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Title

Open Philanthropy shallow investigation: Civil conflict reduction

Editorial note on this document

This document is a “shallow” investigation as described [here](#). This is the product of about two weeks of work, during which I read a selection of major papers in the field and spoke to five experts. For the purposes of this document, I assumed that the current prevalence and dynamics of civil war would not change substantially – I’m uncertain about this assumption, but think it’s reasonable.

My major sources of uncertainty after writing this are the following:

- What is the best way to model the economic impact of civil war? I tended to make fairly conservative (in the sense of total size of the problem) assumptions – e.g. economies that experience civil war recover fully within ten years – but I am not sure how reasonable those assumptions are. We’re currently hiring some academics to investigate these questions further.
- Am I fully capturing the health impacts of civil war on civilians? There is relatively little data about the social or economic consequences of being displaced within the Global South, and I am not sure my estimates of off-battle-field DALYs are particularly good.
- Fundamentally, I am quite uncertain how much of a difference micro-scale interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy will make on macro-scale events like war.

This document was read and discussed by the full cause prioritization team, but has not yet been advanced for further research (other than hiring academic researchers to further investigate the cost of conflict). Relative to other shallow investigations we’ve done, this shallow is currently around the 70th percentile of promisingness for future research. The most likely cases for moving to a medium investigation would be an update that the costs of civil conflicts are substantially larger than the (already fairly large) numbers that we’re using here, or a positive update on tractability.

We’ve also anonymized the experts we spoke to for this shallow, though we’ve tried to leave in the gist of what they told us.

Over the last few years we've moved towards trying to do more shallows more roughly and quickly for internal audiences and, correspondingly, we haven't worried about doing the work to share them publicly. But we wanted to experiment with sharing more again to

see how much work it takes and whether it generates informative feedback or leads, so this is the first shallow we've published in a number of years. We also know that some people have been curious about the type of work that Open Philanthropy's Global Health and Wellbeing team does, and we saw this as an opportunity to share our work and let others see if engaging with this style of work could be of interest to them, whether as a career or via more informal mechanisms (such as on the EA Forum).

We welcome comments either posted to the EA Forum, as an email to the author lauren@openphilanthropy.org, or to [this Google Form](#) (can be submitted anonymously).

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Summary

What is the problem?

Living through a civil war is very bad for your health. The direct cost of civil conflict is about 10M DALYs per year, but the indirect cost probably quadruples that figure.¹ (This is a fairly conservative estimate; [one paper](#) argues that there are 25x as many indirect deaths as there are direct deaths.) Infant mortality and malnutrition rates are [twice as high](#) in states either experiencing or recovering from civil conflict as in stable ones. Life expectancy is about a decade [lower](#) than would be expected in a peaceful state.

Per my [BOTE](#), civil wars cause a loss approx. $\frac{2}{3}$ as many DALYs per year as malaria and NTDs (combined). A civil war costs about \$14,000 OP value per country resident per year, or 0.14 life years. (Malaria, by contrast, has a DALY burden of 0.038 life years / resident of sub-Saharan Africa - so civil wars are not as significant a burden on life as malaria, but not insubstantial either, at least in countries where they are ongoing.)

But war's impacts are not limited to health. War impoverishes the populations that experience it, such that poverty is increasingly concentrated in and around states experiencing civil conflict. By 2030, about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the global extreme poor will live in such states. This is not simply because poverty is declining elsewhere; an [increasing percentage and an increasing number of the global poor](#) live in countries either at war or at high risk of descending into war. Most of these wars are not wars of global importance; no major power has any particular investment in settling them. (Indeed, for the purposes of this shallow, I am choosing to focus on civil wars where great powers did not intervene - thus excluding Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Yemen, Israel/Palestine, as reducing conflict there is likely to involve different processes than reducing conflict in more local wars.)

War is bad for growth; unlike other emerging markets, states at war generally have zero or negative growth. The residents of fragile states are particularly unable to bear a recession or depression, as civil wars essentially exclusively happen in low income countries.

Who is already working on it?

[30%](#) of overseas development aid goes to fragile states, totaling about \$76 billion in 2018. However, most of that is targeted toward poverty reduction and alleviation rather than reducing conflict. The UN estimates that about [\\$6.8B](#) was spent on peacebuilding projects in 2013, with another [\\$8B](#) spent on peacekeeping operations.

¹ The GBD estimate includes only direct DALYs, so war injuries/war deaths but not deaths caused from disrupted access to healthcare, etc.

The US government is and has been the largest single contributor to peacebuilding budgets. Particularly during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the US spent copiously on stabilizing these two countries to dubious effect. In 2013, spending on peacebuilding in these two countries alone was over 100 billion. For the purposes of this shallow, I ignore those conflicts and attempts at peacebuilding, and focus only on conflicts where a great power is not involved.

In 2020, the US spent [\\$4.1B](#) a year in peacebuilding in countries where it was not actively involved. Nonetheless, even \$4.1B makes the US the largest single contributor to peacebuilding efforts. The majority of this is in the form of UN peacekeeping missions (\$1.45B) and general international organization funding (\$1.5B), with the Department of State funding an additional \$650M [a year](#) in peacebuilding and democracy promotion programs.

