CONFLICT TRENDS 02|2025

How can development assistance help prevent conflict?

Development assistance has the potential to address several structural drivers of violence. These include weak and oppressive governance and limited livelihood opportunities. At a time when the number of armed conflicts is on the rise, while development assistance is expected to drop significantly, this potential is increasingly difficult to realize. Given these challenges, how can development assistance contribute to conflict prevention? This policy brief summarizes the key takeaways from the PRIO Paper 'Can development assistance prevent conflict?', which analyses this question through a systematic review of global evidence and in-depth case studies of South Sudan and Mozambique.

Brief Points

- Development assistance fosters stability when it strengthens governance and improves livelihoods. Yet, under weak institutions or exclusionary regimes, it may intensify grievances and competition.

- When determining development finance priorities, donors should resist the urge to mainly prioritize countries with large-scale conflicts, as many of the smaller-scale conflicts have a greater conflict prevention potential.

- Weak states need support for existing local mechanisms, not imported institutions.

- Donors should provide long-term flexible funding for proven local actors and support local leaders. It is important to support community-driven development emphasizing local agency and ownership, alongside structural reforms, to strengthen trust and reduce fragility.

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Assistance follows ongoing, but not potential conflicts

Preventing conflict is not only morally imperative but also cost-effective; it is cheaper and more humane than post-conflict recovery. Nonetheless, states challenged by fragility do not receive substantially greater shares of Official Development Assistance (ODA), suggesting a potential misalignment between resource allocation and fragility.

Development assistance

Development assistance consists of monetary contributions, materials, activities or services for which the primary goal is to contribute to **economic and social development** in one or more developing countries.

Violent conflict

Violent conflict is defined as the use of physical force between organized actors – whether state or non-state – resulting in harm to people and communities.

Conflict prevention

Conflict prevention refers to efforts by international partners and national actors at different governance levels to prevent the outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict by addressing its structural drivers and immediate triggers.

Conflict trap

A conflict trap is a self-reinforcing cycle where countries experiencing violent conflict are more likely to relapse into conflict, often due to weakened institutions, economic decline, and social fragmentation.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, countries with lower Human Development Index (HDI) scores generally have a larger share of their population living in conflict zones. However, the graph also shows that some of the countries experiencing a high number of battle-related deaths – such as Ukraine – still perform relatively well on the HDI scale. In contrast, the countries highlighted within the red

box have low HDI scores and a high proportion of conflict-affected populations, yet they report fewer direct battle deaths compared to Ukraine or Gaza. These cases often represent long-standing, under-reported conflicts, where humanitarian and development needs remain severe, such as for example Mali, Burkina Faso and Somalia. These are illustrative cases of the conflict trap, where the damaging effects of conflict on material conditions, such as poverty, and on the social fabric of society together create a powerful breeding ground for future violence. The dynamics of conflict traps impact long-term economic development, which is important when developing strategies for conflict prevention.

