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Working Paper

Finding the Cases that Fit: Methodological Challenges in Peace Research

GIGA Working Papers, No. 189

Provided in Cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Suggested Citation: Simons, Claudia; Zanker, Franzisca (2012) : Finding the Cases that Fit: Methodological Challenges in Peace Research, GIGA Working Papers, No. 189, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/56380>

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G I G A *Working Papers*

German  Institute of Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

GIGA Research Programme:
Violence and Security

**Finding the Cases that Fit:
Methodological Challenges in Peace Research**

Claudia Simons and Franzisca Zanker

No 189

March 2012

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GIGA Research Programme “Violence and Security”

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WP Coordination and English-language Copy Editing: Melissa Nelson

Editorial Assistance and Production: Silvia Bücke

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Finding the Cases that Fit: Methodological Challenges in Peace Research

Abstract

Subnational comparative research has received increasing attention as a method that is academically rigorous and offers in-depth knowledge about specific cases. However, the practical difficulties surrounding the selection of cases to be researched and compared are seldom discussed in a meaningful way in academic circles. Even though a research design may itself be very elaborate, we need significant information on the cases before we can actually decide on useful comparisons. Based on our experiences in studying how power-sharing peace agreements affect the local level and why conflict dynamics often continue, we consider the following basic question: How do we actually know that a specific case suits a particular research design?

The challenges we experienced in our research were twofold: first, how to conceptualize peace and identify indicators to measure the level of peacefulness; and second, how to obtain comprehensive and reliable disaggregated data on these indicators. By detailing our own experiences we hope to encourage a more open approach to the discussion of methodological challenges.

Keywords: methodology, data collection, peace research, comparative design, subnational research, post-conflict societies

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Finding the Cases that Fit: Methodological Challenges in Peace Research

Claudia Simons and Franzisca Zanker

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1 Introduction

Conflict research continues to be an important subject area in the social sciences and demonstrates the growing trend of using mixed-methods designs that combine case-study research with comparisons. The method of subnational comparative research has received increasing attention as an approach that is academically rigorous and offers in-depth knowledge about specific cases. However, the practical difficulties surrounding the selection of cases to be researched and compared is seldom discussed in a meaningful way in academic circles.

There is an extensive body of literature on the question of how case selection should be carried out in order to guarantee sound conclusions in small-N studies. The strategy most widely proposed is a most-similar or most-different systems design (Mill's method of difference and agreement), which makes it possible to isolate the explanatory variable that leads to the observed outcome.¹ Further recommendations include choosing those cases which are typical, diverse, extreme, deviant, influential or crucial, or are pathway cases, for in-depth analysis, depending on the specific research interest (Gerring and Seawright 2007: 89–90). However, the authors seldom discuss the question of how to decide whether a particular case in fact meets the criteria of the chosen design – that is, how we develop sound indicators for particular characteristics and how to collect and interpret data about these indicators. While many scholars have discussed the problem of selection bias in small-N studies and possible ameliorating strategies, such as time-series analysis or within-case analysis (Collier and Mahoney 1996; Geddes 1990; King et al. 1994: 128–138), most of the discussion revolves around the methodological pitfalls of case selection for specific variables (mostly for the dependent variable, but also for explanatory variables).² The practical problems regarding the availability of and access to data are much less frequently discussed.

The basic question that this paper discusses is in fact a rather simple and perhaps seemingly banal one: How do we actually know that a specific case suits a particular research design?

Behind this question lies the finding that even though a research design might be very elaborate in itself, we need significant information about the cases before we can actually decide which comparisons will be useful. What is needed is information not only on the relevance of a concept, such as peace, in a given context, but also on the applicability of indicators – as well as that of the actual data for the indicators selected. The three steps are thus as follows: defining the concept (in our case, peace); developing indicators for measurement; and lastly, collecting data, or using data already collected, for measurement. The difficulties inherent in these three steps, which are necessary prior to case selection in any research, are discussed in this paper.

This paper has resulted from the challenges faced by the authors while selecting cases for a study examining the effect of national power-sharing agreements at the local level in Burundi, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia. In each of the four countries a within-case analysis of two local “arenas” – both former hot spots in preceding civil wars,³ one of which is now peaceful and one where conflict remains – was to be carried out. The aim was to determine if and under which circumstances centralized power-sharing arrangements generate peace at the local level. While trying to identify peaceful and nonpeaceful

1 See Lieberman (1991) for the drawbacks and difficulties of carrying out Mill's method.

2 Bennett (2004: 41) briefly mentions that a selection of cases that are easily researched is less helpful for theory building but does not elaborate further on this point.

3 Or election violence in the case of Kenya.

arenas, we discovered that the task was not as simple as originally thought. The challenges we experienced were twofold: first, how to conceptualize peace and identify indicators to measure it; and second, how to get comprehensive and reliable disaggregated data on these indicators. While the problems outlined here are also relevant for country-level studies, they apply even more to subnational research.

The paper proceeds as follows: After looking at the new trend of subnational comparison, we present our own design and the difficulties we faced. We discuss how we conceptualized peace, how we developed indicators, and the challenges we experienced in accessing reliable data on these indicators. We conclude by outlining our own solutions to these challenges.

2 The New Trend in Political Science: Subnational Comparison

Recent years have seen a significant increase in studies characterized by a focus on subnational dynamics and disaggregated conflict data projects.⁴ Kalyvas (2008: 399) has termed the new reorientation towards microlevel analysis the “micro-theoretic turn.” It has followed the shift towards large-N econometric studies in the early 2000s. Despite the heterogeneity of approaches with regard to research questions, units of analysis, disciplines and methods, Kalyvas detects one distinct element: the systematic application of “social scientific methods at a level of analysis and on a type of problem where such methods did not traditionally enjoy much purchase” (ibid.: 398). The focus here lies on the comparison, as opposed to single case studies and ethnological methods. Areas can be compared within or across countries or both. In our own research project we chose a mixed-methods design, first comparing two arenas with divergent outcomes within each country, then comparing those arenas with the same outcome (peaceful/nonpeaceful) with others across the four countries.

