What do we know about the evidence base on violence prevention programmes and their impacts on homicides and conflict-related deaths?

BACKGROUND, SCOPE , EVIDENCE BASE AND GAPS

Thomas de Hoop, Andi Coombes, Anna Warren, Chinmaya Holla, Emily Mutea, Suchi Kapoor Malhotra, Eve Namisango, Swati Mantri, Shalu Jain, Bhumika TV, Howard White

September 2024

Contents

Overview

This brief presents an update from the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition's **inaugural synthesis under the Peace Pillar on the effects of violence prevention programs on homicides and conflict-related deaths.** These efforts align with SDG targets 16.1 (to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths) and 16.4 (to reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat organized crime).

The selection of these targets was guided by a thorough scoping and consultation

> This synthesis is the first in a series. Priorities identified for future syntheses include:
> - Rule of law and access to justice (SDG target 16.3)
> - Legal identity (SDG target 16.9)
> - Violence against women and children (SDG target 5 and 16.1.3)

process conducted by the Peace Pillar Management Group: UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, OIOS, UNPBSO, IOM, the Governments of Ireland and Spain, OHCHR, UNESCWA, UNHCR, and UNICEF. The process considered the availability of evidence, the progress on SDG16 targets, the priorities highlighted in existing United Nations frameworks and policy documents, as well as the priorities of agencies represented in the Management Group.

This brief provides key insights into the nature and characteristics of the evidence base compiled for the synthesis, as an indication of what can be expected in the final report. Accompanying this brief are **two interactive evidence gap maps** that illustrate the distribution and scope of evidence used in the synthesis. The first map focuses on impact evaluations, primarily from academic sources, assessing the effects and outcomes of violence prevention programs. The second map highlights performance and process evaluations, predominantly published by United Nations evaluation agencies and bilateral and multilateral development organizations. These evaluations provide rich qualitative insights into the factors that either enable or hinder the successful implementation of violence prevention initiatives.

The final synthesis report, anticipated in November 2024, will deliver a comprehensive analysis of substantive findings and their broader implications for decision-makers, researchers and evaluators, programme implementers and donors. It will answer questions on:

- What types of interventions work for reducing homicides and conflict-related deaths?
- How do these interventions work (e.g. what contextual, implementation and design factors contribute to success)?
- To what extent do the leave do no one behind principles affect the success of interventions?

Background

The 2023 Sustainable Development Report revealed a sobering reality. Based on current trends, "not a single SDG is projected to be met by 2030, with the poorest countries struggling the most" (Sachs et al., 2023, p. 2).

Global crises, including an increasing number of conflicts, jeopardize progress toward achieving the SDGs, particularly the goals under the peace pillar (SDG 16). After a period of relative peace following World War II, **the number of armed conflicts began rising in 2010 and has remained high**, with a sharp increase in conflict-related deaths in recent years. Global homicide rates have fluctuated between 400,000 and 450,000 since 2000, with an uptick to 458,000 in 2021, although the overall homicide rate has seen a slight decline over the same period. The resurgence of conflicts in Ethiopia and Sudan, alongside prominent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, suggests that these figures will not improve soon. As a result, achieving SDG target 16.1, which aims to "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere," appears increasingly unlikely.

Despite some growth in the availability of evidence from impact, performance, and process evaluations, significant knowledge gaps persist regarding what effectively reduces homicides and conflict-related deaths. To address this, the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition commissioned the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Campbell South Asia (CSA) to conduct a comprehensive evidence synthesis.

The review included a thorough search of academic and non-academic databases, identifying **40 experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations** that shed light on the effectiveness of various interventions. Searches in the evaluation databases of United Nations agencies and bilateral donors uncovered **444 performance and process evaluations**, providing insights into how and why different programs and interventions work.

Thematic scope

The synthesis focuses on **initiatives explicitly aimed at reducing violence**, homicides and conflict-related deaths. Interventions with indirect links to violence reduction - such as cash transfers, vocational training, or social inclusion activities that do not specifically target violence reduction - were excluded from the analysis.

The synthesis evaluates programmes within three thematic areas: (1) social inclusion and social cohesion, (2) peace processes, and (3) safe environments.[1]

Table 1: Activities and initiatives included in the synthesis.

