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**Research Report**

## Building peace after war: the knowns and unknowns of external support to post-conflict societies

Briefing Paper, No. 11/2016

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

*Suggested Citation:* Fiedler, Charlotte; Mroß, Karina; Grävingholt, Jörn (2016) : Building peace after war: the knowns and unknowns of external support to post-conflict societies, Briefing Paper, No. 11/2016, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/199775>

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## Building Peace after War: The Knowns and Unknowns of External Support to Post-Conflict Societies

### Summary

Civil wars and other armed conflicts within states kill tens of thousands of civilians every year, destroy many more livelihoods and have forced millions of people to flee their homes over the last five years alone. For many years since the mid-1990s, armed intrastate conflicts seemed to be steadily receding, but this trend has reversed itself since 2013. For populations affected by civil war, 2014 – the year for which the most recent data is available – was deadlier than any year since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Most violent conflicts today are recurrences of previous wars. Thus, besides ending ongoing violence, preventing wars from breaking out again is one of the major challenges the world faces today. Since the 1990s, this has been the exact objective of peacebuilding activities. But how successful are efforts to stabilise peace after armed conflict really? And what can be done to make them more effective?

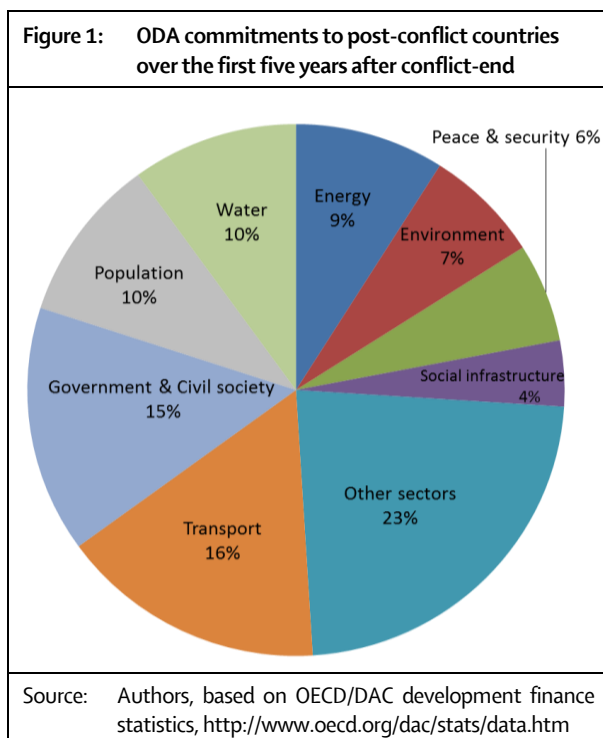
Summarising a broad range of empirical research on post-conflict peace support, this briefing paper reports which types of external engagement are known to be effective, and which ones are not. International peacebuilding efforts focus mainly on four issue areas: providing security, (re-)starting socio-economic development, advancing democratic governance and promoting transitional justice. Assessing the evidence available in each area, three messages for external actors who wish to support peace in post-conflict environments emerge most clearly.

- First, international peacekeeping missions are in many cases an effective instrument for stabilising peace after civil war, indicating that the immediate security concerns of affected populations is of utmost importance. Yet, security alone is not enough. Peacekeeping is all the more successful when it is embedded in a multi-dimensional approach, supporting the notion that political, economic and social concerns also need to be addressed early on if peace is to last.
- Second, supporters of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes and security sector reforms need to embrace the political character of these processes. Approaching them merely as technical issues – as outside actors often do – and turning a blind eye to the vested interests involved risks fuelling new conflicts instead of preventing them.
- Third, transitional justice is an important area of post-conflict peace consolidation – but only if it meets the interest and support of key stakeholders in the affected population: in parliament, in government and administration, and in civil society.

One-size-fits-all strategies for how to support sustainable peace after civil wars do not exist. Different types of conflicts obviously require different pathways to peace. One direction of future research should be a more systematic analysis of post-conflict contexts that are similar enough to call for similar strategies of peace support.

## Introduction

For many years since the mid-1990s, conflict research conveyed the consoling message that, globally, the number and deadliness of armed conflict was constantly decreasing. The scale and intensity of international efforts to contain war and forge peace are often cited as an explanation for this positive development. Figure 1 illustrates the international community's main areas of engagement in post-conflict countries after 1990.



But recent conflict data confirms that the trend has reversed. Since 2013, armed conflict has been on the rise again, both in the number of wars and the number of battle-related deaths and refugees. Most violent conflicts, however, are recurrences of previous wars. Figure 2 shows that almost all active civil wars in 2013 – if not protracted for two decades or more – were in fact recurrences of prior conflicts. So how successful are efforts to stabilise peace after armed conflict really?

This briefing paper summarises a broad range of empirical research on post-conflict peace support. It asks which types of external support are known to be effective and which ones are not, and discusses the four main issue areas of international support: security; socio-economic development; democratic governance; and transitional justice. It assesses the body of evidence in each area and concludes with substantial findings and open questions.