Private spending is likely considerably smaller than government spending. According to [one source](#), 2020 grants were only \$150M, \$50M of which comes from USAID. This is likely somewhat of an underestimate, as the 990 for a single NGO - Search for Common Ground - reveals yearly funding of about [\\$25M](#), but I would not expect private spending to be more than \$300M total.

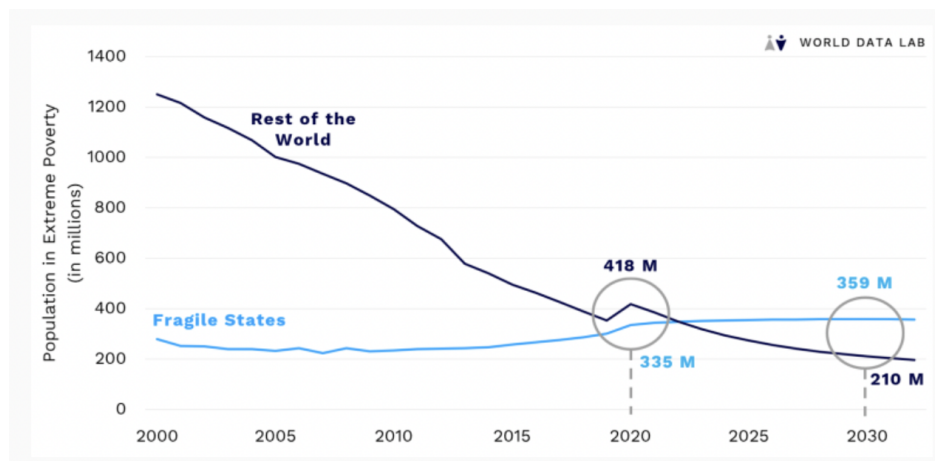
What could a new philanthropist do?

OP might be interested in funding a) more research on particular interventions (see [potential grants](#)), b) lobbying for more effective interventions rather than less effective ones (e.g. CBT for ex-combatants instead of community-driven development programs).

OP could also fund lobbying for more engagement with international peace processes (for instance, lobbying for funding UN peacekeeping to the level requested by the UN, rather than the smaller amount currently provided by the US government).

Importance

Global poverty reduction will likely stall out without improvements in states with civil conflict (or that are recently post-conflict).



While extreme poverty in east Asia and south Asia [will approach zero by 2030](#), poverty in fragile states (mainly but not exclusively in Africa) will increase over the same period. The economies in fragile states barely grew during the period 1970-2008, and the living standards of the people living in those states are unlikely to improve unless governance improves. Stabilizing existing fragile states and preventing other states from becoming fragile is thus of potentially very high importance - indeed, eradicating poverty likely requires it.

Estimates of how badly a civil war affects a host economy vary widely; Imai and Weinstein 2007 estimate that a civil war costs an economy [1.25%](#) of growth a year, Collier 1999 estimates a [2.2%](#) decrease due to war, the [IGC](#) roughly estimates 4-5%, [UNDP](#) puts the reduction in GDP at 12.3%/year for civil wars after 1990. (Though an extreme example, GDP/capita in Syria is [11%](#) of what it was before the war.)

I've chosen to use a 5% annual hit to GDP/capita in the [BOTE](#). (I assume LICs would otherwise grow at 3%, so in the BOTE, countries at war shrink at 2%.) With this input, the financial cost substantially outweighs the cost in health; I find that a 5% hit to growth for four years and full recovery by year 10 will cost individuals about \$1000 in income, for a total financial cost of about \$21B in an average LIC.² A rough estimate of the financial cost of all civil wars that occurred in 2017 was 290B.³ Note that this is a relatively optimistic assumption – it implies that these countries grow at >7% for the six years following the end of the civil war.

Civil wars also cost lives. IMHE estimates that 10.1 million DALYs are lost per year directly due to “conflict and terrorism”. This is about 0.25% of all DALYs, but that estimate does not include any deaths or disability incurred through displacement⁴ or disrupted access to healthcare. I am highly uncertain how many DALYs this adds (see [mortality cost](#)), but it seems that the indirect deaths due to conflict substantially outnumber direct deaths on the battlefield. (I take total DALYs to be 4x the number of direct DALYs, but I'd be willing to believe anything from 2-20x.)

Between deaths and lost income, preventing an average civil war would have OP value of around [1.2 trillion](#),⁵ of which 20% is from DALYs and 80% is from lost income.

Unfortunately, it seems relatively few civil wars are currently averted. After a relative lull in interstate and intrastate violence in the 2000s, the number of civil wars and the number of people killed in civil wars has [increased in the last decade](#). There are also now more [refugees](#) than any previous point in history. While data on poverty among refugee populations is scant, it

² Paul Collier finds the financial cost of the average civil war is \$64B 2008 USD in The Bottom Billion, though he doesn't specify in any detail how he reaches this figure.