Category	Initiatives
Social inclusion (strengthening social cohesion and conflict resolution as well as inter-group perceptions and relations)	Communications
	Economic inclusion
	Gender/youth inclusion for conflict prevention
	Reintegration of ex-combatants or other ex-offenders
	Social cohesion for conflict prevention
Safe environments (ending violence and building a safe and secure environment)	Border management
	Democracy and peaceful elections
	Early warning systems
	Governance strengthening to prevent conflict, violence, or crime
	Law enforcement capacity
	Youth crime prevention
Peace processes and conflict prevention (supporting peace processes, oversight, and post-conflict justice)	Gender for peace
	Governance strengthening to respond to conflict
	Natural resource management
	Peace agreement implementation
	Security and stabilization strengthening
	Social cohesion for conflict resolution
	Transitional justice
	Youth for peace

[1] Based on the 3ie Building Peaceful Societies Evidence Gap Map by Sonnenfeld et al. (2020), Categories were adapted as part of the screening and coding of the included studies.
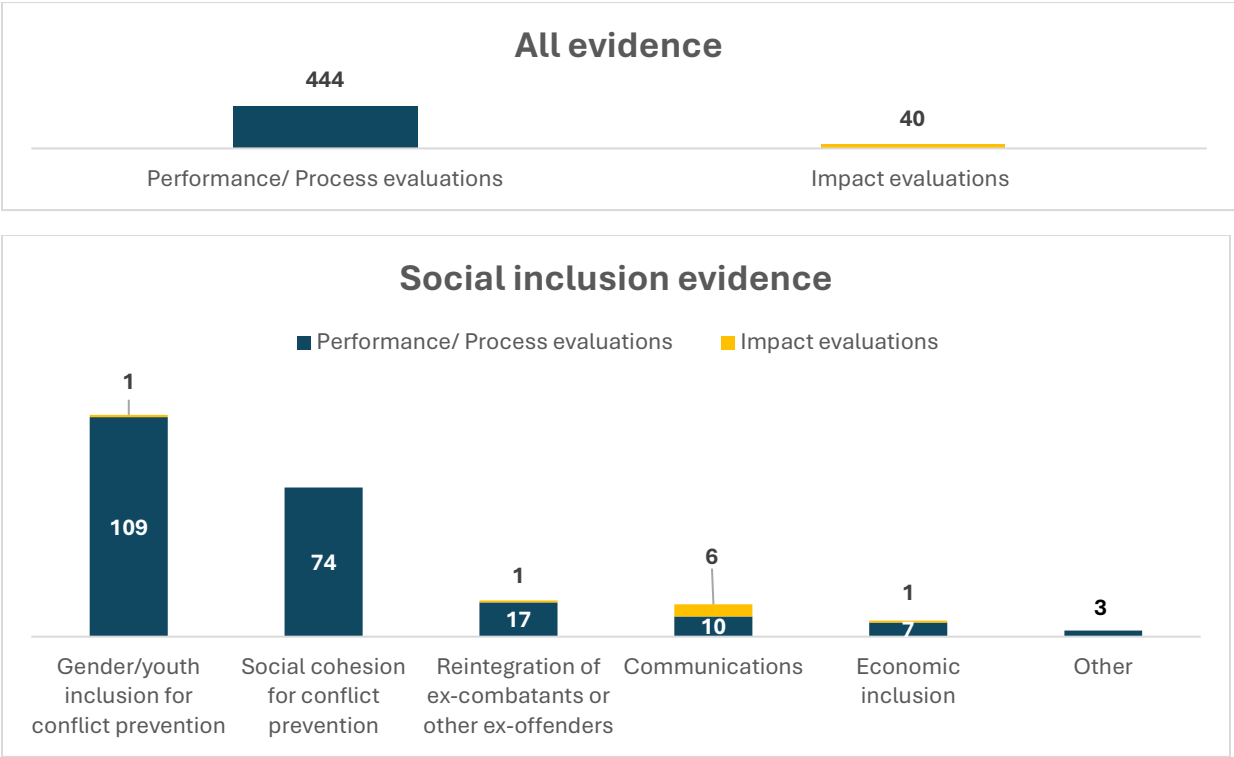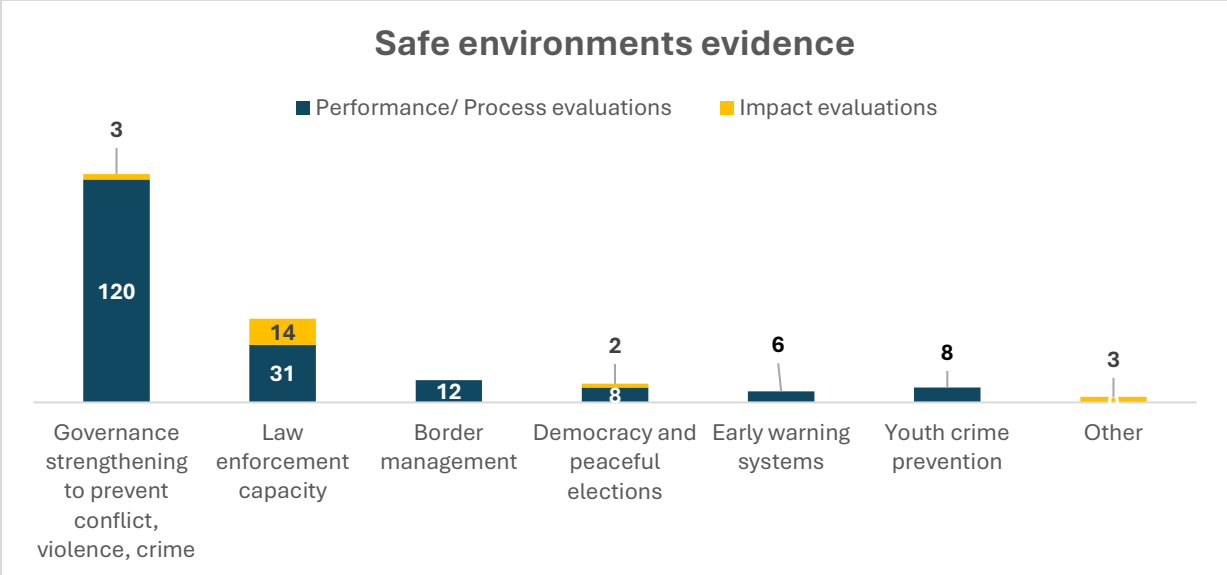
Evaluative evidence