Using the subnational comparative method in this way has a number of advantages for peace and conflict research.⁵ First, it allows for explanations of subnational variation. This is important since many conflicts have their roots in subnational dynamics. By looking only at the national level we can grasp neither the local causes of conflict and insurgency nor the way in which they become relevant on a national level. Furthermore, violence rarely engulfs entire states; it is usually confined to certain areas (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009: 487). The same is true for the effects of peace agreements. We can observe significant variation in the

4 The idea of subnational comparison is not entirely new. Lijphart (1971: 689) proposed intrastate instead of cross-country comparison to strengthen comparability. He quoted Smelser’s 1966 hypothetical article on industrialization in Germany and Italy as well as Linz and de Miguel’s 1966 argument that a combination of intrastate and cross-country comparisons is particularly fruitful. He further quoted Naroll (1966), who suggested using this approach when analyzing the differences between government systems in Great Britain and the United States. Snyder (2001: 104 footnote 1) lists Tilly (1964), Linz and de Miguel (1966), Kesselman and Rosenthal (1974), and Tarrow (1967, 1976) as earlier works concentrating on subnational political analysis.

5 Taking the subnational level as the unit of analysis not only strengthens qualitative small-N research, but can also help alleviate the shortcomings of quantitative methods. However, this paper focuses on qualitative research.

attainment and maintenance of peace at the subnational level in countries such as the DRC, Liberia, Kenya or Burundi: while there may be less violence in some areas of a country, other areas remain in a state of war (Mehler and Tull 2011).

A second advantage of the subnational comparative method is that it allows for the development of theories about the dynamic relations between the different levels of a political system. Snyder argues that a “center-centered” approach that treats the national level as an autonomous, separate sphere and obscures the connections between actors in the periphery and the center may mischaracterize the “strategic context in which national politicians labor” (Snyder 2001: 100). Kalyvas has taken this argument further and applied it to the study of conflict, arguing that action and identity in civil wars are complex processes that operate at the juncture of local and national actors. Local cleavages and the “master-cleavage” at the national level are connected through a web of mutual influence. “Although in some instances political actors willingly underwrite local factions in every respect, in other instances they are manipulated by such factions and led to act in ways they would have otherwise preferred to avoid” (Kalyvas 2003: 484).

Subnational comparative analysis not only offers deeper insights into the local dynamics of conflict but also promises, more generally, to mitigate some of the methodological problems of small-N comparisons. First, it helps to alleviate the “small-N many variables” problem (Lijphart 1971: 689; Snyder 2001: 95) by increasing the number of observations (hence cases). It furthermore offers improved conditions for a most-similar-systems design (MSSD). In theory MSSD is an ideal research design as it makes the isolation of causal variables possible. However, in reality no two cases that exhibit exactly the same preconditions but differ in outcome can be found.⁶ By comparing subnational cases within the same country, this problem can be alleviated to some extent, as potentially explanatory variables can be held constant more easily.⁷ Second, subnational analysis further strengthens the researcher’s ability to conduct controlled comparisons through the use of within-nation and between-nation comparisons, and a combination of both (Lijphart 1971: 689–690; Snyder 2001: 95–97). Third, subnational analysis can help explain and reconcile the often stark contrast between findings from cross-national research and findings from case-study research. Cederman and Gleditsch (2009: 488) argue that this contrast is at least partially the result of the focus on country-level attributes and averages, which often differ substantially from those of subnational conflict locations. By looking closely at the subnational level of internally heterogeneous countries, a coding bias resulting from the use of national-level averages can be mitigated (Snyder 2001: 97–99).

Given the potential advantages that subnational analysis has for the study of peace and conflict, new initiatives have emerged in recent years. Most interestingly, a range of new data

6 As noted above, see Lieberson (1991) for the drawbacks and difficulties of this research design.

7 Though this largely depends on what subnational areas are chosen, as differences within the same country can sometimes be more significant than those between subnational arenas of two distinct countries.

sets using geographic information systems (GIS) are currently being developed (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009: 490). These are useful not only for large-scale comparisons but also for case selection in qualitative small-N studies. They include the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) data set, the Geo-referenced Event Dataset (GED) from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Event Data Project on Conflict and Security (EDACS). These database projects concentrate on the “event” as the basic unit of analysis and its characteristics, including geographical location, time, actors, type of event, and fatality count, among other things. Most database projects draw on the media as the major source of data; some also include reports by NGOs or other institutions, which often collect data by means of local people’s accounts. Some projects use innovative methods such as cell phone-based data collection (see below).

Having outlined the changes in comparative peace research brought about by the use of subnational analysis and the benefits this may entail, we now turn to some of the difficulties and constraints of this type of research and of peace and conflict research more generally. We begin by outlining the challenges involved in conceptualizing peace and conflict, then turn to the task of developing indicators for the concept.

3 Identifying Peace

The first step in any comparative research is to define the dependent variable, on the basis of which the case selection will then be carried out. In peace research, the dependent variable will more often than not be peace (or war/conflict/violence). The definition of peace, as well as Galtung’s (1965) classic division of positive and negative peace, is not discussed in detail here. Suffice to say that Galtung’s notion of positive peace (the “integration of human society”) might not be appropriate for the fragile post-conflict context in the countries examined through our research. It therefore makes sense to look at peacefulness in terms of “negative peace” (the absence of violence), as most scholars in the field do.

For our purposes the variable is not simply peace, but local peace. The current literature on local peace, which mainly discusses “traditional” conflict management at the local level (e.g. Frank 2002), rarely considers the implications local peace has for national peace or vice versa. In addition, the status quo in terms of theoretical focus is almost exclusively based on the macrolevel literature (Kalyvas 2003: 401). A notable exception is Heitz (2009), who looks directly at the link between national and local power sharing in Man, Côte d’Ivoire.

We propose to look at different levels of peacefulness at the local level, as outlined above in the description of our research design. Autessere notes that “the relationship between war and peace is that of a continuum, not a dichotomy” (2009: 276; see also Höglund 2011: 117). It is often assumed that after a peace agreement, a state is “peaceful” (hence the term “post-conflict”). While at the national level the worst fighting over political or territorial strongholds might be over, or the conflict parties may have been appeased by some kind of power-

sharing arrangement, in specific subnational areas the fighting can continue or even become worse. There have been clear examples of this: in Burundi after the 2000 Arusha Agreement and subsequent accords, and in the aftermath of the various agreements in the DRC since 1999. An ordinal measurement for analyzing conflict – negative peace as a continuum, as Autesserre suggests – makes a comparative research design difficult.⁸ Therefore, some form of dichotomous measurement that is comparable, even if it is crude, has to be made. This does not mean that the difference between the peaceful and nonpeaceful arenas will indeed be dichotomous or easy to distinguish. Varshney (2001: 371) points out that studies of ethnic violence often concentrate only on violent cases, which are not usually studied alongside peaceful cases. This means that few researchers have experience in designing peace research projects that assign dichotomous distinctions to essentially ordinal concepts.