³ This is greater than the cost of the number of civil wars that started in 2017 * the cost of a civil war, because more civil wars start than resolve, so the number of civil wars is increasing over time.

⁴ On average, [~100 people are displaced per battle death](#).

⁵ The true value obviously varies substantially by the size of the country and the severity of the civil war; even small countries can have particularly deadly civil wars (Liberia), while India is a large country that has had several small civil conflicts.

is likely that they are experiencing considerably more poverty than either the native population of their host country or that they would have if not forcibly displaced.

Sources of Uncertainty

Most of the above figures are fairly conservative; I could be substantially underestimating both the mortality cost and the financial cost of civil war.

Mortality Cost

In terms of mortality cost, I've estimated that about 25% of deaths from civil war occur on the battlefield. Papers range from suggesting that [there are as many deaths off the battlefield as on the battlefield](#), to suggesting that only [4% of war deaths occur on the battlefield](#). Sources attempting to determine the percentage of battlefield deaths by war vary by nearly as much.

Table 2.1: Violence as a minor cause of mortality

Conflict theatre	Violent deaths as percentage of total excess deaths (%)
Northern Uganda, 2005	15
Democratic Republic of Congo, 1998-2002	< 10
Congo-Brazzaville, Pool Region, 2003	17
Burundi, 2002-2003	22
Sierra Leone, 1991-2002	6
Darfur, Sudan, 2003-2005	30
South Sudan, 1999-2005	< 10
Angola, 1975-2002	11
East Timor, 1974-1999	18
Iraq, 1991 War	32-37

Source: Geneva Declaration (2008)

I am not sure I have strong thoughts on which end of this range is more likely to be right; I would be willing to believe that the total number of DALYs caused by war is >> 4x the number of reported battlefield DALYs.

Further complicating estimates of the total number of DALYs from civil war, one expert mentioned that battlefield death counts are often a severe underestimate, by >3x. I am willing to believe I'm probably order of magnitude correct on DALYs, but that's about it.

Financial Cost

There is substantial heterogeneity in how badly civil wars affect the economy of the country experiencing one; in some cases, rebel groups stay in the hinterland and life in the major cities is able to keep ticking along much as usual, while in others, the economy completely collapses.

Given this, it's difficult to figure out what the counterfactual is for the economy of countries experiencing civil war.

The best single paper is probably [Costelli, Moretti and Pischedda 2017](#), which does attempt to estimate a counterfactual with a synthetic control rather than just doing a cross-country regression. Costelli, Moretti and Pischedda 2017 finds a total effect of -17.5%, which is relatively similar to the BOTE simulation I use (-5%/year for four years).

It is also unclear how much a civil war in one country affects its neighbors. I do not model spillover effects at all; Paul Collier claims that modeling spillovers doubles the cost of civil wars. I could fairly easily be convinced into a substantial increase here too.

Neglectedness

Per DALY, civil wars do not seem particularly neglected.

International spending on averting and settling civil wars seems to be in the range of 10-15B (not including governments also spend money trying to pacify restive areas).⁶ OECD countries spend about \$5B [on peacebuilding](#), the UN spends about [\\$6.5B on peacekeeping](#), and presumably non-OECD countries spend at least some amount (though likely not a lot)

This means that the world spends about [\\$330-\\$495 per DALY](#) from civil wars, about [1.5-2.5x](#) what is spent per DALY on HIV/AIDS.

However, the financial cost of civil war substantially outweighs the DALY cost. About \$15B is spent preventing civil wars, but civil wars cost \$290B in 2017. If one adjusts for the greater consumption value for LIC residents - civil wars almost exclusively happen in very poor countries - OP's valuation of for loss of income is \$14T. This gives a current OP-valued cost/current non-OP spending ratio of 966 versus 497 for HIV/AIDs — which means we could view conflict prevention as relatively underfunded.

Tractability

I am reasonably convinced this area is both important and neglected relative to its importance. However, its tractability seems questionable. In the below, I review some possible interventions to prevent civil conflict.

Intervention	Does it work?	Fund Research, Fund Directly or Advocate For? ⁷
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⁶ Estimating government military and policing spending to reduce the chance of civil war seems difficult, so I'm not doing it.

⁷ Note: This section describes how OP might support an intervention if it chose to do so, rather than describing a recommendation for what OP should do. If an intervention doesn't work, OP would not fund it or advocate for it.

Predicting Civil Wars	Not really	Fund Research or Fund Directly
UN Peacekeeping	Yes	Advocate
Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs	No	Fund Directly or Advocate For
Community Driven Development	No	Fund Directly or Advocate For
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Promising	Fund Research
Cash Transfers and/or Job Training	Yes for economic gains, no for peace and stability	Fund Directly or Advocate For
Alternative Dispute Resolution	Promising	Fund Research
Contact Interventions and Mass Media	Promising	Fund Research
Investigative Journalism	I am skeptical, but maybe?	Fund Directly
Mediation and Diplomacy	Promising	Fund Directly

Tractability and Speed

Several experts have mentioned that speed matters a lot in reducing the severity of conflict. Once things have started to spiral, there is a very limited time in which one can bring down the temperature of the situation.

