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“How do we...?” Bridging the Gap in International Peace and Security at the United Nations

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The title “How do we...?” refers to the commonly heard phrase among UN policy makers, which is indicative of their interest in “actionable” findings and recommendations emanating from scholarly research.²

Overview: “How do we...?”

(Or,
“What
works and
what
doesn’t?”)

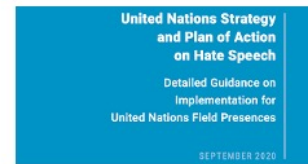
1. The UN wants to know: Can moderation be induced?
2. Bridging the gap in intrastate conflict: causes, consequences
3. Vignette 1: “What works (now)?” The power-sharing debate
4. Vignette 2: “What (should) work?” Elections and conflict prevention
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6. Vignette 4: “What (certainly doesn’t) work?” State capacity development
7. “How do we...?” Reflections on bridging the gap

Another common refrain from a policymaker perspective is the question, often presented bimodally, of “What works and what doesn’t.” The notion of work is also related to the common concern with findings from research that inform action; as Alex George has pointed out, this is distinct from scholarly concerns with generalizable knowledge from systematic inquiry.

The UN wants to know: Can moderation be induced?

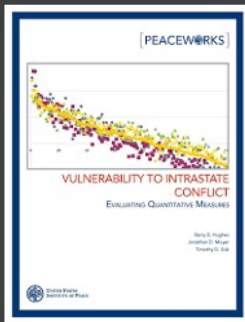


- From *An Agenda for Peace* (1992) to *Pathways for Peace* (2018)
 - Conflict prevention: What mechanisms inhibit escalation?
 - Conflict termination: Under what conditions do parties exchange war-making for peace agreements?
 - What's "better" anyway: peace agreements or military victories?
 - Peacebuilding: What are the social, economic, and political dimensions of "sustaining peace?"
 - Social cohesion: How can vertical and horizontal social linkages be strengthened?
 - Statebuilding: How can states be made more inclusive, responsive, and resilient?
- Buzzwords you'll hear:
 - "Thinking politically"
 - "Political economy analysis"
 - "Local elites"
 - "Empowerment"
 - "Dilemmas analysis"



This slide presents concerns emanating from the United Nations' highest levels with knowledge on addressing the principally internal armed conflicts from the early 1990s to the present. Along the way, landmark publications such as those referenced are the vehicle by which scholarly research and findings on issues of causes of conflict, patterns of escalation, peace processes, and peacebuilding are integrated into policy-oriented findings and guidance. For example, the Agenda for Peace draws implicitly on the literature on transitions in comparative politics (so, too, the 1996 Agenda for Democratization), and the most recent iteration of "Big Reports" from the UNDP and World Bank such as Pathways for Peace are sought to be reflective of current knowledge and "evidenced-based" understanding and learnings from scholarly research.²

Bridging the gap on intrastate conflict: Causes, dynamics, outcomes



Causes and dynamics

- “Need, greed, and creed”: Intersections and interactions
- Dynamics: Escalation, stalemate, ripeness
- International-domestic interactions
- Why *do* people kill their neighbors?

Outcomes

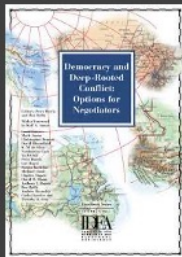
- Peace processes
- Political settlements
- Transition dynamics
- Social contracts: Strengthening social cohesion
- State capacity development
- Varieties of peace

One of the most contentious areas that demonstrates challenges at the research to policy frontier is the literature of “root causes” and “drivers of conflict.” The scholarly literature on interactions among conflict drivers, escalation dynamics, readiness for peace, and integrated theory on the causes of armed conflict has directly affected policy-focused assessment methods on vulnerability to conflict. The USIP report, emanating from the Korbel Pardee Center for International Futures Research, covaried findings from quantitative approaches to measuring state fragility, which in turn informs the “models” that are used to generate multidimensional assessment of vulnerability to conflict within countries. The study found that the models and indicators actually conform well to one another. But is that a good thing? Could it be that they all are working on assumptions about conflict drivers that reflect only partial findings from the literature?

Among the key outcomes that this causes-of-conflict literature speaks to is peace processes (what substantive issues drive conflict that must be addressed in peace accords; political settlements, or elite consensus which is a key feature of such agreements; transitional dynamics, such as the tensions between transitions to peace and concomitant social dynamics of transformation; social contracts, which ideally build upon and consolidate political settlements, and the so-called “varieties of peace” literature in which conflict drivers are managed or exacerbated by various

regime types.

Vignette 1: What works (now)? The power- sharing debate



“Consociational” (Group Building Bloc)

- Political coalitions formed among ethnic blocs
- Guarantees of group security, autonomy, veto power
- Elite constraints on conflict
- Core principles are re-discovered again and again

Argument: After the polarization that occurs during civil war, parties discover the consociational bargain time and again through negotiation.