3.1 Ambiguity and Relevance of Indicators

Once an acceptable understanding of what peace means is decided upon, the next step is to develop indicators for identifying the level of peacefulness as “the analyst must employ implicit or explicit indicators for categorizing the cases included in the study” (Snyder 2001: 97). At first glance it may seem that developing indicators to identify the levels of peacefulness within a country should be quite simple. Note, once again, that we are undertaking not only a within-country analysis of two areas (peaceful/nonpeaceful), but also a cross-country comparison. This means the indicators have to be applicable to all countries, otherwise the comparison of peaceful and nonpeaceful arenas in the four countries becomes difficult. This requirement in turn means that one of the advantages of subnational research, the creation of context-specific indicators for peacefulness, cannot be fully utilized. There is plenty of literature suggesting what peace could mean (see for example Uvin 2009: 43–44). Based on the literature and with our case studies in mind, the indicators we initially decided to focus on were conflict deaths; patterns of internally displaced people (IDPs); security sector reform (SSR); disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR); economic growth; and crime levels. Once we began applying them, we found, firstly, that it was difficult to find reliable disaggregated data (see below) and, secondly, that all of the indicators proved not only to be ambiguous but also to often have questionable relevance at the local level.

Conflict-related deaths seemed like a good starting point for assessing how peaceful a place is. Nonetheless, we identified certain ambiguities. Civilian deaths are not always taken into consideration (only battle deaths), nor are those of indirect victims who die from hunger, injury or disease.⁹ This makes the intensity of conflict unclear (Benz and Benz-Schwarz-

8 Ordinal measurements can be used in comparative studies, but exactly the same scale, measurements, etc. would need to be used. This is not really plausible when measuring peace and conflict.

9 Note also that counting war-related deaths is extremely complicated. Most often these are counted as excess deaths, meaning the number of people who died above the average mortality in the region. The International

burg 2010: 399). Furthermore, the thresholds can be limiting: many ongoing conflicts may not reach the threshold of 1000 battle-related deaths per year, which is used in a variety of databases as a measurement of conflict. A conflict can be intense and polarizing even with a relatively low number of deaths. No one will dispute the severity of conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, especially the post-election violence in early 2011, even though the fatality figures are quite low relative to other conflicts – for example, in the DRC. However, given the population size, the number of deaths in Côte d'Ivoire is significant.¹⁰ Furthermore, if 1000 people die in a clash in one particular arena of a vast country – for instance, in some densely populated areas in Eastern Congo – this figure is highly significant in understanding the intensity of conflict in this area, though not necessarily in the country as a whole. This illustrates how a uniform and absolute threshold of 1000 deaths might be convenient for researchers but does not mirror the severity of conflict in a particular place. Some databases, such as the UCDP Conflict Database, are of course much more specific, using 25 deaths as a threshold.

Difficulties arise when we consider the disaggregated level of conflict-related deaths. First of all, the number of deaths would have to be disaggregated down to the local level, and the question then becomes down to which level? The farm, the village, the town or the province? (More on this below). Second, consider Kalyvas (2008: 401), who notes that using fatality counts as a proxy for conflict intensity can be dangerous as the dynamics of violence and the dynamics of war are analytically distinct. An absence of violence does not necessarily mean the absence of war, as, for example, in a rebel-controlled area that is peaceful for the time being. A certain area could also perhaps be seen as artificially and only very temporarily peaceful, since the central government may wish to regain control of it at some point and a future of violence is, thus, guaranteed (*ibid.*: 401–402). Therefore, even with access to disaggregated data it might be difficult to ascertain, at least without prior knowledge of the area, what a high number of deaths in a certain area means (conflict or violence?), or whether the absence of deaths actually means that the area is peaceful.

Another indicator we considered was displacement and repatriation patterns. Displacement suggests conflict and repatriation can suggest peace; however, the reality is much more complex. Firstly, identifying people as IDPs is in itself a difficult task: What about displaced people who have never been in an official IDP camp or repeated short-term displacements (see Uvin 2009: 29–30)? Secondly, while the presence of IDP camps could be used as an indicator, the nature of IDP camps and the violence that can be associated with them is complex,

Rescue Committee (IRC) used this method in their well-known studies on conflict-related deaths in the DR Congo. This method has been criticized for not taking into consideration other contextual factors, such as a generally underdeveloped health system, reluctance to use existing formal health systems, or other impediments to the utilization of health systems that might not necessarily – or at least not only – be the result of the armed conflict. Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish figures on average mortality, as population estimates in countries where no recent official census or a systematic registration of births and deaths exist are shaky.

¹⁰ In any case, the percentage of conflict-related death in the population is often difficult to measure, as for many countries no official population numbers exist and censuses have often not been undertaken since colonial times.

as Kahn (2008) points out. This violence may be as extreme as armed intervention from government troops fighting against alleged militarism or from rebels who are manipulating tensions in the camps. The latter example is evident in the Sudanese/Chadian border camps. There can also be tension between the nondisplaced population present in the area of an IDP camp and the camp inhabitants because the resources in the area need to be shared and the IDPs receive development aid. As such, the presence of IDP camps can very well be an indicator of the absence of peace; however, this is not always the case. A strong international presence could mean some form of security in the area. The camps in Darfur are, for example, not really militarized, although they are not neutral, humanitarian spaces either (*ibid.*). Furthermore, people who move to a specific camp will do so either because they perceive it to be more peaceful (which would then mean that this is an indicator of peace in that specific area) or because they have no choice. In the latter case the decision to settle in an IDP camp does not have any informative value with respect to the peacefulness of the area around the camp.