It is helpful if a particular intervention already has people on the ground, or can get them there very quickly. Peacekeepers are often useful for this, as they are on site and neutral.⁸

For example, an expert told us a story about a town in a country that had recently ended a civil war where a girl had been murdered and her body dumped outside a mosque. Tensions escalated quickly, the local imam was beaten up, and there were threats of further attacks on the Muslim community to happen the next day. The local peacekeeping mission had Muslim and Christian leaders make a broadcast on local radio *together*, and this kept the situation from escalating further. Even a limited delay likely would have made such an intervention impossible; de-escalation would have been much more difficult after further violence.

This suggests that we should focus particularly on organizations that can react *quickly*.

⁸ Once they are deployed; the process of getting peacekeepers deployed is notoriously long.

Possible Interventions

Predicting Civil War

The first step to preventing civil war is to determine where a civil war is likely to be in the future. Nearly every party interested in knowing about future conflicts has a project designed to provide information about where future conflicts will occur - [the US](#), [the EU](#), ECOWAS, the OSCE, etc. The [Integrated Crisis Early Warning System](#) (ICEWS) claims to have a forecast accuracy of 80% (though I am skeptical that this means an 80% accuracy for predicting exactly when conflict escalation is likely to happen).

At the macro level, it is relatively easy to tell which countries are at risk of future conflict. Countries that have had prior civil conflict are [quite likely](#) to have civil conflict in the future, and poor countries are also more likely to have insurgencies and civil conflict. The riskiest countries therefore are both poor and have current conflicts: the DRC, Yemen, Nigeria, Sudan/South Sudan, Somalia.

However, it is difficult to predict exactly *when* a recurrence will occur, no matter how fine-grained the data. Bazzi et al [find](#) that predicting conflict over space is fairly straightforward, but adding time-varying information provides little additional information. Indeed, the within-location-but-time-varying model has an R^2 of only 0.01.

I think this is likely to be a problem not easily solved with additional research or funding, but I don't know how well superforecasters do on this problem. My inclination is that if the Pentagon has an incentive to solve a problem, and has failed to do so, I suspect the sticking point is not resource constraints, but I may be wrong here. If it is possible to predict which situations will escalate, that could be enormously valuable.

UN Peacekeeping

Despite the perceptions of peacekeepers as largely useless, the empirical evidence suggests peacekeepers really do keep the peace; indeed, of interventions to reduce the risk of return to conflict in a fragile state, peacekeeping is probably the most promising of the bunch.

The experts we have spoken to have universally agreed that peacekeeping works. Peacekeepers may also help support the rule of law and a functioning justice system in the difficult reconstruction period.

Reducing The Likelihood Of A Return To War

Even when parties to a civil war come to the negotiating table, talks often break down, and even signed agreements are often ignored in favor of rearming and returning to war. With a third party willing to enforce a signed agreement, warring parties are much more likely to make a bargain (5% vs. 50%) and the settlement is much more likely to hold (0.4% vs. 20%) (per Walter 2002).

Peacekeeping is the most common tool used to enforce such an agreement, or at least give all parties substantial warning if one party violates the agreement. A cross-sectional logit by Page Fortna finds that peacekeepers reduced the likelihood of further war by 75% through the mid-2000s.

However, I am not sure that I believe that past peacekeeping successes necessarily imply future peacekeeping successes. Per [Krasner and Eikenberry](#), “[peacekeepers] work best when there are a limited number of national parties, when there are no hostile neighbors, when there are no national spoilers, and when there is [still] a functioning state”. It is not clear to me that this describes *that* many modern civil wars.

Many modern civil wars happen in places where the state is very weak to non-existent - Somalia, CAR - and there are many national parties. Furthermore, it is often difficult to get *enough* peacekeepers. In a place like Liberia (population 5M), a force of 15,000 will suffice; should you wish to deploy a similar density of peacekeepers to the DRC (population 89M) or Ethiopia (population 115M), you would likely need more peacekeepers than currently exist in the world. I took a 30% haircut on Fortna’s number.

Even with this haircut, peacekeeping has decent returns of up to ~152x; BOTE [here](#). If we have some leverage here, such that the cost of one lobbyist returns >7x in funding for peacekeeping, this seems possibly worth keeping on the radar and/or considering as part of a larger advocacy portfolio.

Rule of Law Support

UN peacekeepers also often have a mandate to support rule of law reform. While it is not their primary mission, UN missions have “assumed responsibility for drafting laws and lobbying for their passage, revis[ed] constitutions, train[ed] judges, prosecutors, and police officers, [built] courthouses, police stations and prisons, monitor[ed] extrajudicial punishments, arbitrary arrests and indefinite detentions, assist[ed] with criminal investigations and prosecutions, improv[ed] coordination both between and among state and non-state authorities and more generally elevating the role of the state as a purveyor of security and justice” (Blair 2021, 17).

By providing an interim rule of law during the transition from war to peace, peacekeepers show governments and citizens a demonstration of how rule of law should work. In his 2021 book, Robert Blair finds that this is remarkably effective. Spending time with a UN peacekeeping mission increased individuals’ trust in formal institutions by 30 percentage points.

