

# Preventing violence, saving lives: What works for reducing homicides and conflict-related deaths?



The Global  
SDG Synthesis  
Coalition

A plain language brief based on the Peace Pillar synthesis of evaluations and research by the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition. The full synthesis report was authored by the American Institutes for Research.

## 10 key takeaways and their programming and policy implications

Evidence	Implication
<b>Strengthening social inclusion</b>	
<b>Media and communication initiatives can promote peace and reduce violence, especially in crisis settings.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>In Uganda</i>, radio messages encouraged defections from the Lord's Resistance Army, leading to fewer fatalities, especially after increases in cotton prices created job opportunities.</li><li>• <i>In Nigeria</i>, broadcasts by religious leaders shifted attitudes toward reconciliation with ex-Boko Haram fighters.</li></ul>	<b>Media and communication initiatives appear to be more effective when implemented alongside economic efforts – such as social protection and job creation initiatives.</b> Embedding them into wider strategies, with economic investments, may increase sustainability, as seen in Uganda, where labour market opportunities reinforced peace messaging.
<b>Community engagement, policy advocacy and local partnerships strengthened the sustainability of media and communication initiatives. Where programmes lacked strong local systems, attitude shifts were temporary.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>In Albania</i>, a United Nations Children's Fund anti-trafficking programme built digital literacy courses and Facebook channels for resources to remain available beyond the project lifespan.</li><li>• <i>In Nigeria</i>, involving religious leaders in peace broadcasts increased trust and resonance.</li></ul>	<b>The effectiveness and sustainability of communication initiatives are often enhanced when they involve structured engagement with communities and local organizations from the outset.</b> Formal partnerships with community organizations, support for local leadership, and investment in digital materials can help initiatives remain relevant in the longer term.
<b>Combined interventions – such as those addressing infrastructure, governance and social cohesion – were linked to stronger peace outcomes than standalone programmes.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>In Jordan</i>, investments in schools, health centres and roads, alongside trust-building between host and refugee communities, improved social cohesion.</li><li>• <i>In East Darfur</i>, the combination of land dispute resolution committees and basic services reduced conflict.</li></ul>	<b>Evaluations to test how different components interact and contribute to peace could enable stronger lessons on the most effective combinations.</b>

Evidence	Implication
<b>Peace processes</b>	
<p><b>Peace missions consistently reduced violence at national scale.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In <i>South Sudan</i>, United Nations deployments increased household perceptions of security.</li> <li>Across <i>sub-Saharan Africa</i>, for each 100 peacekeepers, civilian casualties were reduced by three per month.</li> <li>Governance reforms reduced land disputes in <i>East Darfur</i>, and pastoralist–farmer dialogue improved security in <i>Nigeria</i>.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Peace missions and governance reforms can contribute to reduced violence, though their influence often depends on mandate, context and scale.</b> Considering local dispute resolution and governance alongside deployments may increase effectiveness.</p>
<b>Safe environments</b>	
<p><b>Expanded police presence and training reduced violence in several contexts.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Policing in the favelas of <i>Rio de Janeiro</i> reduced homicides, though some violence was displaced to neighbouring areas.</li> <li>In <i>South Africa</i>, police alarms reduced vigilante violence.</li> <li>Conversely, militarised policing in <i>Colombia</i> increased abuses and crime.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Expanded policing can lower violence in some settings, though rights-based approaches and accountability appear central to sustaining gains without negative side effects.</b> The evidence suggests that militarised approaches carry clear risks.</p>
<p><b>Community policing delivered mixed results, whereas firearms regulation was more consistent.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the Democratic Republic of Congo, community policing improved police legitimacy and reduced insecurity, while in <i>Uganda</i>, it had no effect on crime or trust.</li> <li>Gun-carrying restrictions in Bogotá and Medellín reduced firearm mortality in <i>Colombia</i>.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Future efforts could focus on better understanding where community policing works and on consolidating lessons from firearms control.</b></p>
<b>Economic conditions</b>	
<p><b>Peacebuilding efforts were more effective when combined with livelihood and employment support.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In <i>Uganda</i>, radio messages encouraging defections from the Lord's Resistance Army were most successful when cotton price increases created labour market opportunities, reducing incentives for conflict participation.</li> <li>In <i>Rwanda</i> and <i>Southeast Asia</i>, reintegration and prevention programmes were stronger when families and dependents had access to livelihoods.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Linking peacebuilding with livelihood and employment support appears to enhance effectiveness, particularly for vulnerable groups.</b> Aligning such initiatives with local labour markets may be important for durable outcomes.</p>
<b>Facilitating factors for effective implementation</b>	
<p><b>Peacebuilding was more sustainable when institutionalised through laws, policies or systemic capacity, and supported by strong partnerships.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In <i>Malawi</i>, paralegal services improved access to justice and reduced case backlogs.</li> <li>In <i>Nigeria</i> and <i>Sudan</i>, government engagement and cooperation with local community actors increased the legitimacy of social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Institutionalization through laws, policies, and systemic capacity, combined with broad partnerships, seems to strengthen sustainability.</b> National strategies, legal anchoring, and multi-level cooperation can support legitimacy and continuity.</p>