A third type of ambiguity results from repatriation, which can mean many things. It can actually cause renewed conflict over land ownership, as has been the case in Burundi (Kamungi et al. 2005) or Liberia (Rincon 2010). In terms of their relevance at the local level, repatriation figures are not always a definite indicator of peace as returns could also be non-voluntary. There are also many reasons people might not return – for example, because they are already well established in the area of the camp or because they do not have a place to go back to as their land has been taken. Furthermore, trauma related to their former homes may prevent people from going back. It is also possible that IDPs who voluntarily repatriate no longer return to their rural homes but instead choose to move to urban environments due to better job opportunities or because they married someone from an urban area during their stay in a camp. Repatriation to a rural area might thus be low, but not because the area is not secure. In addition, even if all these factors are taken into consideration, it is difficult to obtain disaggregated data on which former IDPs have returned where: there is currently more emphasis on collecting data on which IDPs are in which camps, rather than on their repatriation. Lastly, the presence of camps, as discussed above, may be a good indicator that conflict is present within the country, but it does not necessarily say anything about the particular area in which a camp is located. Burundi is an interesting case in this respect. While searching for data on displacement in Burundi and speaking to experts as well as affected populations, we realized that IDP figures have completely different informative value depending on the region. In some parts of the country people live in camps but work their lands back “home.” The reasons given range from fear of renewed violence to convenience. In some areas displacement and IDP camps resulted from the civil war, in others displacement was caused by the force of nature (for example, after heavy rains in and around Bujumbura in 2009). Therefore, using IDP and repatriation figures as a systematic measurement of peacefulness would not even be possible within the same tiny country.

The current understanding of peace, according to academics and especially practitioners, essentially has to do with whether security has returned or not. Successful DDR processes or SSR could therefore be good indicators of the level of peacefulness, since their success will usually be celebrated on the basis of improved security (see for example Collier et al. 2003: 159; Knight and Özerdem 2004). Yet again, however, these indicators are not without ambiguity. DDR processes may sound good in theory, but in practice they often have countless shortcomings. The weapons that are handed in might not be destroyed, or they may be sold elsewhere. It could be that not all weapons are handed in, or that combatants hand in their weapons and then rearm afterwards. It can be difficult to assess the success of a DDR program as the long-term causal effects are not easy to ascertain. A count of those who have demobilized can be misleading. These figures can be inflated as a result of incentives, in the form of cash payments in exchange for demobilization, for those who claim to be former combatants. Such an inflation was noted in Liberia (Paes 2005).

In terms of its relevance at the local level, the next step of DDR – reintegration – is even more complex to handle. Reintegration remains acknowledged as the most difficult aspect of DDR and often receives the least funding and attention from the international aid community working in post-war situations (see for example Bøås and Bjørkhaug 2010; Knight and Özerdem 2004; Paes 2005). It is here that the local community is really affected. How does the community deal with living with a former combatant? How does this affect their daily lives, and how safe is the former combatant from retaliation attacks? Little systematic analysis of the effect of DDR at the local level has been undertaken; the only exception is the work by Humphreys and Weinstein (2007: 554), who find that internationally funded DDR programs probably have little impact at the micro level, even though they pertain to the individual former combatant rather than a specific area. Even if a DDR process is seen as successful, the question remains: What happens in areas where ex-combatants cluster, often unemployed, in the long term? Can this affect the peacefulness of an area? All these factors suggest that a DDR process in itself would be problematic as an indicator of peacefulness, especially at the subnational level.

It is even more difficult to evaluate the effect of security sector reform on peace than that of DDR. Peace agreements often break down because former rebel or army structures remain the same as they were during the war. This means that the peace is fragile and can easily revert to violence (Aboagye and Rupiya 2005). While the reorganization of the army and the police will in theory make a difference in the level of security, and hence peacefulness, at the local level, it usually takes a long time for such a reform to take effect at this level. The National Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), for example, is an army of officially integrated rebel groups. In reality, the strongest of the rebel groups – the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP) – continues to operate under parallel command structures. Furthermore, FARDC soldiers are underpaid and are often involved in looting and violence against civilians in the eastern provinces of the DRC. In Liberia, SSR has also

faced numerous difficulties, especially financial constraints. As a result the new Liberian Army has only 2,000 soldiers and remains dysfunctional (Nilsson 2009: 30). At the local level, SSR can have even less relevance in indicating levels of peacefulness. In Liberia, for example, some newly trained AFL soldiers were involved in beating up residents in Gbarnga in July 2011.¹¹ Sometimes SSR simply does not produce the expected results. SSR may be an important step in post-conflict societies, and in terms of overall peace in the country, but it cannot be viewed as an indicator of peace at the subnational level as its effects here are largely unknown.

Economic growth or investment is another indicator we considered, the idea being that investment and growth in the aftermath of war help stabilize a country, ensuring its long-term peacefulness – or at the very least reducing the risk of renewed violence (Collier et al. 2003: 152–3).¹² This idea is reflected in the common assumption that increased investment suggests that stability has returned or significantly improved, as the absence of stability will usually scare away investors. Additionally, if an area is safe, the population can return to their occupations, increase economic activity and hence stimulate growth.¹³ Nonetheless, it remains difficult even as an indicator since real economic growth and development takes a long time to be achieved in a sustainable manner in a post-conflict setting (see for example Collier et al. 2008). Furthermore, economic activity does not always take place in a safe and peaceful environment, as is evident from the arms trading and the illegal exploitation of resources – for example, timber, diamonds – in many civil wars (see for example Reno 1999). Economic activity probably always continues at the local level to a certain degree, even in refugee camps. Moreover, cities like Kabul or Goma might go through a building boom, but this is more a result of the strong international aid community and the increased wealth of elites who have benefited (or are still benefiting) from illegal exploitation and conflict than of sustainable long-term peace in those areas. Infrastructure investment can thus in fact be an indicator of a very volatile situation where expensive security infrastructure for international personnel is needed. Lastly, as with all the other indicators, data is difficult to find at the subnational level.

The last indicator we considered was the level of crime, on the basis that less crime is an indication of peacefulness. Nonetheless, the end of a conflict can mean an increase in domestic violence, especially gender-based violence (GBV), or the aggravation of land-related conflicts and mob justice, when refugees and IDPs try to return to their former homes. Daley

11 Authors' interview in Gbarnga, Liberia, July 2011.

12 Which has resulted in post-conflict/unstable countries being major aid recipients as it is believed this reduces the risk of conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2002).

13 It must be noted that because of its inherent endogeneity, economic growth is a particularly difficult indicator. However, the object is to find variables which might indicate levels of peacefulness. Accepting that economic growth can be linked to peace, despite a complex causal relationship, is enough to say at this stage that it can act as an indicator of peace.