This seems like a valuable contribution by peacekeeping. It is unclear if this is contributing to the increased likelihood of peace holding, but it does seem useful.

What Could Funding Do?

As noted above, it is relatively unlikely that additional funding for peacekeeping would increase the number of missions. If the Security Council has not yet agreed to a mission, there is likely a

reason for that; that reason will not vanish with more funds. However, simply increasing the funding for existing missions seems to be useful; [Collier and Hoeffler](#) find that doubling mission funding reduces conflict by 25%.

Particularly, additional funding could be used for one of two purposes: increasing the number of peacekeepers or increasing the quality of peacekeepers.

The first seems to be effective in reducing conflict; the larger the mission, the more combatants are deterred from returning to conflict ([Hultman, Kathman and Shannon 2014](#), [Kreps 2010](#), [Kathman and Wood 2016](#)). The second is also useful as [better-trained \(more expensive\) peacekeepers are more effective at keeping the peace](#).

Current peacekeepers are poorly trained and poorly paid,⁹ often from armies not known for their efficacy. Given existing variation in peacekeeper troop quality, it may be possible to use additional funding to rely more on the higher quality peacekeeping troops,¹⁰ and less on [cheap troops](#) from countries with histories of major human rights violations from their armed forces.

Alternatively, it might be possible to spend some additional funding on better training peacekeeping troops. Training for peacekeeping is currently [two weeks long](#) due to the “limited time available for professionals” and the need “to pay staff while enrolled in long-term training programmes.” This does not seem like enough time to train people to operate in a foreign country, under high stress conditions, especially if they are going to serve as an example of the rule of law.^{11,12}

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Programs

There are relatively few evaluations of programs to reintegrate ex-combatants. This is unfortunate, as they are nearly universal and would seem to be a key to maintaining peace - it is not uncommon for former combatants to join other conflicts or start their own, new conflicts.¹³ In order to encourage fighters to truly put their weapons down, DDR programs often have multiple goals - both combatant reintegration into the economy (increasing the opportunity cost of rejoining the war) but also convincing fighters to support the peace process (so that they would not want to rejoin anyway).

⁹ The UN reimburses at \$1400/month/peacekeeper. This is cost-effective for Egypt (2812 peacekeepers), where the average soldier costs \$672/month, but means that even South Africa is effectively subsidizing the UN when it contributes peacekeepers (average South African expenditure/soldier/month = \$2700). France (618 peacekeepers), Germany (563 peacekeepers), and the UK (605 peacekeepers) are unlikely to want to contribute more personnel at that reimbursement rate.

¹⁰ This might also serve to reduce the number of bad PR incidents involving peacekeeping troops. Well-trained soldiers are hopefully less likely to be involved in sexual abuse of minors.

¹¹ By contrast, the US Peace Corps has [10-12 weeks of training](#), and explicitly does not operate in conflict zones.

¹² Most peacekeepers come from countries that aren't well known for their extremely strong rule of law; the top contributors are Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Pakistan.

¹³ This can be within the same country - for instance, Ahmad Shah Massoud clearly never stopped rebelling - or in another country - for instance, Paul Kagame, who would lead the RPF in the Rwandan Civil War, began his career as soldier in Museveni's army in the Ugandan Bush War.

The very limited literature (a JPAL review includes only [two papers](#)) shows limited support for the former and no support for the latter. The program Gilligan, Mvukiyehe, and Samii 2012 evaluates - in Burundi - increased employment, but the program evaluated in Humphreys and Weinstein 2007 - in Sierra Leone - did not. Neither GMS 2012 nor Humphreys and Weinstein 2007 find any impact of the DDR programs they evaluate in breaking social linkages from rebel groups or increasing support for peace. A friend running a survey on ex-FARC rebels was also quite skeptical of the efficacy of the DDR program in Colombia.

The empirical results here don't accord terribly well with my priors; I'd expected that DDR programs would be well-defined and effective.

Nonetheless, it doesn't seem like there's much to fund here; DDR programs are often run by either the government (as in Colombia) or by a UN mission if there is one (El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Tajikistan). The lack of evaluations and reports suggests that there has been relatively little NGO input in the process.

Community-Driven Development

Community-driven development has been a very popular form of intervention since the 1990s. In a typical CDD program, an NGO provides funding for development projects provided that the local community plans how that development money should be spent. There is usually an area of development that the funding is earmarked for (e.g. health, education), but the community can choose what to implement within that broad category.

In theory, this encourages the local community to take ownership of the project, allows them to choose what they need, and the resulting project will provide services in contexts where the government is generally absent. In a setting where the economy is growing and the government is providing a useful service, locals are less likely to choose to support rebel groups and conflict will be reduced.

In practice, this does not appear to be the case. Across a large sample set (not necessarily in conflict areas), [Rao and Mansuri 2013](#) finds no evidence that CDD projects improve social cohesion. JPAL has funded a [handful of CDD projects](#) in post-conflict societies, and also found little evidence of change in governance. There is even some evidence that CDD projects become rebel targets, and are likely to *increase* rather than decrease conflict (Croft, Felter, and Johnson 2014).