The synthesis includes both **experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations** examining the causal effects of violence prevention programmes. Other evaluations use **performance and process evaluation** methods that focus on the implementation of violence prevention programmes.

The synthesis primarily focuses on evidence related to interventions in **low and middle-income countries**. Studies published in the period **2019-2024**, inclusive of both years, were included in the synthesis.

Graph 1. Included initiatives and volume of evidence

All evidence

444	40
Performance/ Process evaluations	Impact evaluations

Social inclusion evidence

■ Performance/ Process evaluations   ■ Impact evaluations

Gender/youth inclusion for conflict prevention	Social cohesion for conflict prevention	Reintegration of ex-combatants or other ex-offenders	Communications	Economic inclusion	Other
1		1	6	1	3
109	74	17	10	7	

Safe environments evidence

■ Performance/ Process evaluations   ■ Impact evaluations

- Governance strengthening to prevent conflict, violence, crime: 120 (Performance/Process), 3 (Impact)
- Law enforcement capacity: 31 (Performance/Process), 14 (Impact)
- Border management: 12
- Democracy and peaceful elections: 8 (Performance/Process), 2 (Impact)
- Early warning systems: 6
- Youth crime prevention: 8
- Other: 3

Peace processes and conflict prevention evidence

■ Performance/ Process evaluations   ■ Impact evaluations

- Governance strengthening to respond to conflict: 37 (Performance/Process), 2 (Impact)
- Social cohesion for conflict resolution: 25 (Performance/Process), 1 (Impact)
- Peace agreement implementation: 21
- Security and stabilization strengthening: 9 (Performance/Process), 6 (Impact)
- Gender for peace: 12
- Natural resource management: 10
- Transitional justice: 10
- Youth for peace: 6

Note: Some evaluations fall under more than one category, so the number of included interventions across the initiatives is higher than the total number of included interventions.

Characteristics of the evidence base

Performance and process evaluations

Intervention focus. Most focus on social cohesion and the inclusion of gender and youth in peace processes. Few focus on security and stabilization through peacekeeping, early warning systems, youth crime prevention and economic inclusion.

Outcomes. 219 focus on programmes that aim to prevent or reduce conflict; 139 on programmes that aim to resolve conflict; 37 on programmes that aim to prevent or reduce violent extremism; 32 on programmes that aim to prevent or reduce trafficking; and 19 on programmes focused on other types of organized crime prevention.

Geographic focus. 25 evaluations assess programmes in countries within East Asia and the Pacific; 36 in Europe and Central Asia; 52 in Latin America and the Caribbean; 27 in the Middle East and North Africa; 20 in South Asia; 227 in Sub Saharan Africa, and 57 in more than one region.

Gender and youth social inclusion. 113 performance and process evaluations focus on gender and youth social inclusion for conflict prevention, while 21 focus on inclusion of women and youth in peace processes.

Evidence Gap Map. Link to the full evidence gap map of the performance and process evaluations, which can be found on the website of the SDG synthesis coalition. https://www.sdgsynthesiscoalition.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/Peace-Pillar-EGM-Impact-evaluations.html

Impact evaluations

Intervention focus. Most focus on improving law enforcement capacity, communications, and security and stabilization strengthening. These categories together make up more than 50 percent of the included impact evaluations. Some other impact evaluations focus on social cohesion for conflict resolution, reintegration of ex-combatants or other ex-offenders, and economic inclusion. Very few impact evaluations focus on gender or youth inclusion, social cohesion for conflict prevention, early warning systems, democracy and peaceful elections, youth crime prevention, and natural resource management.