(2008: 125) finds that recorded cases of rape in Burundi increased drastically after the signing of the peace agreement. In addition, insecurity does not always disappear at the end of a conflict; indeed, crime levels often remain quite high in the aftermath of war (Small Arms Survey 2011: 2). The question then becomes whether violent events are motivated by personal issues or political causes. Is the foundation of criminal acts political, economic or social violence? Furthermore, do these acts occur at the international, state, community or individual level (Steenkamp 2011)? Steenkamp finds that post-conflict levels of violence are closely linked not only to the preceding war but also to the peace process that follows it (*ibid.*).¹⁴ In terms of the relevance of crime levels as an indicator of peacefulness at the local level, it is unlikely that data exists. What happens at the local level is often neither recorded nor sent to the national level in a systematic manner. Particularly in a post-war environment, a whole new system of security and statistics needs to be rebuilt, and this takes time.

In summary, we found the indicators that we wanted to use to assess the level of peacefulness at the subnational level to be incredibly ambiguous – though this tends to be the case whether they are used to estimate national or local peace. In some cases, the effects and repercussions of these indicators at the local level were nonetheless even more difficult to untangle. In all cases one of the main problems we stumbled upon was the lack of reliable disaggregated data. Before considering this data problem in more detail in the next section, we briefly discuss the problem of subjectivity when using indicators to consider levels of peace.

3.2 Subjective Peace

The indicators provide only a general idea of whether the subnational arena may or may not have become more peaceful. More important than anything is whether the local population feels that security has been regained in their area and that they can thus live there peacefully. This therefore leads to the larger question of whether peace is something subjective or objective. At the national level there might be political reasons for state leaders to call a situation peaceful or nonpeaceful, even if the depiction is contrary to the reality. At the local level the perception of peace cannot be known prior to fieldwork, unless perception survey data from other researchers is available. Of course, even when surveys and interview data from other researchers are available, we cannot be sure of their validity, as the participants in surveys and interviews often misrepresent the truth for various reasons.¹⁵ In an excellent article about the practicalities of field research Lee Ann Fujii (2010) notes that rumors, inventions, denials, evasions and silences affected the answers to her questions about the genocide in Rwanda.

14 Please note that we are refraining from a discussion of crime in post-conflict societies, which is an incredibly complex subject area. For more on this topic see Steenkamp (2011) and Kurtenbach and Wulf (2012).

15 Of course the difficulty of measuring perceptions must also not be forgotten: What if inhabitants become hysterical due to media reports, thus feeling insecure in peaceful areas, or what if the population is so used to violence that they no longer feel insecure?

Nonetheless, she realized that this metadata could and should be an important part of the research itself, as it indicated a great deal about the current social and political landscape (ibid.: 232). This example shows that in the rare case that data on local perceptions of peace and security, which may be important in case selection, is available, this data will need to be considered carefully. Moreover, it indicates that the case selection for this kind of research must be flexible in order to allow for changes during fieldwork. An arena indicated as peaceful prior to fieldwork may in fact be perceived as violent by the local population. Alternatively, a perception survey might indicate that though the population in a certain area feels that conflict remains there, this perception is actually based on rumors and inventions, and is completely contrary to reality.

4 Availability and Reliability of Data

As outlined above, the first step of implementing the research design is determining the conceptualization of peace. The indicators for peace (or the absence of peace) are then derived from this concept. Once these indicators have been identified, the third step is to locate reliable data on them, a task which is equally challenging. Even when the research itself will be qualitative fieldwork, quantitative data is often helpful or even necessary when using subnational comparative mixed-methods designs in order to decide which cases to compare – that is, to make the case selection. In our own research design we used quantitative subnational data to choose the arenas we would explore during the fieldwork for our comparative analysis.

Most research in comparative politics is based on data collected by others; therefore, the reliance on off-the-shelf data is very important. However, data is often unavailable or of poor quality. This problem is already well documented in the case of quantitative cross-country research, particularly if the research includes less industrialized countries where data collection is often difficult and the data itself thus often poor (Collier 1993: 111). It is even more difficult to find data related to the subnational level. Rustad et al. (2011: 18) go as far as to argue that “the lack of high-quality and cross-sectionally consistent data prevents a rigorous analysis at the sub-national level.” The whole endeavor is further complicated by conflict environments, which make data collection extremely difficult. Although academics are constantly concerned with the quality of data and with the bias involved when using particular sources (such as media reports, official state statistics, human rights reports, etc.) rather than others, rigorous investigation into these issues is rare (Davenport and Ball 2002: 427). Case selection based on off-the-shelf data therefore often rests on a very shaky foundation. In the following discussion we outline some of the difficulties related to data availability and reliability at the subnational level, focusing particularly on conflict environments.

4.1 Data Availability

First of all, in many places it is generally very difficult to find disaggregated data on virtually anything – for example, crime rates, investment, DDR, IDPs. Most of the available data is in fact aggregated at the national level (although it must be collected at the local level to some degree). If there is disaggregated data it is not always systematic, but rather sporadic. The necessity of systematic data across time and space results from the comparative research design. Extensive data can sometimes be found for selected local arenas – for instance, in a pilot study conducted by the *Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* – International Services (GTZ-IS) on demobilized soldiers in Western Cote d’Ivoire (Chelpi-den Hamer 2011). Creative new data collection methods exist with regard to such specific contexts; however, in order to be able to compare cases within one country, as well as across countries, researchers must have access to systematic – that is, comparable – data on the chosen indicators.

Furthermore, even within a particular level of aggregation (a province, for example) the data is often collected, randomly, at the local level and then aggregated at the provincial level. So when we take the provincial level to code the dependent variable and then look for explanatory factors at the local level, we might mismatch independent and dependent variables because they are coded at different levels. Kalyvas (2008: 404) therefore argues for the collection of data at multiple levels of aggregation in order to allow for more sophisticated research designs.

Second, even if data exists it is often incomprehensive. Demobilization figures have already been described above as problematic. Self-demobilized former combatants, who have not gone through official demobilization campaigns, are not captured by official figures, and long-term studies on whether the demobilized actually remain demobilized are scarce. The same is true of official IDP figures, which cannot capture those IDPs who have not registered in official IDP camps but are nevertheless displaced.