Due to their dubious efficacy, CDD programs are [somewhat falling out of favor](#) as development interventions, and given the evidence, I see no reason Open Philanthropy should try to change that. When we advocate for more global aid, this should likely not be one of the kinds of aid we advocate for.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Most pre-civil war countries are not at peace; rather, they have some background level of conflict that does not rise to the level of a civil war. Perhaps a murder goes unsolved and a community is blamed (see [tractability and speed](#)); perhaps [some tourists are kidnapped](#), perhaps [two allied political parties fall out](#), perhaps [police kill a few civilians](#). Some percentage of these low-level conflicts - events where a few people are killed, but not dozens - are likely to escalate to further violence. (In the above linked cases, they did, but not all tourist kidnappings or cases of extrajudicial killings lead to rebellions.)

The experts we spoke to suggested it is almost a stochastic process which conflicts escalate and which do not. While it's difficult to predict which particular violent event will spiral into wider conflict, probably one of them will eventually. If there are fewer low-level violent events, the number of opportunities for things to spiral out of control is also reduced.

Ex-combatants are often a source of this low-level violence, as they previously used violence to resolve disputes. [Small studies](#) show that giving ex-combatants cognitive behavioral therapy can make them less likely to use violence in future (Blattman, Jamison, and Sheridan 2019; Heller, Shah, Guryan, Ludwig, Mullainathan, and Pollack 2016). In one study, even therapy with non-licensed professionals with minimal training (Dinarte and Egana-delSol 2019) was successful at reducing violent activity and improved participants' level of emotional regulation. CBT may have contributed to Liberian men choosing not to join the Ivorian civil war, but it's equally likely job training increased their opportunity costs such that being a mercenary was less attractive.

CBT seems to be most effective when combined with other forms of intervention - that is, CBT and cash are more effective than either cash or CBT alone (though notably CBT plus cash also costs more) - and the effects fade with time, so it is possible ongoing interventions would be required.

It is worth noting CBT seems less effective for the "hard cases"; Dinarte and Egana-delSol 2019 finds that the positive results are driven by people who were committing less violence to start with. This may limit the efficacy of CBT if the majority of violence is committed by a small number of individuals.¹⁴

It is also not clear how this would scale. CBT tends to be quite resource (and people) intensive, and requires direct contact with every individual. (The Blattman study involved 999 men; Dinarte and Egana-delSol 1000 children.) While it is promising that such programs *may* not require trained professionals as facilitators, there is only one study that shows that.

I would thus put this firmly in the bucket of "promising, but needs more research to determine how implementation would work at scale". If OP was interested in this, we would want to invest in more research. I would be particularly interested to see more research on training facilitators

¹⁴ I don't know if post-war violence is evenly distributed across the violence, or mostly comes from a small number of individuals.

for therapy; there is a fairly limited supply of trained psychologists to conduct interventions; I really only think this has legs if it's fairly easy to train people to teach CBT.

Cash Transfers and/or Job Training

Per Paul Collier, civil wars are not a problem of grievances, but of greed. Combatants choose to participate in rebellion because $E[\text{participation}] > E[\text{not participating}]$. For combatants to choose to lay down their arms, and continue to not participate in the war, $E[\text{not participating}]$ must be greater than $E[\text{participating}]$.

This is challenging because ex-combatants often have limited non-martial skills and little ability to support themselves in a post-civil war economy. Cash transfers and job training make the non-martial world more appealing and increase the opportunity cost to participating in the war. In theory, this will also serve to win hearts and minds - that given better opportunities, youths will be less interested in the war and more interested in their economic prospects. They will hopefully also be more supportive of the government that provided said economic prospects. The theory here is not dissimilar to that of most DDR programs.

As DDR programs have also found, encouraging young people to work is considerably easier than changing their minds about politics. Most - but not all - employment programs do seem to increase wages and employment outside of illicit activities. Programs in [Liberia](#), [Uganda](#), the [Ivory Coast](#) and the [USA](#) have all been relatively successful (though one in [Afghanistan](#) was not).

The record on conflict prevention and social cohesion is more mixed. There is at least one success - a job training program in Liberia kept men from joining the nearby [Ivorian civil war](#), though there was no impact on social cohesion within Liberia. In Afghanistan, cash transfers increased support for the Taliban and job training increased support for the government; in [Uganda](#), there was no impact on social cohesion or protest. A [review article](#) shows "few sustained positive impacts of programs on stability, even in the face of economic gains".

As a development intervention, job training appears to show some promise. As a way to reintegrate fighters, job training seems to have little impact.

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)

[Cognitive behavioral therapy](#) is probably the best studied way to reduce the number of low-level violent events, but it is not the only way. Since the desired outcome is a behavior change rather than a mindset change, it is plausible that changing social norms would suffice to reduce using violence to resolve disputes.