## Security promotion

Security promotion is a main pillar of international support aimed at preventing the recurrence of civil war. Its premise is that establishing basic security for the state and its citizens

against internal and external threats is a precondition for all other activities related to peace and development. Interventions directly aimed at restoring basic security include the deployment of peacekeeping forces by the UN or other international organisations, demining activities and small arms control. Other key activities aim to re-establish and consolidate the state's monopoly of violence. These are 1) disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes and 2) security sector reform (SSR), which focusses on professionalising the state security forces (including the armed forces, police, security services and intelligence), establishing democratic control over them and strengthening justice provision.

Although DDR and SSR are widely perceived by policy-makers as being crucial for sustainable peace, the few available academic cross-country analyses provide mixed evidence. Moreover, qualitative research and comparative analyses are sceptical about the usefulness of external support in this area. They identify two key challenges: first, DDR and SSR are inherently political processes but donor programmes tend to approach them as technical ones. This focus appears easier for external actors, who thus avoid becoming involved in a jealously guarded area of national sovereignty, where vested elite interests often hinder effective reform. Second, both DDR and SSR require different "communities" – for example, development and security actors – to find common ground and work together, which has often proven difficult, led to contradictions and reduced the effectiveness of support.

Evidence exists, however, that peacekeeping – another common international instrument in post-conflict societies – significantly decreases the likelihood of renewed violence, according to quantitative studies. This is particularly noteworthy, since peacekeeping is often employed in especially challenging circumstances where the recurrence of conflict is highly likely. One of the most influential studies in this line of research furthermore shows that *multidimensional* peacekeeping, which combines troop deployment with other elements of peace support, has so far proven to be the most effective approach in promoting long-term peace, indicating the relevance of these other areas of international engagement.

## Support to socio-economic development

Supporting socio-economic development is another pillar of peacebuilding efforts. Improving the living conditions of the population – so the reasoning goes – can alleviate grievances, restore confidence in state institutions, give the population a stake in peace and hence reduce the risk of arms being taken up again. Some activities in this area directly address the legacy of conflict, such as supporting physical reconstruction or the repatriation of refugees and internally displaced people. Others are not unique to the post-conflict context and constitute the bulk of official development assistance (ODA) generally: ensuring food security, the

provision of basic services as well as more long-term policies for growth and employment.

Efforts to promote growth in post-conflict settings are based on strong evidence that a high level of GDP per capita is associated with a reduced likelihood of internal conflict. Focussing more specifically on post-conflict situations, quantitative research shows that growth reduces the probability of a return to warfare. Furthermore, evidence suggests that ODA can indeed help to stabilise post-conflict peace.

Yet, scholars emphasise that in immediate post-war situations, economic priorities need to be different from normal circumstances. The strategic choice of whether to focus on sound macroeconomic policies or rather the short-term provision of basic services has long been debated in this context. After the Cold War, international financial institutions promoted neoliberal strategies for economic reconstruction. However, by now most scholars agree that in the short-term, liberal economic policies can directly conflict with peace. World Bank studies found macroeconomic policies to be relatively less important in post-conflict situations, whereas social policies, such as widening access to education and health care, are relatively more important. More generally, generating a peace dividend by providing basic services is seen as a priority after conflict.

Unemployment is generally perceived as a key issue to be resolved, since it is not only regarded as an obstacle for economic recovery but can also create disillusionment with the peace process and facilitate renewed recruitment. Yet, while many believe that high unemployment increases the risk of violent conflict (in particular combined with a youth bulge), statistical research has so far failed to establish this link consistently.

For positive effects on peace, equity is considered crucial. Albeit not tested by rigorous analysis, almost all scholars emphasise that in post-conflict contexts, economic growth and development need to benefit the population in an equitable and conflict-sensitive manner – otherwise well-intended efforts can do more harm than good.

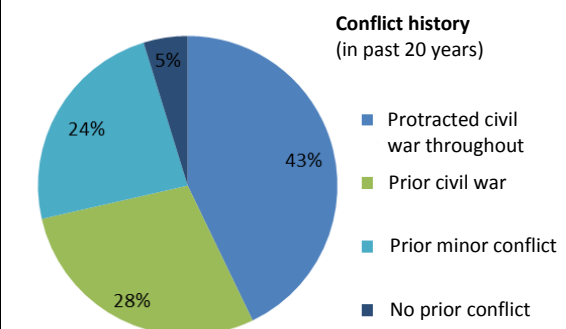
### Democracy support

Democracy support has become a central component of international efforts to establish peace in post-conflict societies. The reasoning is that functioning democracies prevent the recurrence of conflict by providing non-violent channels to express and deal with competing interests and grievances. Democracy support typically includes assistance to elections, constitution-writing, the administration, rule-of-law, human rights and civil society.

A scholarly debate has ensued about the relationship between democracy and violent conflict. On the one hand, many regard building or fostering democratic structures as a crucial step towards long-term peace, and research demonstrates that full democracies are a regime type that rarely breaks down. On the other hand, prominent authors

have shown that transitions to democracy can be associated with increases in violent conflict. Explanations centre on weak state institutions unable to regulate electoral competition and constrain abuses of power. Adequate responses to these insights are disputed. Some argue that international actors should sequence their engagement by first supporting the establishment of capable state institutions and then democratisation, whereas others call for parallel gradual support.