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The colours of the bubbles in Figure 1 illustrate another insight: many of these protracted conflict countries receive less ODA in absolute terms (paler bubbles) than countries facing more intense, high-profile conflicts. This pattern suggests that development assistance allocation tends to prioritize active, high-intensity crises over medium-intensity, enduring conflicts – despite the fact that preventive and resilience-building measures could be particularly relevant in these contexts. Studies show that policy makers should avoid mainly prioritizing countries with high levels of violence. Instead, it is necessary to divert more development assistance to countries with lower levels of conflict. Further research shows that conflict prevention is often more effective in countries which are overlooked by mainstream reporting – such as the countries in the red square in Figure 1 – because in highly violent contexts, there is a greater risk of interventions increasing the fragility of the conflict situation.
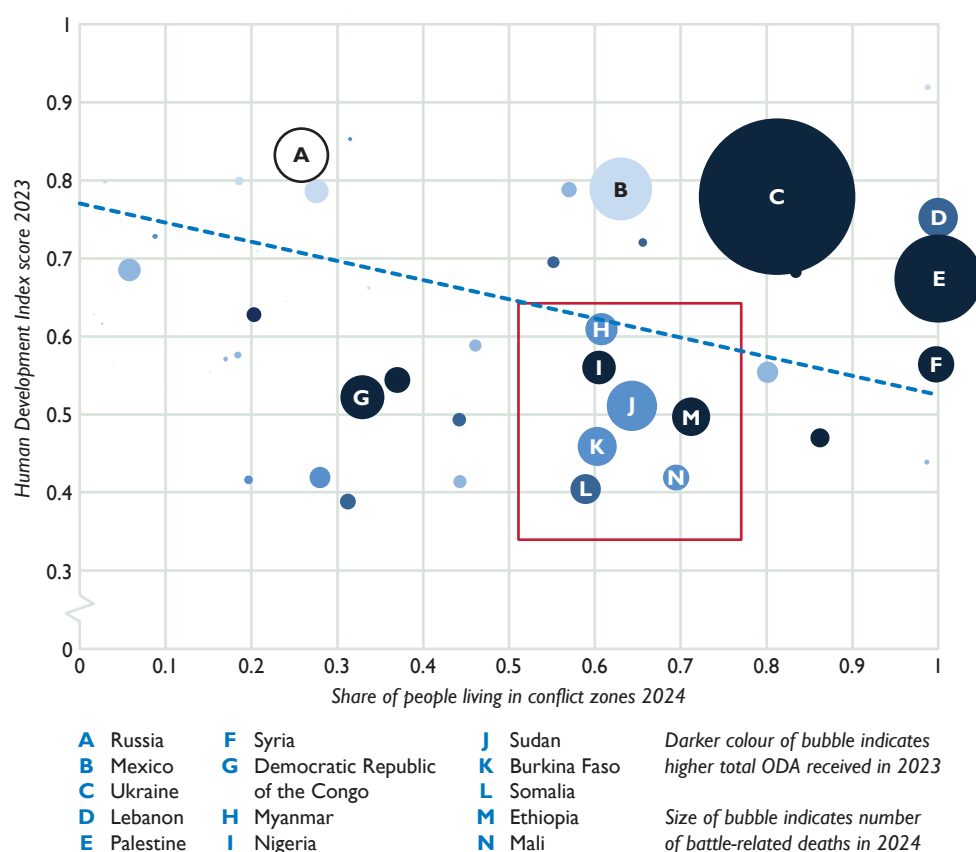

A	Russia	**F**	Syria	**J**	Sudan	*Darker colour of bubble indicates*
B	Mexico	**G**	Democratic Republic	**K**	Burkina Faso	*higher total ODA received in 2023*
C	Ukraine		of the Congo	**L**	Somalia	
D	Lebanon	**H**	Myanmar	**M**	Ethiopia	*Size of bubble indicates number*
E	Palestine	**I**	Nigeria	**N**	Mali	*of battle-related deaths in 2024*

Figure 1: Relationship between conflict exposure, development assistance and human development outcomes. *Note: The horizontal axis shows share of people living within 50 km of a deadly conflict event in 2024; bubble size is based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)*

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Governance matters

The effect of development assistance on violence is governed by how such assistance impacts the underlying structural drivers of conflict. Assistance fosters stability when it strengthens governance and improves livelihoods; yet, under weak institutions or exclusionary regimes, it may intensify grievances and competition.

Research shows that development assistance can promote peace through two main pathways. First, **by improving welfare and economic security, assistance reduces incentives for violence** and fosters trust between civilians and the state. Second, **by strengthening governance** – through rule of law, civil liberties, and inclusive institutions – **it enhances state legitimacy** and creates peaceful channels for participation. However, assistance can also fuel conflict when it reshapes power relations,

intensifies local grievances, or makes the state a more valuable prize for competing elites and armed groups. The impact of development assistance depends not only on resource levels but also on how it redistributes power and legitimacy in fragile contexts. These mechanisms are visualized in Figure 2.

Assistance fosters stability when it strengthens governance and improves livelihoods; yet, under weak institutions or exclusionary regimes, it may intensify grievances and competition.

Lessons from South Sudan and Mozambique

First, **weak states need support for existing local mechanisms, not imported institutions.** In South Sudan, customary courts, peace committees like Akut de Door, and civil society organizations like the South Sudan Council of Churches demonstrate greater conflict resolution capacity at a community level than formal state structures. Donors should continue to fund these proven actors with long-term flexible support rather than building parallel international systems.

Second, **strong but exclusionary states need accountability measures to prevent state capacity from becoming repressive capacity.** In Mozam-

bique, the centralized control of the Agency for Integrated Development of the North (ADIN) and the post-2024 electoral violence (315 deaths, 3,000+ injured) demonstrate how capable states can monopolize both development resources and coercive power. Prevention requires supporting independent oversight, civic space and decentralization, with safeguards against central government interference.

Third, **successful interventions align with local political initiatives rather than donor theories.** The Maputo Accord succeeded because it was nationally owned but internationally guaranteed. The Cabo Delgado military intervention contained violence but lacked corresponding governance reforms. Both South Sudan's elite power-sharing and Mozambique's Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process show that technical fixes fail without addressing underlying political economy issues – oil patronage networks in South Sudan, FRELIMO dominance in Mozambique – that shape how assistance is actually used. Donors must confront these power dynamics directly rather than assuming development assistance automatically reduces violence.