In Liberia, Hartman, Blair and Blattman find reasonably large effects from a training program on resolving disputes peacefully. Over three years, the number of violent disputes declined 9%, at a cost of about \$14,000 per village. How cost effective this is depends heavily on the assumptions you use; if a national program of ADR reduced the chance of a civil war as brutal

as the Liberian Civil War by 4.5%, it would be near a 1000x return, but if it reduced the chance of a less severe civil war by 4.5%, the return would be nearer to 100x¹⁵ (BOTECH [here](#)).

Mercy Corps finds a giant effect from an ADR program in Nigeria - a 43% (!) reduction in reported violence. Even if the effect is considerably smaller than that (likely), it likely had an effect of >1000x.

However, all the caveats about [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) also apply here. Alternative dispute resolution is hard to scale, relatively expensive (possibly cheaper than CBT at scale, but it's not clear), and it's unclear how many civil wars reducing low-level violence would really avert. Still, given there's at least one paper that suggests the return could be >1000x, this is where I would spend research money first.

Contact Interventions and Mass Media

Violence is often fueled by a fear or hatred of the "other". This is often but is not exclusively a racial or ethnic other; it can be a class/occupation other, such as in farmer/herder conflicts in the Sahel.

There is good evidence that the more one interacts with the othered group, the less likely one is to hold prejudiced views. A number of programs therefore have tried to promote intergroup cooperation through promoting direct interaction (for instance, through [mixed soccer teams](#) or [mixed vocational training](#)) or by broadcasting [mass media](#) showcasing cooperation.

Direct Contact

In general, direct contact interventions reduce reported prejudice, though this is not a universal finding. This is probably one of the more reliable and replicated findings in the conflict literature – that increased contact with an outgroup leads to reduced negative feeling towards that group.

There is somewhat less good evidence that this affects one's *behavior* toward the othered group. It's possible this is simply because the interventions are generally quite small in scale, and are swamped by the political context in which people are living. However, it's also not clear that a change in reported prejudice will always map to a change in discriminatory behavior.

Interestingly, there is a recent exception to the relative lack of impact on behavior. Mercy Corps recently did an impact evaluation on a [peacebuilding program](#) in the Middle Belt in Nigeria¹⁶ and found positive effects on economic behavior. As the conflict worsened elsewhere, and herders were less inclined to come to the market to do business with farmers in control communities, interactions in the treated communities were stable.

This seems like the most promising intervention studied, because it shows a clear theory of change for blunting the economic impact of civil war. Per [my BOTECH](#), most of the cost of civil

¹⁵ The Liberian Civil War involved considerably more deaths than would have been expected for a country of Liberia's size.

¹⁶ Not generally considered a civil war, but [has often exceeded](#) 1000 deaths per year.

war comes from a loss of income rather than a loss of life, and the severity of the economic contraction varies widely across civil conflicts.

I do not know how to map a decrease in contact to a decline in GDP but a return of >1000x seems within the range of possibility. This intervention (\$60/person in Nigeria) prevented a 13%-19% decline in pastoralists selling products at the market. If this could shift a village from a path of a 7% economic contraction to a 2% economic contraction during the war¹⁷, this would avert losses of approx. [\\$1000 USD](#) (\$50K OP value) in income/person, for a return of 833x.

Mass Media

Rather than relying on direct contact, some interventions use mass media to show cooperation between groups. Multiple experts mentioned one NGO - Search for Common Ground - as being particularly good at this type of intervention (they reach 51M people currently).

The evidence for this is somewhat less strong than for direct contact. In Nigeria, a broadcast from religious leaders led to [higher acceptance](#) of ex-combatants, and one intervention in Rwanda made ethnicity [less salient](#). However, a [different mass media intervention](#) in Rwanda did not change attitudes towards outgroups. A [talk show](#) in the DRC designed to reduce prejudice actually increased it.

Mass media is substantially cheaper than a direct contact intervention, though, and avoids difficulty scaling. I would be interested to see what results come from a [Search for Common Ground mass media intervention in Nigeria](#) (funded 2020, PIs Dube and Robinson).

Investigative Journalism

Two of the experts we spoke to expressed skepticism of the effectiveness of journalism for journalism's sake. However, both seemed to think that journalism can provide information for targeted sanctions.

Both government and rebel leaders often become very wealthy, and most of that money is not kept in-country. International sanctions have the potential to put pressure on individuals to come to the table by freezing access to their money.

Country-wide sanctions do seem to end conflicts somewhat sooner ([Letzkian and Regan 2016](#), [Escriba-Folch 2010](#)), but these results are not strong. Letzkian and Regan find sanctions alone are not terribly effective - military intervention is also required - and Escriba-Folch finds that total economic sanctions for the country are required, which can have major humanitarian implications. The theory for country-wide sanctions thus seems not great - this requires journalism to get sufficient traction to change policy, and then the policy may or may not actually work.

¹⁷ A 5% shift is essentially made up here, but it seems plausible enough - pastoralists selling at the market isn't the *only* economic activity in a village, but it's probably a significant part of the economy.