Why is there so little data when it comes to peace and conflict research? Firstly, there is a pronounced lack of state-sponsored statistical data for regions outside the industrialized world¹⁶ (Rustad et al. 2011: 26; Collier 1993: 111). It is in these regions, however, that most violent conflicts take place. This absence of reliable official statistics can simply be the result of a lack of means, but it is often also a product of particular governments’ unwillingness to provide data on their populations. This is the case in authoritarian regimes eager to withhold or falsify statistical data on sensitive issues.

Secondly, in research on conflict countries the very defining principle – that the region is experiencing or has experienced widespread violence – makes data collection a daunting task. The insecurity of the situation makes it difficult to undertake research or to work as a

16 Gómez and Kuronen (2011: 687) point out that even in industrialized countries with generally well-developed state-sponsored statistics it is often difficult to find comparable statistical data across countries. The authors attribute this not only to differences in statistical systems but also to different cultural and social preferences concerning what data is worth surveying.

journalist. Using a statistical analysis of the level of risk to journalists and the scope and intensity of news coverage, Urlacher (2009) argues that, contrary to common perceptions, news coverage is largely unaffected by violence, except in the most extreme circumstances. This interesting research has two shortcomings however: First, Urlacher bases his study on a country-level analysis, which provides no insights into how even or uneven news coverage within a country is. Second, as a measure of risk to journalists he uses conflict intensity, which is itself drawn from aggregated data sets subject to the limitations outlined in this paper. As another independent variable he uses killings of journalists, which can in fact be a powerful deterrent and should thus be considered to impact the level of news coverage. However, there are other elements of (assumed) insecurity, beyond the direct targeting of journalists (or researchers for that matter), that influence reporting. The costs of accessibility, for example, “tolls” at roadblocks or instances of robbery and harassment, can be equal deterrents, but these variables are not considered by Urlacher.

The issues related to research in insecure areas have very practical consequences. These include difficulties in obtaining funding for such research trips (Vlassenroot 2006: 192) or an urban bias, as urban spaces are often more accessible than the hinterlands (Kalyvas 2006: 41). A lack of linguistic skills on the part of journalists and researchers adds to this urban bias, and might even prompt researchers to exclude a country from their research altogether (Vlassenroot 2006: 192). Furthermore, interesting data often relates to illegal or informal activity, such as violence or the informal economy. Various actors, including governments, rebel groups, or business men, thus try to prevent agencies and researchers from collecting data on these sensitive issues (*ibid.*: 196–197). In many war zones, journalists and researchers are banned from combat areas, as was the case in Sri Lanka (Öberg and Sollenberg 2011: 55). Even if a researcher or journalist is not prevented from actually entering the conflict zone, the local population might be unwilling to answer questions due to a general lack of trust in an insecure environment. Cohen and Arieli (2011) describe how a conflict environment can make it extremely difficult to locate, access and involve members of the population. A survey on the difficulties of conducting qualitative research in authoritarian or semiauthoritarian states in the Middle East by Clark (2006) found that most problems were related to the political climate, which in turn complicated access to the local population.

More data on violence thus does not necessarily mean more violent events. It may, in fact, result from an improved security situation. Davenport and Ball (2002) found in their study on Guatemalan state terror that media coverage of killings decreased as repression by the state increased. This is not surprising, as an environment that allows for freedom of expression can be assumed to coincide with a decrease in state-enacted violence. The same is true with regard to the problem of security when accessing rural areas. If the general level of violence decreases, journalists and human rights activists will have better opportunities to cover instances of violence in otherwise inaccessible areas. Data from health centers and court proceedings is prone to the same dynamics. In environments that are relatively safe,

women tend to report sexualized violence more often as the risk of reprisal decreases and the hope of assistance increases. Daley (2008: 125) finds that the geography of reported cases of rape in Burundi exhibits a strong correlation with “areas of greater sensitization to the criminality of sexual violence and available assistance to the victims.”

Some projects aim to overcome the security problem by collecting data through innovative means. One such project is the *Voix des Kivus project* led by Columbia University with support from USAID. It uses a decentralized cell phone-based SMS platform to collect data on conflict events. Mobile phones and credit are handed out to selected community leaders who then text events to the platform, where the messages are automatically processed.¹⁷ The project is still in its pilot phase, so it remains to be seen whether the technology used is feasible and whether the data will benefit the affected populations and researchers.

4.2 Data Reliability

Even when data is available, significant problems regarding its reliability remain. The first problem relates to data collection during conflict. Due to the volatile environment, wartime data is ever changing. Displacement figures may change on a daily basis, as may the number of militias. Vlassenroot (2006: 198) also finds that the amount and sources of income secured by individuals and communities change very quickly.

Furthermore, sensitive information on conflict events tends to be instrumentally manipulated by various actors, with the aim of concealing their own actions, gaining access to resources or settling private issues. Much of the data used in peace and conflict research is collected by UN bodies and humanitarian or human rights organizations. It frequently relies on individuals' accounts, which are often the only source of information about conflict events in a given area. Data collected on this basis exhibits serious limitations. Not only does the sensitivity of some data often lead to the obstruction of research and the concealment of data, but data collection on conflict events can also have the opposite effect – that is, that excessive information is given on conflict events that have never taken place or that the numbers of IDPs, repatriates or victims of violence are inflated. Various actors manipulate conflict data to settle private issues (Kalyvas 2003: 475, 484), to gain access to resources or to manipulate public opinion according to their own political agenda.¹⁸ A notorious example is provided by the Rwandan refugee camps in Eastern Zaire in the early 1990s, where military and political leaders gave inflated figures of the numbers of refugees in order to get more humanitarian aid for themselves (Prunier 1995: 314). One needs to know the situation and the actors involved in a particular conflict extremely well in order to interpret accounts in a meaningful

17 See online: <<http://cu-csds.org/projects/event-mapping-in-congo/>> (18 March 2012).

18 Pottier (2002) gives a detailed account of how international reporting on the Rwandan genocide and the subsequent refugee crisis and war in Eastern Zaire (today's Democratic Republic of Congo) was the result of a mixture of manipulation by the Rwandan government and selective perception by journalists.

manner. This, however, does not always occur. There do exist some innovative means of counting IDPs, such as the UNOPS methodology for data collection on IDPs in Eastern Congo. IDPs and their huts are physically marked before counting in order to avoid double counting.¹⁹ This, however, implies that UN staff have access to all parts of the camps, which is not the case.²⁰ In addition to intentional manipulation, psychological phenomena that occur when people talk about their own experiences – from the suppression of memories to an exclusive focus on recent events to exaggeration – can also distort data.²¹

Another key source of conflict data is the media.²² We wish to elaborate on this issue as most disaggregated data sets use the media as their primary source. Media reports, especially from national and local media, offer a lot of advantages to the researcher. National news organizations and news agencies often have the “most detailed and in-depth coverage of a conflict” (Öberg and Sollenberg 2011: 49). Furthermore, even local media have become increasingly accessible through news databases specialized in the collection (and translation in the case of BBC Monitoring Global Newswire) of media reports from around the world.