**Figure 2: Conflict history of ongoing civil wars in 2013**



Source: Authors, based on UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset, [http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp\\_prio\\_armed\\_conflict\\_dataset/](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/)

The current empirical literature does not present a clear picture of the relationship between regime type and the *recurrence* of civil war. Some studies show democracies to be better able to keep the peace after civil war, whereas others find that autocracies are better equipped to avoid repeated violence. This inconclusiveness has led some to believe that “good enough” institutions should be the aim. But others argue that better governance needs preconditions, and they have recently advocated for a focus on the quality of the “political settlements” that underpin post-conflict orders, that is, the underlying agreements among competing elites and with society on how power is shared and exercised. This strand of research, however, has yet to mature. Some indications exist that peace agreements that include “power-sharing” institutions, such as federalism and proportional representation, are beneficial for peace. Moreover, two recent studies convincingly show that higher governance levels have a significant impact on preventing the recurrence of civil war.

The issue of whether international support to democracy in post-conflict societies is effective remains understudied. Quantitative studies have shown that, on average, democracy support makes countries more democratic and that it can reduce democratising countries’ risk of experiencing internal strife, but these insights have not been tested explicitly with regard to the recurrence of civil war. Qualitative research points out that, among other things, the strategic interaction between peacebuilders and the domestic elite is crucial; for democracy support to be effective, democracy has to be in the interest of local actors.

## Transitional justice support

Promoting transitional justice has become integral to international peacebuilding efforts, based on the assumption that establishing peace requires processing a society's legacy of violence. The highly differentiated range of activities spans from reconciliation and healing on the individual or inter-personal level to institutional change on the state level. Typical instruments include criminal prosecution, granting amnesties, discharging personnel that commit human rights abuses as well as reforming judiciary and security institutions. They also comprise truth commissions to investigate the extent of past abuses, paying reparations and acknowledging victims' suffering in memorials.

The field is marked by two debates: peace vs. justice and truth vs. justice. Originally intended to facilitate transition from repressive regimes, the use of transitional justice for peace purposes raised doubts. Proponents argue that only justice is able to break the cycle of violence by stigmatising the elites responsible for conflict, which is supposed to build trust and legitimacy for the new order. Critics argue that holding people accountable for past abuses can divide a society even more and that, instead, amnesties can help to end a conflict. The second debate (truth vs. justice) weighs the use of trials against other forms of accountability, such as truth commissions. Advocates of truth commissions argue that without the threat of criminal prosecution – a key component of trials – society will be more likely to actually engage in the painful but cleansing process of uncovering the past, helping to counter a culture of denial and initiate societal healing. But in reality, the dividing line has become blurred, since truth commissions frequently recommend prosecutions and are increasingly used as a complement to trials.

Only recently have scholars begun to search for systematic evidence on the impact of transitional justice. Whereas some studies have not found significant effects – neither positive nor negative – others present contradictory results. Several factors seem to influence the impact of transitional justice measures, which might explain this ambiguity. First, political will and support from key stakeholders in parliament, government and administration, as well as a strong

civil society, appear to be essential to generate the positive effects of transitional justice. Second, evidence shows that the specific choice, combination and context of transitional justice instruments matter for their impact. One study, for instance, finds that amnesties significantly increase the risk of recurrence only in a subset of democratic post-conflict societies. Reparations to victims and truth commissions, in turn, are shown to have a positive effect on the duration of peace.

## Conclusion: The multidimensional approach

International support needs to approach post-conflict peace in a comprehensive way. The relative success of multidimensional peacekeeping supports the notion that security is crucial, but it is not enough. Other aspects of economic, political and social transformation are likewise important if peace is to last. Positive economic development is known to be conducive, and so is better governance.

Yet, strategies on how to weigh, time and sequence different areas of peace support have to take into account important interdependencies and dilemmas. Demobilising fighters is likely to be easier when the economy can offer them decent jobs. Political institutions and the character of a political order determine whether economic growth leads to more equitable, inclusive development or instead drives a society further apart. Amnesties are often necessary to win the consent of fighters to demobilise, but they run counter to the interest of victimised populations in retribution. Research on the implications of such interdependencies for external policies is still in its infancy.

Obviously, different types of post-conflict situations require different pathways to sustainable peace. Interestingly, this has not yet been studied systematically. Most research has either sought to find compelling answers for a broad range of post-conflict situations at once, or has generated case-specific findings that often seem to support the truism that every context is unique. More systematic knowledge on which situations are comparable (and within which limits) when it comes to devising useful strategies for peace support is needed for more successful engagement against the new wave of violent conflicts the world faces today.

## References

Online appendix available at <http://www.die-gdi.de/briefing-paper/article/building-peace-after-war-the-knowns-and-unknowns-of-external-support-to-post-conflict-societies/>

*This paper emanates from the DIE project "Supporting sustainable peace", financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.*

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