Outcomes. While a substantial number of impact evaluations examine the impact of interventions on homicides and violent crime, few provide evidence on the impacts on conflict-related deaths or violence. Impact evaluations in conflict settings instead often focus on intermediate outcomes such as attitudes towards violence or trust in political institutions.

Methodology. Approximately two-thirds of the impact evaluations use a quasi-experimental design, while one-third use a randomized controlled trial. This finding suggests that while challenging, it is possible to conduct rigorous impact evaluations of violence prevention programmes, including randomized controlled trials.

Geographic focus. Almost all impact evaluations focus on either Latin-America and the Caribbean or sub-Saharan Africa. Few impact evaluations examine the impact of violence prevention programmes in other regions. While the preponderance of studies set in sub-Saharan Africa reflects the incidence of active state-based conflicts (UCDP, 2023), those from Latin America and the Caribbean originate from historical state-based conflicts as well as higher prevalence of non-state crime in the region (UNODC, 2023),

Gender and youth social inclusion. A minority of impact evaluations have a focus on disadvantaged groups and the furthest left behind. Approximately one-third of the impact evaluations focus on either gender or youth inclusion.

Evidence Gap Map. Link to the full evidence gap map of the impact evaluations, which can be found on the website of the SDG synthesis coalition. https://www.sdgsynthesiscoalition.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/Peace-Pillar-EGM-Impact-evaluations.html

Evidence gaps

Despite the substantial number of rigorous impact, performance, and process evaluations, several significant evidence gaps persist.

Limited assessment of violence outcomes in performance and process evaluations. Few of the performance and process evaluations included assess outcomes directly related to violence or conflict-related deaths. Instead, they tend to focus on intermediate outcomes such as community social cohesion to prevent conflict, leadership development for local government and law enforcement, and the design and implementation of policies and programs aimed at conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Limited research on conflict-related deaths in impact evaluations. While many impact evaluations address homicides and violent crime, only a small number estimate the impact on conflict-related deaths and broader violence. In conflict settings, impact evaluations often concentrate on intermediate outcomes, such as attitudes toward violence or trust in political institutions.

Limited causal evidence on gender or youth inclusion. Although a considerable number of performance and process evaluations focus on the inclusion of gender and youth, few impact evaluations examine this issue, leaving a gap in causal evidence.

Limited evidence beyond sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Only a small number of impact evaluations explore what works to reduce violence outside of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. While the focus on these regions is expected due to their high rates of conflict-related deaths and homicides, it remains important to gather evidence from other geographic contexts.

Further implications for evaluation and research

Abundance of performance and process evaluations. Having 444 performance and process evaluations - primarily published by UN agencies and bilateral donors - highlights the importance of including non-academic databases in systematic reviews and evidence syntheses. Most existing systematic reviews overlook such evaluations, resulting in an incomplete picture of the evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing homicides and conflict-related deaths. Syntheses that incorporate gray literature could benefit from systematically searching evaluation databases from UN agencies and bilateral donors.

Coverage of equity and "Leaving No One Behind" (LNOB). While many performance and process evaluations, as well as a notable subset of impact evaluations, emphasize gender and youth inclusion, few evaluations address other vulnerable populations. The synthesis found limited evaluations focused on indigenous populations. Almost none addressed persons with disabilities. The final synthesis report will provide a more detailed analysis of LNOB coverage.

Need for more mixed-methods evaluations. The growing body of evidence underscores the need for evaluation commissioners and evaluators to invest in mixed-methods evaluations to better understand how and why violence prevention programs succeed or fail. Currently, most impact evaluations rely solely on quantitative methods, with minimal use of qualitative approaches, while performance and process evaluations tend to focus exclusively on qualitative methods. This lack of mixed-methods evaluations limits our ability to draw comprehensive conclusions about the effectiveness of violence prevention strategies and the mechanisms behind them.

Limited number of experimental impact evaluations. Researchers and academics could enhance the evidence base by designing and implementing impact evaluations, such as randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs, for programs that are well-suited to these methodologies, such as communication campaigns and police reforms.

Next steps

Work is ongoing to complete the full analysis and synthesis of the included evaluations, with the goal of generating substantive findings and lessons on what effectively reduces violence and conflict-related deaths, as well as understanding the mechanisms behind these outcomes. To address these questions, the synthesis will triangulate both quantitative and qualitative evidence to identify key mechanisms of change. It will also compare the effectiveness of different interventions and, where possible, analyze variations in effectiveness across different geographic regions.

The final synthesis, which is anticipated for **November 2024**, will include an analysis of all **44 impact evaluations and a sample of 100 performance and process evaluations**. These evaluations will be thematically aligned to allow for a cross-analysis of information from all evaluation types. This sampling approach ensures that the analysis remains feasible within the project's timeframe and maximizes the value of triangulation across impact and performance and process evaluations.