A Major Challenge to the Sustainable Development Goals

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted at the UN Summit in September last year, contain a goal that calls for the creation of “peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and accountable institutions.” This goal is now under threat.

The inclusion of peace, justice and accountability goals in the SDGs was one of the most notable achievements of the new development regime that has now officially replaced the 15 year-old, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) process.

The first target of what has become known as the “peaceful societies” goal was to “… reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.” The metrics proposed to track progress towards this target were violent war deaths and homicide rates.

But Goal 16, which includes targets to enhance not just security, but justice and governance as well, is now under threat, with a number of governments arguing against the inclusion of conflict deaths in the first target. This is unfortunate to put it mildly. A “Peaceful Societies” Goal that completely ignores political violence makes little sense.

Critics have focused on the most politically sensitive security indicator—conflict deaths—arguing that current methodologies for estimating numbers killed in wars are so flawed that this target should be dropped. If the push to get rid of the “conflict deaths” indicator for Target 1 succeeds we will be confronted with the curious spectacle of a “peaceful societies” goal that ignores war completely. Absent robust war data we will have no way of determining whether the world and its individual states are becoming more or less peaceful.

It’s quite true, as the critics claim, that war death estimates are subject to uncertainty, but this is also the case with most other SDG indicators, including that for estimating homicide rates. This latter rate is highly relevant because homicide data is the second indicator for Target 1 of the
“peaceful societies” goal. But the data for this indicator in some regions are highly unreliable. In 2012, for example, the UN’s Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that Africa’s homicide toll lay somewhere between 50,000 and 130,000.

Such a degree of uncertainty means that we have no way of knowing whether homicides were increasing or decreasing in the region in this period. But there have been no suggestions that the international community should drop its commitment to estimating homicides. Nor should there be. It is true that homicide data are terrible in much of Africa, but this is a reason to improve the collection of data, not abandon it. In fact this is already happening.

Flawed Data Are the Norm for Many SDG Indicators

Global poverty data are also subject to very large levels of uncertainty. According to the UK’s Overseas Development Institute, official estimates of the numbers of people living in absolute poverty around the world underestimate the true figure by some 350 million. But again no government or international agency has suggested that this is a reason for abandoning efforts to estimate absolute poverty levels.

In 2013, Norwegian researcher, Morten Jerven’s, much-cited study, Poor Numbers, revealed that official GDP numbers for Sub-Saharan Africa were gross underestimates. This is in part because governments have repeatedly failed to include income estimates for relatively new and/or “informal” or “shadow” sectors of their economies. Just how serious such omissions can be became evident in 2014 when Nigeria revised its GDP estimate upwards by an extraordinary 89 percent—becoming sub-Saharan Africa’s largest economy overnight. In 2010, Ghana had revised its GPD up by 60 percent. Other countries are now scrambling to update their GDP measures.

There is no doubt that traditional methodologies for measuring GDP in Africa—and almost certainly elsewhere in the developing world—are flawed, but—yet again—there has been no suggestion that GDP per capita estimates should be rejected because of this.

The Data Gatherers
Since the late 1990s there has been a huge increase in the collection of conflict data by individual researchers and research organizations, most of them in Europe or North America.

Most of these datasets rely on event data drawn from electronic datasets, like Factiva, that aggregate a very large range of disparate media and other resources. But dataset compilers also draw on vital registration data, official government, NGO, think tank and international agency reports, academic publications and sometimes reports from truth and reconciliation commissions in war-affected countries. Most of the major datasets are updated when new information from earlier periods becomes available.

Some of the best-known conflict datasets are not included here because they have not been updated—and thus cannot be be used to estimate current trends. Not all the current conflict datasets are included in the list below, the main ones are, however.

**Uppsala University’s Conflict Data Program (UCDP).** UCDP has reported estimates of conflict deaths in every country suffering from armed conflicts around the world since 1989. Ironically the same war death data that are may not be included in the SDG monitoring process, *already* inform official statistics in international agencies, including the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

UCDP data are now geo-referenced—i.e., the approximate location of fighting within countries is now identified. Currently UCDP dataset updates are only released annually, but there are plans to release data at more frequent intervals in the near future.

UCDP battle death data have only been collected since 1989, but the Peace Research Institute, Oslo’s (PRIO) battle death dataset covers a period from 1946 to 2008. The UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset v.4-2015, 1946 – 2014, as it name suggests, it combines the PRIO and UCDP data on the number and type of conflicts to provide worldwide coverage from 1946 to 2014. The UCDP/PRIO conflict dataset is updated annually by the Uppsala research team. But the battle death data for each research institution continue to exist independently of each other. PRIO’s battle death dataset is no longer updated; Uppsala updates its data annually.

In the early 2000s, UCDP started recording estimates of the incidence and deadliness of so-called “non-state” conflicts around the world—those
involving a varying mix of guerrillas, militias and extremists, but where governments are not a warring party. In addition, it tracks deaths arising from so-called “one-sided violence”—the intentional killing of civilians by both governments and non-state groups.