However, localized action is not without challenges. When development assistance reinforces local power asymmetries, fuels rivalries, or is perceived as biased, it can inadvertently deepen grievances and trigger new cycles of violence. Careful design and oversight are therefore essential to ensure that localized approaches promote inclusion and stability rather than exacerbate conflict.

Recommendations

The policy framework presented in Figure 3 aims to present a range of policy approaches to address the concerns raised in this brief. These approaches may be applicable at different levels of conflict prevention. The different levels are:

1. **Direct/operational prevention**, which refers to short-term responses to imminent crises.

2. **Structural prevention**, which tackles underlying drivers of violence such as poverty, weak governance or resource competition.

3. **Systemic prevention**, aimed at addressing global risks that transcend particular states.
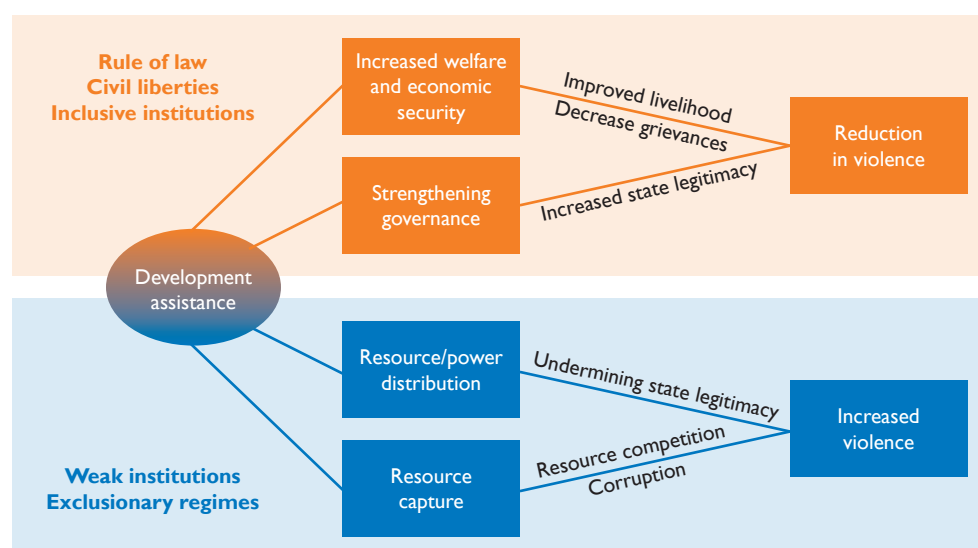

Figure 2: Summarizes the mechanisms identified in the systematic review, and how type of governance clearly affects how development assistance affects violence.

Direct/operational prevention	Structural prevention	Systemic prevention
Regional/Multi-country		
• Support and fund regional early-warning systems such as the African Union's CEWS or IGAD's CEWARN.	• Promote regional resource-sharing agreements and cross-border infrastructure projects.	• Implement international regimes (e.g. Kimberley Process).
National		
• Support deep and contextual conflict analyses and develop rapid response teams for crisis mediation and fact-finding.	• Invest in inclusive governance reforms, anti-corruption measures and inclusive service delivery.	• Promote political participation for vulnerable groups, women and youth.
Provincial		
• Support and promote conflict-sensitive standards.	• Strengthen provincial administrations through capacity building and decentralized service delivery. • Support local governance reforms to strengthen accountability.	• Link provincial early-warning systems to regional and national frameworks.
Community/Local		
• Support community-based mediation and dialogue platforms, including customary courts and traditional dispute resolution.	• Implement and fund livelihood programmes and social cohesion projects co-designed with communities. • Provide vocational training and trauma healing to reduce youth disenfranchisement and alleviate poverty.	• Integrate local voices – particularly youth and women – in policy-making processes to ensure context relevance.

Figure 3: Policy framework

Our policy framework also outlines how conflict prevention measures can be implemented at various levels within a state. Some initiatives are designed to operate at the national level, addressing systemic issues and promoting broad-based stability. Others are targeted toward specific regions or localities, depending on where conflict is occurring and the nature of its impacts. Finally, certain measures may focus on particularly vulnerable communities or groups, aiming to mitigate localized risks and strengthen resilience. ■

Further reading

Siri Aas Rustad; Júlia Palik, Øystein H. Rolandsen & Kathrine Rudolfsen (2026) Can development assistance prevent conflict? *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO.

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THE PROJECT

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.