There is some anecdotal evidence that individual sanctions can be more effective than country-wide, though I can find no systematic work on this. One person we spoke with mentioned further conflict was averted in Kenya in 2007 by threatening the leaders' children's visa statuses in the west.

I am still very uncertain how this would actually work, though. Funding journalism to reduce conflict requires quite a lot of things to happen *after* the production of a story. Policy-makers must read the story, decide to act, apply (hopefully individual-level sanctions), and if all that happens, it is possible that rebels will be incentivized to make peace.

I also think too much international attention risks drawing a major power directly into the conflict. This requires a sweet spot where the major powers care enough to apply sanctions but not get involved directly. If the civil war is too important, a major power may decide to back one side and the conflict will become much more complicated. For instance, the Syrian Civil War is probably the [most documented conflict ever](#), [the country remains sanctioned](#), and yet the war continues, because of a major power intervention.

Mediation and Diplomacy

Multiple people mentioned that quality mediation can make a difference in getting a peace deal. The difficulty is figuring out what "quality" mediation is; it's not clear to me how we would evaluate the quality of high-level mediation. The academic literature on mediation has varied conclusions - possibly [it works](#), possibly [it doesn't](#). However, mediation is definitely cheap; even a small probability of success would make mediation cost effective.

For instance, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue is one of the larger such organizations. Their annual budget is about [\\$42M/yearly](#), and they are active in [23 conflict zones](#), for an average cost of \$2M per country. If a marginal Center for Humanitarian Dialogue mediation-year has a 0.52% chance of ending a war one year sooner, it would reach an OP return of 1000x.

Sources of Uncertainty

Individual-Level Measures

My most significant source of uncertainty is how much we can rely on individual measures to tell us about a country-wide event.

Much of the post-2010 literature on conflict has focused on micro-level interventions with strong causal identification. In general, the treatment is applied to individuals or communities; outcomes are measured at the individual level.

Unfortunately, civil war is not an individual action, and it is not clear how changing individual actions map to 1) meso-scale rebel group organization, 2) macro-scale war. Attitudes exist

within a context of political institutions; do we believe that changing attitudes without changing institutions will change the likelihood of civil war?

I think the answer to that depends on one's theory of civil war escalation. Most of the experts we spoke to model civil war escalation as a stochastic process, where some events end up escalating but it is not clear ex-ante which ones will do so. In this case, reducing the number of conflict events should reduce the number of events that spiral out of control (see [alternative dispute resolution](#)).

The Changing Nature of Civil War

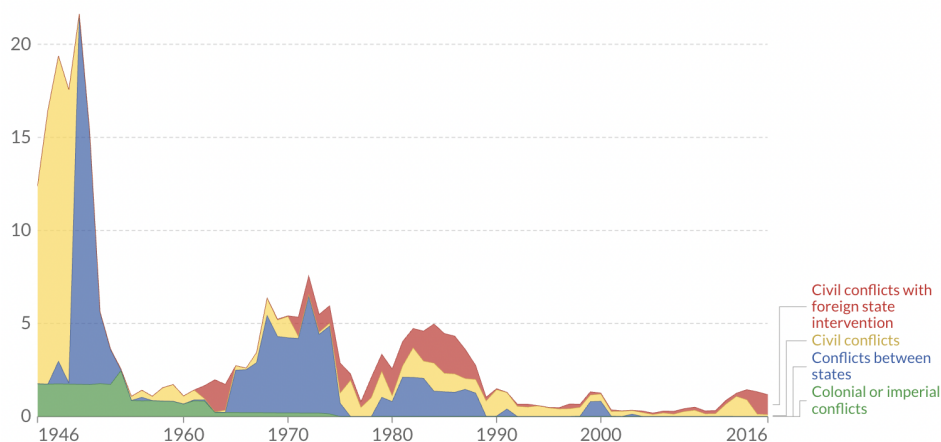
This shallow discusses prevention of civil wars where there is not extensive international intervention. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, this has been most civil wars (see below)

State-based battle-related deaths per 100,000 since 1946

Only conflicts in which at least one party was the government of a state and which generated more than 25 battle-related deaths are included. The data refer to direct violent deaths per 100,000 of world population. Deaths due to disease or famine caused by conflict are excluded. Extra-judicial killings in custody are also excluded.

Our World
in Data

□ Relative



Source: UCDP/PRIO

Note: The war categories paraphrase UCDP/PRIO's technical definitions of 'Extrasystemic', 'Internal', 'Internationalised internal' and 'Interstate' respectively. In a small number of cases where wars were ascribed more than one type, deaths have been apportioned evenly to each type.

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However, there has been a recent uptick in proxy wars or wars where at least one side is substantially backed by a great power. The interventions described below are unlikely to be as successful in Syria or Ukraine, or even Yemen, as they are in Nigeria or Liberia.

I do not have a good sense of how likely future civil wars are to have major international intervention. I am concerned that the universe of civil wars in which such interventions may work is shrinking.

On the other hand, civil wars don't start as internationalized conflicts; if events are [de-escalated](#) before major powers are interested, perhaps the interventions themselves could prevent civil wars from becoming internationalized.