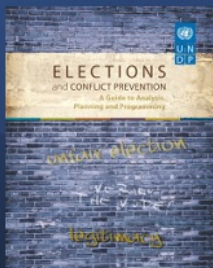
“Centripetal” (Integrative)

- Rule by a coalition of moderates; ethnicity not the basis of the state
- Incentives not constraints; in pursuing their own interest (power), elites moderate through electoral incentives
- A centripetal spin

Argument: Given the right institutional choices, the system can break down the group-based divisions that caused or arose during the war.


This vignette explores the literature on political institutions and the sustainability of peace as reflected in the power-sharing literature. In this pioneering book, for example, International IDEA sought to harness the literature on power sharing to present in a clear and simple way the complicated (and jargon-laden) literature on the “best” political institutions to manage conflict in societies riven by identity-based conflict.

Vignette 2: What (should) work: Elections and conflict prevention



- Elections as a double-sided coin: Voice... and Violence
- Election-violence as a type of political violence
- Electoral violence in the context of volatile processes of democratization; between liberalization and “consolidation”
- How can democracy be reconciled with diversity: The electoral systems debate
- Contexts:
 - Countries in “Transition” (Myanmar)
 - Weak or Fragile Democracies (Ethiopia)
 - Post-War Societies (Nepal)
 - High-stakes Referendums (Timor Leste)

Vignette 3: What (might) work: Strengthening social cohesion



“When people clash, it is almost never over civilization. Rather, other factors are at play — discrimination, competition over resources, a lack of jobs and opportunities, and other grievances. Identity is often a proxy for these issues but is rarely at the core of the dispute....

“

We must act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate.

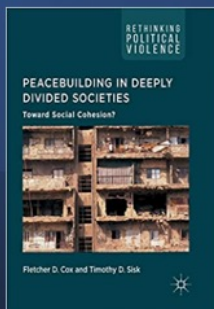
Antonio Guterres
UN Secretary-General

IOM UN REFUGEE

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres
22 September 2017

Our third vignette taps into the vast academic literature on social cohesion, and the ways in which this orientation and perspective – drawn from literature in sociology, economics, political science, and social psychology – speaks to the imperatives of the United Nations in pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 16 which calls for “just, peaceful, and inclusive” societies. The social cohesion concept has seeped into common UN discourse, and, in contexts such as Iraq, Cameroon, or Nepal, the social cohesion concept informs an entire range of development programming in peacebuilding. For example, in Iraq, research on sport for peace programming draws on findings from scholarly research that featured randomized controlled trials of cohorts of Christian and Muslim youth in cross-communal soccer programs. See the research here: <https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.abb3153>; and the UNDP program on social cohesion in Iraq here: <https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/social-cohesion.html>.

Social Cohesion and Resilience: Three Questions



- What is “bonding” and “bridging” social cohesion, and how does the latter relate to the theory and practice of conflict prevention and social resilience?
- How does conflict prevention-oriented program interventions in divided societies create the networks and social connections that can act to keep conflict from escalating?
- What findings have emerged from research on the relative efficacy of international support for direct and indirect approaches to fostering social cohesion in ethnically fractured societies?

This volume is an example of sponsored research that features a structured, focused comparison of social cohesion bring together Western and local scholars in collaborative research. The findings of this work informed directly a subsequent UNDP guidance document on social cohesion programming:
<https://www.undp.org/publications/strengthening-social-cohesion-conceptual-framing-and-programming-implications>.

Factors that affect social cohesion



- Historical Narratives and “Invented Tradition:” Constructing Identity and Belonging
- Political Institutions and Processes: Prisms, Politics, and “Playing the Ethnic Card”
- Political Capture and Predatory Politics: Patterns of Patrimonialism and Patronage
- Inequalities, Relative Deprivation and Discrimination: Economic, Social, and Psychological
- Violence and the “Hardening” of Ethnic Identity; Organized crime
- Quotidian or “Everyday” Dynamics of Interactions



The publication referenced in the previous slides is provided here, and it tracks somewhat directly the deep conceptual framework drawn from an exhaustive review of the literature on social capital, horizontal inequalities, and the individual and social psychology of violence and peace.

The photos show juxtaposition of the concepts of “bridging social capital” (middle illustration) and “binding social capital” (lower illustration).



Vignette 4: What (certainly doesn't) work: Statebuilding

- Legitimacy
 - Inclusivity of the Political Settlement
 - Accountability and Responsibility
- Authority
 - Legitimate, “Sole” use of Coercion
 - Rule of Law and Access to Justice
- Capacities
 - Leadership
 - National, Regional, and Local Governance

One of the core policy concerns of building capable, responsive, inclusive states reads like a page from Max Weber: theories of the state meet the realities of international statebuilding, or external efforts to strengthen the legitimacy (e.g., through elections), authority (e.g., through security sector reform) and the capacities (such as technical assistance to local government) of the state through development cooperation.