However, the use of media reports as a source presents several difficulties. First, the media in conflict zones (as everywhere else) is political and may not be free to report on all types of conflict events, or may exaggerate conflict events for political reasons. As in the case of individual accounts, the researcher using particular newspapers, radio or television broadcasts needs to understand the context in which these media operate and how they are positioned. S/he needs to understand what is reported and, more importantly, what isn't. This is especially true of local media, but applies to the international media as well. With reference to Guatemala, Ball (2005: 3) says, “Newspapers must be understood as part of the society in which they are located.”

In addition to these ideological or substantive biases, the media generates “censored samples” (Woolley 2000: 158) as it tends to report about what is assumed to be significant and what is accessible.²³ One can observe that international in-house reporters on foreign issues are often based in capital cities and – depending on the size of the media outlet and the relevance of the region for the respective home country – responsible for large areas. In the event of an important incident in one part of that region, the reporter concentrates on this particular event and is thus not able to report on others. The problem of which issues are reported on is not limited to the international press. In a study on the impact of transitional justice mechanisms on interethnic conflict and cooperation in Bosnia, which was based on

19 See online: <www.dc4idp.org/htdocs/> (18 March 2012).

20 This method furthermore resembles registration procedures in prisons and concentration camps and is therefore highly questionable with regard to the respect of human dignity.

21 On biases in individual narratives and the problem of memory see also Davenport and Ball (2002) and Kalyvas (2006: 405–411).

22 For a comprehensive analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of using media reports in conflict research see Öberg and Sollenberg (2011).

23 For a synopsis of earlier general attempts to identify media biases see Woolley (2000: 158–160).

events reported in the local press, Meernik (2005: 279) found that the media reports significantly more about prominent persons than about everyday interactions. These conclusions are confirmed by Weinstein (2007: 369), who finds that rural events are underrepresented as the media tends to report on highly populated areas and “important” individuals. He adds that the media bias might be different in different countries, making it very difficult to compare events across countries (ibid.: 370). In their study on sources of information regarding Guatemalan state terror, Davenport and Ball (2002) found that media sources tended to focus on specific types of events (disappearances) in urban environments, whereas interviewees actually highlighted rural violence. Öberg and Sollenberg (2011: 53) offer an illustrative synopsis of how data is filtered in a process of steps, starting with the universe of conflict events and traveling via the reporter (or stringer) to the news agency (like AFP).²⁴ With each step data is being selected and reframed, to the point that what ends up being part of a data set based on media sources can always only be a very small part of the complete picture of what actually happened because it has been interpreted, reinterpreted and filtered many times.

A method widely used to ameliorate a shortage of data, political bias, and bias due to regional or local focus is cross-validation. However, the cross-validation of singular events often only improves intersource reliability and has rarely been undertaken using different types of sources (Davenport and Ball 2002: 430). Taking this shortcoming into account, emerging data projects are starting to combine different types of sources. ACLED complements local and regional news sources with reports by humanitarian agencies as well as humanitarian information and analysis provided by ReliefWeb (Raleigh et al. 2010: 656). EDACS also cross-checks with humanitarian information in cases where data is missing or inconsistent (Chojnacki et al. 2009). UCDP has a threefold process: It starts with media reports as the main source. These are then complemented by publications from humanitarian or development organizations and researchers, and finally, in cases of uncertainty, by consultation with regional experts (Sundberg and Harbom 2011: 102).

In addition to the unreliability of the “raw data” provided by media or humanitarian reports, problems can occur when these data are processed in large data sets. The emerging disaggregated data projects are a promising new tool for peace and conflict researchers. However, when it comes to the coding process in large-scale databases, there are particular problems that can distort data.

The coding of actors as rebels and of violence as political is prone to inaccuracy as actors can be both political and private at the same time (Kalyvas 2003: 481). All too often adherence to a rebel group or army offers opportunities for settling private disputes. Furthermore, putting actors in different categories is problematic as “labels coined at the center may be misleading when generalized down to the local level” (ibid.). Even if data is disaggregated into

24 As well as to news organizations (radio, television or print media); however, this step is not of interest when it comes to data sets as they feed in information directly from news agencies and thus include those events that don't make it through the filter of a daily or weekly news outlet.

actor, type of violence and time period, it might still be misleading as actors are not unitary in two ways: First, actors coded as “rebel organizations” exhibit a high degree of variation in terms of strategies and the character of the violence employed. Weinstein (2007) finds a striking difference in the violence of rebel groups depending on the initial conditions of the particular group. Second, the possible splintering of groups as well as variations within single rebel groups regarding preferences and behavior, for example, are not easy to grasp using large-scale data sets as this would require interpretive coding of raw data and the appropriate knowledge about the respective actors (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009: 491). Cederman and Gleditsch (*ibid.*: 492) find that “systematic data collection at the level of political organizations, or even individuals, represents such a challenge that the goal of creating a global sample cannot be realized at this point.” Séverine Autesserre (2009: 268) impressively demonstrates how the lack of a differentiated picture of fragmented actor groups such as the Mai Mai in Eastern Congo prevented international agencies from dealing adequately with local dynamics and disputes, which were often the basis of large-scale violent conflict in Congo. Some efforts are already being made to overcome the lack of differentiation when it comes to actor coding. A new data project at the University of Mannheim undertaken in cooperation with the University College London offers new insights into progovernment militias (PGMs) by providing a more nuanced picture of such groups. It identifies the type of PGM, the nature of its link to the government, the characteristics of its members, and its most common targets (Carey et al. 2011).

