



Small Arms Survey

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A plan of action for capturing the burden of conflict-related deaths

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, Target 1 commits states to ‘Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere’. Progress in this direction will be measured—inter alia—using data on violent deaths in non-conflict settings (homicides, Indicator 16.1.1) and conflict-related deaths (Indicator 16.1.2, still to be finalized, but likely to focus mainly on the loss of life due to violence in conflict settings). But a wide range of stakeholders involved in crisis mitigation and prevention are calling for the comprehensive burden of conflict-related deaths to be captured, including deaths caused by, for example, starvation, lack of access to clean water, and decreased health care. This is also necessary to support the cross-cutting messages of Agenda 2030 and the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit; and, more specifically, a vision of sustained peace and conflict prevention like the one recently promoted by the UN Secretary-General.

Many researchers have suggested methodologies to measure conflict-related deaths, but no validation mechanism has been developed to create consensus on which methods would best capture the entire range of the phenomenon.

On 25 January 2017 the Small Arms Survey convened an expert meeting in Geneva to identify options for better capturing the burden of conflict-related deaths.¹ More specifically, the meeting aimed at producing a ‘plan of action’ for relevant organizations and actors to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and policy-making in this area. The meeting explored how the data collection framework of Agenda 2030² could help this process.

Looking back at 2008, when the Small Arms Survey last explored the state of the methodology used to estimate conflict-related deaths in its analysis for the [Global Burden of Armed Violence](#), both in terms of persons killed by violence and those who lost their lives because of other impacts of armed

¹ Participating organizations included the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the REACH/Impact Initiatives, as well as experts from the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies (IHEID), the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the Catholic University of Louvain, the American University, and the Small Arms Survey.

² Under SDG Target 16.1, two indicators focus on lethal violence (16.1.1 on homicides and 16.1.2 on conflict-related deaths, thus not explicitly limiting measurement to the loss of life due to violence during armed conflict). SDG 3 is also relevant in this regard, because it endeavours to ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’ and mandates the measurement of mortality from a number of communicable and non-communicable conditions that are highly relevant in conflict situations.

conflict, the meeting discussed key factors underlying measurement methods and progress made in the development of definitions and estimation techniques, with a view to identifying challenges and opportunities.

In particular, the discussion focused on the advancement of the official SDG measurement process (led by OHCHR) in developing Indicator 16.2.1 on conflict-related deaths, and its relation to a number of existing processes, such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, the Complex Emergency Database (CE-DAT) at the Catholic University of Louvain, and relevant work done by the ICRC and IMPACT/REACH. Participants agreed that the quantity and quality of data available on conflict-related deaths had visibly improved over time. However, several limitations still pose a challenge to attempts to better assess the burden of armed conflict. There is no consensual definition of 'armed conflict', and some affected states might reject this label, or seek to under-report or over-report conflict-related deaths to strengthen a particular political narrative. Furthermore, the capacity to collect data during armed conflict is often limited. These limitations can have significant consequences, because those who collect data may influence the type of data that is collected, and hence the type of policies and programmes that may be adopted and supported based on such data.

The 'data revolution' affecting the development of indicators for the SDGs provides opportunities for overcoming some of these challenges. National institutional capacity, which lies at the core of data collection for the SDGs, can be complemented by the efforts and engagement of international organizations, academics, and civil society to measure the broader scope of the lethal impacts of conflict. Such a triangulation of estimates would not only expand the knowledge base, improve methodological standards, and result in overall enhanced accountability, but could also provide expert oversight of the official data collection process.

Participants noted that any future measure/estimate should systematically disaggregate conflict mortality by cause, time, and affected demographic groups in order better to understand trends and the distribution of risks. In addition, causal chains leading to (violent and non-violent) conflict-related deaths should be further investigated, because this will likely identify further factors that should be considered when designing policy responses.

Taking stock of what we know and don't know about the process of identifying gaps and needs would generate agreed-upon definitions and benchmarks for measuring mortality in conflict-affected countries or regions. Participants proposed this process as a *platform*; that is, a go-to place for all interested stakeholders, a source of updated information, and a useful interface for dialogue with the official SDG measurement process.

Next steps

Participants agreed that this platform would need to retain strong links with the official SDG measurement process. Interactions will serve to inform national statistical offices about methodological options, and supply estimates of conflict mortality based on wide consensus and transparent methodologies. Such estimates of conflict-related mortality would provide the basis for states and international organizations to address causes and support policy and norm development. The availability of accurate data would also support the effective implementation of development initiatives both within the 2030 Agenda framework and beyond. Because work on the finalization of the methodology for SDG Indicator 16.1.2 is still under way, this initiative could support the official process at a very early stage.

As an immediate follow-up to the expert meeting, the Small Arms Survey plans to produce an initial briefing paper based on the results of the meeting that will discuss definitions, data sources, and factors of disaggregation, with a view to advancing knowledge and consensus on existing methodologies. The paper would be produced in time for the expert meeting on measuring conflict deaths that OHCHR plans to convene in June 2017.

Work on the proposed plan of action would extend beyond 2017 and could be developed around the following key headings:

1. Clarifying the scope of conflict-related deaths

As noted, careful definitions of armed conflict and its relevant impacts are a prerequisite for identifying units of analysis and ensuring uniform and meaningful accounts of conflict-related mortality. The notion of armed conflict is broadly defined by international humanitarian law, and the ICRC avoids semantic debates by referring to 'armed conflict and other situations of violence'. International casualty databases such as UCDP/PRIO and the Correlates of War project provide their own definitions. In addition, the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes calls for separate accounting of 'Unlawful killing associated with armed conflict', and the International Classification of Disease (ICD 10th revision) features a detailed breakdown of injuries resulting from war operations by type of weapon used, and whether the injury occurred during war operations or after the cessation of hostilities. In order to achieve consensus, the expert meeting suggested using a broad definition of armed conflict with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Such a definition will also help to provide a clear boundary between conflict-related deaths counted by SDG Indicator 16.1.2 and non-conflict deaths counted by SDG Indicator 16.1.1, to prevent double counting.

2. Developing estimates of conflict-related mortality

The main task will then be to map, analyse, and reconcile different estimates of conflict-related mortality, both violent and non-violent, so that policy-makers are provided with clearer estimates of mortality trends.³ Organizations participating in this process could collaborate in the collection and/or collation and analysis of data related to mortality in conflict. Data sources could include casualty-recording databases, epidemiological or demographic studies of mortality, and also indirect data sources such as measures of displacement and humanitarian aid. To ensure a coordinated process of data collection, an option would be to build on the Conflict Emergency Database (CE-DAT, now discontinued), which already contains data from over 3,000 surveys conducted by humanitarian organizations in 54 countries and territories since 1998.⁴ Using small-scale surveys may represent a sustainable way to incrementally add knowledge of conflict-related mortality in hard-to-reach regions. Further case studies of a similar type could be undertaken by participating organizations with relatively small investments. The platform could then provide a scientific basis for the reconciliation and validation of particular estimates, and the unpacking of chains of causality of violent and non-violent deaths in individual armed conflict situations in order to inform policy responses.

³ For example, the Small Arms Survey has mapped 43 sources of direct conflict deaths statistics. See Pavesi, Irene. 2017. *Tracking Conflict-related Deaths: A Preliminary Overview of Monitoring Systems*. Background paper.

⁴ For more information see <<http://www.cedat.be/>>.