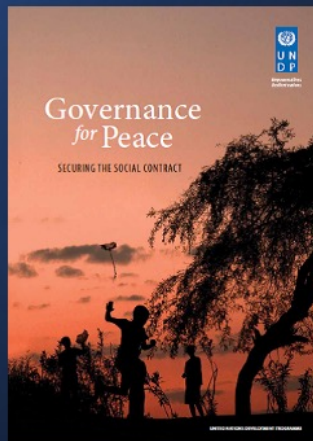
Dilemmas of Statebuilding



- Sequencing Dilemmas
 - Example: Quick Impact Projects
- Dilemmas of Authority
 - Responding to “spoilers”
- Dilemmas of Participation
 - Efficiency versus buy-in
- Dilemmas of Ownership
 - International “can-do” versus “endogenous development”

A scholarly project identified that the policy-maker efforts to build states with external assistance was fraught with some core dilemmas... which resonates in light of the 2021 collapse of the Ghani regime in Afghanistan. From this research, policy makers were encouraged to engage in “dilemmas analysis.” And they do: today, more relatable concepts such as “thinking and working politically,” often heard in the halls of the UN, reflect an understanding of the policy salience of the academic work to identify dilemmas in such interventions.

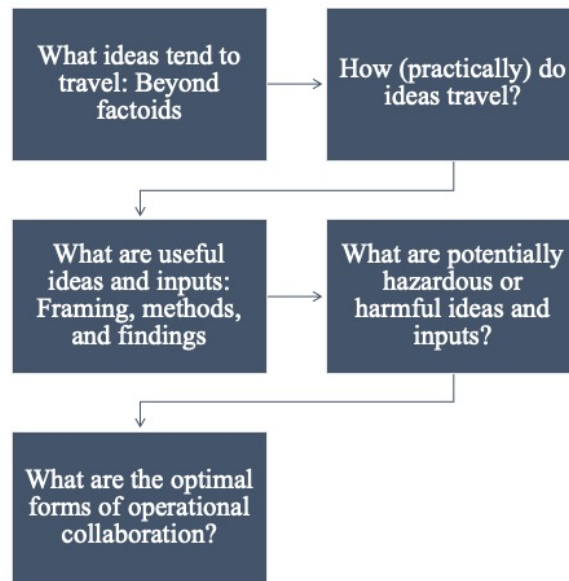
Implications for Policy



- Integrate gender throughout responsiveness, inclusivity, and resilience-oriented work
- Transitional governance outcomes are most successful when the agency supports flexible, innovative and informed interventions aligned with ground realities and local capabilities
- Development practitioners and their counterparts are adopting pragmatic strategies to promote responsive, inclusive and resilient governance but lessons not reflected in traditional democratic governance guidelines
- Better balance support for formal governance institutions at the center with localized informal actors from below. This means working with local associations, peace committees, women's associations, villager groups and other nodes of legitimacy

The statebuilding literature in turn affected further development of policy, particularly at the one entity in the UN system best placed to pursue the aims of statebuilding, UNDP. UNDP programming guidance in this publication has been used by UN Country Offices globally to design programs and projects, and these findings emanated from scholarly and sponsored research on statebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

“How do we...?” Reflections on bridging the gap



The presentation ends with reflections on bridging the gap.

1. Scholars and practitioners alike must be cognizant of the tendency to grab from academic literature key findings and “factoids” that tend to be replicated through a complex organization such as the UN. There may be a tendency to use quantitatively derived findings – numbers – to justify already determined assumptions.
2. Ideas travel from research to policy, and a key mechanism is the ways in which scholarly work feeds into “Big Reports” such as the 2018 Pathways UNDP-World Bank report, and in the myriad of publications that emerge from the UN’s specialized agencies.
3. Framing matters: If scholars want to have impact on policy, framing, clearly articulated methods, and sufficiently granular findings (contingent generalizations) are critical. Policy update on framing is successful when scholarly research informs key concepts and themes that resonate with policy professionals; that is, framing that they themselves find useful in their “How do we?” discourses.
4. Harmful or hazardous ideas typically come from arrogance by scholars who believe that their research informs a particular or specific policy action or intervention, when in fact the research itself only marginally contributes to

understanding. Hubris hurts.

5. It is probably most important to realize that policy makers, especially those in leading jobs at the UN, are highly educated and sophisticated professions and no small number of them have themselves cycled through academic and policy careers. Optimal forms of collaboration involve recognizing that the “bridge” in bridging the gap is a rather busy two-way street.