The coding of places is also a challenge. In many countries the names of places occur more than once. In Burundi a province, a city and several villages carry the name Gitega. Cibitoke is a province, a major town, and a borough of the capital Bujumbura. If a media report only provides the name of the place but does not specify any further, it is difficult to effectively disaggregate the data. Furthermore, coders need to be familiar with the geographical particularities of the country in question in order to adequately allocate location descriptions. However, coding is more often than not performed by inexperienced assistants in the early stages of their studies. In the ACLED data set we found numerous coding errors, including a mismatch between a specific location and the region the location was assigned to, a mismatch between location name and longitude/latitude, and a mismatch between the location and the description in the original source.²⁵

The EDACS team now post-checks the data with experienced geographers in order to address coding errors.²⁶ UCDP GED employs a triple-checking process that involves an initial manual check by the coder, a second one by the UCDP project leader, and a third automated check using programming-language software such as Python and PHP (Eck, forthcoming: 6). Nevertheless, location allocation will always remain a difficult procedure. The

25 Using the examples of Burundi and Algeria, Eck (forthcoming) provides a detailed account of coding errors in the ACLED and UCDP GED data sets.

26 Phone conversation with Christian Ickler, EDACS team.

ACLED team therefore reminds researchers to be cautious when using the data set for country-specific studies. They specify that “ACLED (...) is not designed to replace in-country field research conducted in order to devise a unique micro dataset on one state” (Raleigh et al. 2010: 658). To summarize, while disaggregated data sets are a promising new tool for researchers in peace and conflict studies, they are also prone to various distortions that should be taken seriously. Using data sets alone will not guarantee adequate case selection.

5 Possible Solutions for Surmounting Case-Selection Challenges

During the process of selecting cases for our research project, we found not only that it was difficult to identify indicators for peace – due to their ambiguity and lack of relevance at the local level – but also that we often had little knowledge concerning how peace was perceived at the local level. In addition we found that there were serious availability and reliability issues with respect to disaggregated data. Positive moves are being made to improve the data available, but what can a researcher do in the meantime? Our solution was as follows:

Firstly, we used ACLED as a starting point to identify former hot spots in DRC, Burundi, Liberia and Kenya where the number of violent events had either significantly decreased or remained the same in the years after the respective peace agreements had been signed. We tried to be as flexible as possible, cross-checking with other databases such as EDACS, using newspaper information to confirm major hot spots (especially for the post-election violence in Kenya, where the data is not as comprehensive), and trying to correct possible errors in ACLED such as the names of towns, provinces and areas in Burundi. Using this approach, we were usually able to find approximately 10 possible locations for each country. We then tried to find more information about our other indicators for each of these locations – for example, IDP movements/repatriation in the area, DDR and SSR processes in the country and, where possible, their effect on the specific locations. Based on this, we further narrowed our selection to roughly four to six cases, which we then cross-validated by contacting country experts and giving them our case selection criteria, the list of possible arenas, and the reasons why they had been shortlisted. We tried to contact a variety of experts in several fields: political science, history, economics and anthropology. On the basis of their answers, and having cross-checked with a variety of academic literature, NGO and humanitarian reports, and sometimes newspapers, we conducted the final selection. We remained flexible at all times, taking into consideration practical constraints such as the possibility of reaching certain towns in Liberia during the rainy season. In the case of the DRC, we remained flexible to the point of leaving the final case selection until the field research began. Thus while the area of North Kivu had been identified as nonpeaceful, the final decision to include the town of Sake as the specific nonpeaceful arena was made on the ground.

6 Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined the difficulties involved in undertaking the three steps necessary for any research design process in comparative peace research: conceptualizing peace, developing indicators for the concept, and finding reliable data on these indicators. More often than not the choice of a specific research area or unit of analysis rests more on practical considerations than on firm theoretical or methodological grounds (Gómez and Kuronen 2011: 687). The question of which concepts to use and which indicators to develop is strongly related to whether reliable data is available.

In order to overcome the issues related to conceptualization and data in peace and conflict research, explorative fieldwork should ideally be performed so that the researcher/s can inductively identify the most suitable indicators and cases. However, this is usually not feasible due to budget constraints (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009: 490). Furthermore, it is always necessary that at least an approximate selection of cases be explored beforehand. Therefore, the availability and reliability of data on the subject should be considered even before the question of whether the researcher him- or herself can gain access to the conflict area for fieldwork. The answer to this last question again depends on issues raised in this paper, such as the researcher's language skills.²⁷

We recommend that researchers use the indicators and data available to them as well as possible, being aware of their shortcomings, and that they contact country experts in order to triangulate the results. In our own research we ended up narrowing down our selection to a few peaceful/nonpeaceful cases by using a combination of the data we could find and backing this up with secondary sources such as reports from the International Crisis Group and academic work on the region. We then contacted country experts so they could confirm what in their opinion seemed to be the most appropriate cases. This type of triangulation can help overcome the constraints to case selection in peace and conflict research (see Höglund 2011: 118; Lyall 2009: 10). In fact, the developers of the UPCD GED and ACLED databases also undertook a similar process when they were uncertain about whether to include and how to code specific events.

A comparative design will rarely be "perfect" in peace research, just as many competing explanations will indubitably exist to explain peace or the absence of peace. In addition, despite the fact that disaggregated data still remains limited, the presence of a data set should not determine the question that is being asked, as is often the case in the social sciences. Rather, funding should be improved so that data can be collected at many different levels and with a variety of methods in order to answer important questions that have been developed. Funding for data collection on how peace and security is perceived in post-conflict societies

²⁷ Furthermore, there are of course all the pitfalls of qualitative field research. Some aspects have been mentioned while discussing data collection, such as the bias and reliability of singular narratives. For a broad discussion of the challenges of qualitative field research in conflict environments see *Understanding Peace Research* (Höglund and Öberg 2011).

as well as for innovative forms of data collection should be particularly considered. Access to a variety of different data sources will not make the problems mentioned above – such as manipulation, urban bias, or omission of data – disappear, but it will help strengthen research by making a broader range of data available for cross-checking.

Ultimately, case selection in peace research will to some extent always remain a “guessing game.” What is important is the researcher’s ability to remain honest and flexible if a chosen concept or indicator turns out to be of little meaning or if the chosen case ends up not matching the initial assumptions. By detailing some of the challenges we have experienced in our own case selection, we hope to have contributed to a more open discussion of methodological issues in the future.

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