Sussex University’s, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) codes the dates and locations of all reported political violence events in over 60 developing countries in Africa and Asia. Because ACLED’s data coverage is not yet global and did not start until 1997, it is less useful for econometric studies that seek to determine universal drivers of armed conflict, than are the datasets that include all countries in conflict over a longer period.

ACLED’s research, particularly in Africa, uses compelling graphics that reveal changes in the perpetrators of political violence in the region over the past five years, as well “heat maps” showing the location and intensity of violence. ACLED’s maps and infographics provide more user-friendly depictions of the data than do the raw statistics.

The widely-cited Washington-based, Center for Systemic Peace, collects trend data on all conflicts being waged around the world using a radically different methodology from those used by PRIO, Uppsala and other dataset compilers. Published annually, the Center’s data have been used intensively in research undertaken by the US government’s Political Instability Task Force. Despite radical differences in data collection methodology, the conflict trend data that the Center publishes each year are remarkably similar to those of UCDP and other dataset compilers.

The UK’s International Institute of Strategic Studies’ Armed Conflict Database (ACD) records conflict statistics dating back to 1997 which, as is the case with ACLED, limits its utility for researchers seeking to use econometric analyses. Unlike other conflict datasets, there is no free public access to the data.

The Human Rights Data Analysis Group’s (HRDAG) work is sometimes referred to the “gold standard” of conflict fatality research. It involves long periods of intensive in-country investigation, often undertaken for post-war peace and reconciliation commissions. It’s ‘multiple systems estimation’ methodology enables it to avoid the double counting of victims which is a major challenge elsewhere this field. HRDAG has also included survey data in its fatality reporting.
But HRDAG does not collect data on all conflicts on an annual basis, which means that it is not really suited for the sort of annual reporting required by the SDGs process. Plus, its investigations are, in contrast of those of Uppsala and the other “events data” methodologies, very expensive.

With respect to conflict data collection in individual countries, the UK NGO, Every Casualty, reports that there are now a considerable number of conflict monitoring projects in individual countries. Iraq Body Count, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights are among the the best known. But, as Every Casualty points out, regularly updated fatality counts are also being generated by NGOs in more than 20 other countries around the world.

Data Collection Challenges

All conflict datasets that rely on events data, base their estimates on reports of conflict fatalities from a diverse range of sources. These include media reports from electronic news aggregators, like Factiva, plus international agency, government, academic, think tank, NGO and other reports. A major source of data for a few war-affected countries has been the reports of truth and reconciliation commissions.

Inevitably some reports get violent death numbers and locations wrong, while—for a variety of reasons—some fatalities simply go unreported. Recognizing these sources of uncertainty, data compilers sometimes give “high” and “low,” as well as “best,” estimates of violent death tolls. Having a multiplicity of data sources can help dataset compilers identify inaccurate reporting. But there will always be some degree of uncertainty in the various estimates.

The methodological challenges involved in calculating war death estimates are well understood by conflict data research organizations like UCDP, PRIO, HRDAG and ACLED, whose researchers have been candid both about the uncertainty of wartime fatality estimates, and its causes.

The causes include: “urban bias”—reflecting the fact that deadly political violence in cities is more likely to be reported than the same level of violence in rural areas, and “event-size bias”—meaning that violent events with high death tolls are more likely to be reported than those with low tolls. Conflict deaths will also be under-reported in conflict zones that are either
inaccessible or too dangerous for the media or NGOs to visit.

Each of these sources of error means that the true extent of war death tolls is likely to be under-reported.

“Indirect” Deaths

Almost all research groups today are focused on counting the direct deaths of combatants and civilians—i.e., those that result from violent injuries. But direct deaths only make up a minority of all war-related deaths. The real killers, especially in wars in very poor countries, are “indirect” deaths—those arising from war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition. These tolls can be five or more times larger than those caused by deaths from injuries.

But estimating indirect conflict deaths is not easy. Simply counting the number of people who die from disease and malnutrition during wartime is not enough. This is because—especially in very poor countries—a proportion of the population would have have died from disease and malnutrition even if there had been no war.

But nationwide household surveys can be used to collect data on the rate at which individuals die from disease and malnutrition during wartime and this rate can be compared with pre-war death rate. The difference between the two is the “excess” death rate—i.e., the death rate from disease and malnutrition, as well as injuries, that is attributable solely to the war.

If the excess death rate and the war-affected country’s total population are known with reasonable confidence, calculating the overall excess death toll becomes straightforward—at least in principle.

Given that estimating excess deaths using population surveys in war-affected countries is clearly feasible, albeit challenging, and given that war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition kill far more people than violent injuries, why has this approach been ignored in SDG 16?

There are a number of possible answers.

First, undertaking population surveys in war-affected countries can be extremely dangerous. For this reason high-risk areas are often not surveyed—which will tend to result in underestimation of the excess death toll.
Second, there are major methodological and data challenges with implementing population surveys in war-affected states. Not least of these lies in determining the “counterfactual”—in this case the number people who would have died had there been no conflict.

Third, and in part for the reasons noted above, conflict death toll estimates from surveys in war-affected countries, particularly those undertaken by advocacy groups, have often been controversial—raising doubts about their utility.