Evidence	Implication
<b>Barriers to effective implementation</b>	
<p><b>Programmes often fell short, due to weak coordination, unrealistic goals and failure to account for cultural or political dynamics.</b> External shocks, like conflict and displacement, further disrupted implementation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the <i>Democratic Republic of Congo</i>, reconstruction projects struggled as beneficiaries were unaware of government involvement.</li> <li>Regional initiatives in <i>Mali, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and DRC</i> were undermined by limited leadership attention and shifting political contexts.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Peacebuilding initiatives are shaped as much by their political and cultural context as by their design.</b> Approaches that are attuned to political economy and adaptable to shocks may be better positioned to deliver.</p>
<b>Leave No One Behind</b>	
<p><b>While many performance and process evaluations, as well as a notable subset of impact evaluations, emphasized gender and youth inclusion, few evaluations addressed other vulnerable populations.</b></p>	<p><b>Stronger theories of change, backed by more rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental studies, are needed to better understand how including vulnerable groups can reduce conflict and promote peace.</b> In addition, political economy analyses can shed light on how women's participation in decision-making and peace processes helps to lower levels of violence.</p>

## Why is this important?

Conflict and violence remain major global challenges. Between 2000 and 2022, homicide rates peaked in 2021, while conflict-related deaths surged by more than 50 percent in 2022. Ongoing conflict and protracted violence across multiple regions underscore the urgency of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Despite a growing body of evaluative and research evidence, significant knowledge gaps persist regarding effective strategies to reduce homicides and conflict-related deaths. To address these gaps, the Peace Pillar Management Group of the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition commissioned its first-ever synthesis of evaluative evidence, focusing on two SDG 16 targets:

- 16.1 (Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere).
- 16.4 (Significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat all forms of organized crime).

# What was the purpose of this synthesis?

The synthesis focused on SDGs 16.1 and 16.4 and examined evidence on three types of initiatives:

1. **Social inclusion** – initiatives to build trust, reintegrate ex-combatants, and promote gender and youth inclusion.
2. **Peace processes** – peacekeeping, governance during conflict, transitional justice, and peace agreement implementation.
3. **Safe environments** – policing, community safety, early warning systems, and firearms regulation.

It addressed three main questions:

- What interventions are effective in reducing homicides and conflict-related deaths?
- How and why do interventions achieve outcomes—or fail to do so?
- How do gender and equity issues shape effectiveness?

# How was the synthesis carried out?

The process was systematic, rigorous, and transparent:

- Extensive searches covered more than 10,000 academic studies, United Nations repositories and donor evaluations.
- 39 impact evaluations and 438 process and performance evaluations were included (75 analysed in depth).
- A mixed-methods synthesis approach combined quantitative and qualitative analysis.
- Machine learning was used to prioritise relevant studies.
- A management group with representatives of several United Nations agencies (United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Office of Independent Oversight Services, Peacebuilding Support Office) guided the scope and priorities.
- A technical advisory panel of academics, practitioners and policymakers provided subject-matter expertise.

# Limitations of the evidence

- A geographic concentration in Africa and Latin America, with gaps elsewhere.
- Limited attention to women, youth and marginalized groups.
- Few long-term studies of sustained impact.

# How up to date is this evidence?

The synthesis included evaluations and research studies published between **2019 and 2024**.

## Learn more

Visit the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition's **Peace Pillar** webpage to explore the following resources: <https://www.sdgssynthesiscoalition.org/pillar/peace-pillar>

- **Full Synthesis Report:** A comprehensive synthesis analysis of what works to reduce homicides and conflict-related deaths.
- **Interactive Evidence Gap Maps:** Visual tools for exploring the evidence base and directly accessing the evaluations and studies included in the synthesis. Separate maps are available for:
  - Quantitative impact evidence
  - Qualitative evaluations conducted by the United Nations and other bilateral and multilateral agencies
- **Interim Brief:** A concise summary of the scope, nature, and characteristics of the compiled evidence—best read alongside the evidence gap maps.

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AND STRONG  
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The Global  
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### The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition

The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition brings together evaluation offices from the United Nations, multilateral development banks, and international financial institutions to generate and share evidence on what works, how, and why to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Co-chaired by UNDP's Independent Evaluation Office and UNICEF's Evaluation Office, the Coalition promotes joint learning and actionable syntheses that inform policy and practice toward achieving the 2030 Agenda.



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