Fourth—major population surveys are extremely expensive, dramatically more so than the incident-counting methods relied on by Uppsala, IISS, ACLED and other dataset compilers.

Other Objections to Collecting Conflict Data

But even if these and other concerns about methodology were resolved tomorrow, some UN member states would still oppose the inclusion of security issues in the SDGs’ agenda on the grounds that war is simply not a development issue. These critics point out that the goal of preventing the “scourge of war” has been central to the UN’s mandate since the Charter was signed in 1945. Plus, the world organization has long had a “peace architecture” in place—which includes the Security Council, the Departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations, and the Peacebuilding Commission. From this perspective there is no need for the new sustainable development regime to embrace security issues.

But this misses the point that inclusive development, as a huge number of high quality statistical studies have demonstrated, plays a critical role in preventing conflict. Security, development and human rights are intimately interrelated.

As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it in 2005:

We will not enjoy development without security; we will not enjoy security without development; and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.

For more than a decade, the World Bank, the UN, other international agencies, key aid donor states and major NGOs have been arguing with
increasing conviction, and supported by mounting evidence, that preventing and stopping conflicts is a critically important development priority, while war itself is “development in reverse.”

Indeed, these claims constitute a major reason why—after a lot of contentious discussion—the “peaceful societies” goal was eventually included in the SDGs.

But even if the arguments about the interrelationships between war and development were to be accepted, and hence that war really is a development issue, there remains one final objection to having security targets in the SDGs. In fact the strongest source of opposition to SDG16 is political—the concern that embracing security targets will impinge on highly sensitive issues of national sovereignty.

This was very clear from concerns expressed by member states during the SDG consultation process and subsequently. Some governments worry about intrusions into their internal affairs, others that conflict data are far too sensitive to be shared in wartime. Still others worry that disagreements over security issues could be used by aid donors and major powers to impose much-disliked “conditionality” programs—particularly on fragile and conflict-affected states.

Collecting sensitive security data also raises the issue of “data sovereignty.” Here the argument is that it is sovereign governments that should determine what data is being collected and who should be doing the collecting. The innovative SHaSHA program of data collaboration between national statistics offices in Africa was created in part as a consequence of these concerns.

The concerns are understandable because currently the only institutions that collect annual data on countries in conflict around the world are based in the global North. Some of these institutions are funded by intelligence agencies or defense departments.

It is not hard to imagine why governments that have perpetrated deadly violence against civilians—would prefer not to have the resulting body count data broadcast around the world. But the reality is that this is going to happen anyway. We live in a world awash with increasingly sophisticated, high-resolution, open-source satellite imagery, drone
technologies that can be used for surveillance of humanitarian emergencies, and cell phone networks that can be used for on-the-ground monitoring of political violence in conflict zones—as we currently see in Iraq and Syria. In most—not all—conflicts media professionals, NGOs and other non-government actors are present on the ground. This means that, with few exceptions, more and more intelligence on developments in conflict zones is becoming internationally available at lower and lower cost.

*Why Is Conflict Data Important for the SDGs?*

Finally, there is the most basic question of all: what is the *utility* of security data? Why does knowing how many wars are being fought around the world—or how many deaths individual conflicts generate—matter?

The first and most obvious point is that if the SDG programs are to be evidence-based, as almost all agree should be the case, there has to be evidence. And even limited amounts of reasonably robust data can tell us things that are both surprising and highly policy-relevant.

Back in the 1990s, for example, before today’s conflict datasets were providing timely annual data on the wars being fought around the world, it was widely assumed, including by the UN, that the level of political violence around the world was increasing.

This was not surprising since about twice as many conflicts started in the 1990s as the 1980s. But few noticed that *even more* conflicts ended than started in this period—creating a substantial net decline in conflict numbers.

Because almost no one realized that conflict numbers were declining, there was no reason for policymakers or researchers to ask *why* this was the case—a question that could have given rise to some interesting answers.

In fact it wasn’t until the early 2000s when access to the new conflict data became available, that researchers were able to demonstrate how effective peace negotiations had become in stopping wars. The evidence also showed how the deployment of peacekeepers contributed positively to stability and reduced the risks of conflict recurrence.
In 2010, the Human Security Report demonstrated that in more than 95 percent of years in which countries are at war, child mortality rates *improve*. This remarkably counterintuitive finding is due in part to the fact that immunization programs undertaken in peacetime save children’s lives in wartime.

Finally, over the past decade concerns have grown that peace agreements have been breaking down with increasing frequency. Indeed, over half the conflicts that end in peace agreements start again within five years. But Uppsala’s conflict death data reveal that, on average, the death toll from the restarted conflicts is *80 percent lower* than in the previous wars. The suggests that conflict recurrence isn’t as worrying as it might at first appear—and indeed that even “failed” peace agreements can save large numbers of lives.

These examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely. But in a world in which data on political violence are *not* being collected, we would have little idea of the extent to which organized violence was increasing or decreasing—or why. This in turn would mean that our ability to determine whether policies to create a less violent world were working—or not—would be dramatically reduced. Honoring Target 1’s commitment to “reduce all forms of violence” worldwide remains critically important.