

Every Body Counts: Measuring Violent Deaths

In September 2015 world leaders will meet at the UN to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are planned to run until 2030 and will be the international development framework that will replace the current Millennium Development Goals. These leaders will have on the table a proposal elaborated by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals¹ (UNGA, 2013) listing 17 goals, roughly clustered around six broad areas, as the UN Secretary-General indicated in his synthesis report (UNGA, 2014), namely dignity, prosperity, justice, partnerships, the planet, and people (see Figure 1). Among them, Goal 16 focuses on peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and accountable institutions (see Box 1).

The SDGs acknowledge the advancement of the political debate on ‘development’ to include issues such as inequality, natural resources management, the environment, and climate change (UNDESA, 2014). The progress of a global agenda on peace and development has been possible thanks to the work of several processes, including the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, a diplomatic initiative launched in 2006 as a bridge between the disarmament and development communities, which called for measurable reductions in the burden of armed violence that humankind faces.

Building on the experiences and knowledge developed through the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* (GBAV) reports since 2008 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008; 2011; 2015), this Research Note focuses on the objective measurement of violent deaths as a composite indicator that can be realistically used for monitoring progress towards target 16.1.

Box 1 SDG 16

‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (UNDESA, 2014).

Each proposed goal is accompanied by targets and indicators focused on measurable outcomes. The first of the targets under Goal 16 (16.1) reads ‘[to] significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere’ (UNDESA, 2014), thus stressing the importance of monitoring violent deaths as a proxy for peaceful and inclusive societies.

Why it matters

Armed violence² and insecurity have profound and long-term negative consequences for states, societies, and the quality of people’s lives. Armed violence is a matter for development:

One-and-a-half billion people live in areas affected by fragility, conflict, or large-scale, organized criminal violence, and no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet to achieve a single United Nations Millennium Development Goal (World Bank, 2011, p. 1).

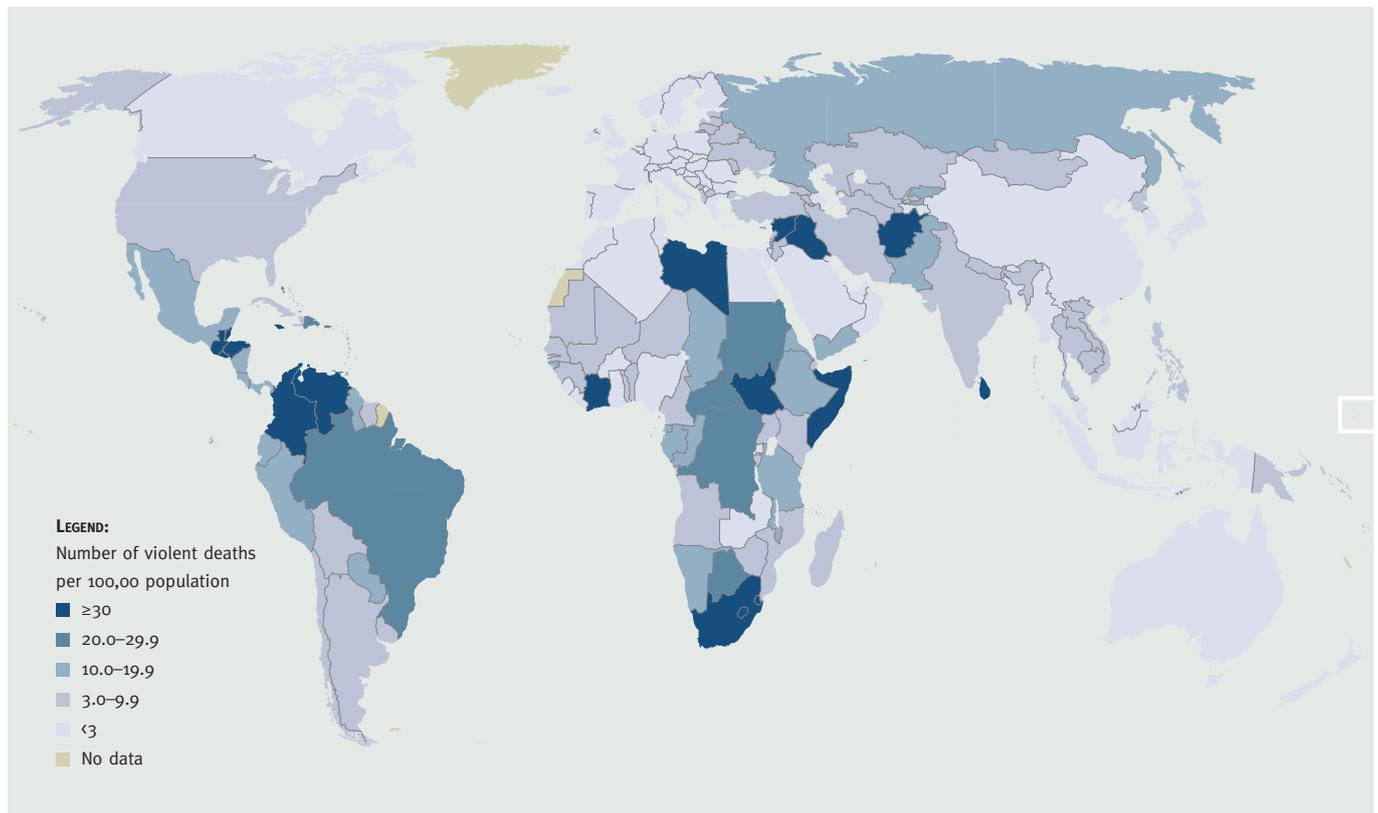
Over the years a consensus has grown that there are negative (and mutually reinforcing) links among violence, insecurity, and development. This has progressively built consensus around acceptance that issues related to peace, security, and good governance should play a role in the post-2015 development framework.

According to the *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015: Every Body Counts*, between 2007 and 2012 at least 508,000 persons—including approximately 60,000 women and girls—died

Figure 1 Six essential elements for delivering the SDGs

Source: UNGA (2014, p. 16)





violently every year, mostly in situations other than armed conflicts (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015) (see Map 1). Considering that the 2011 GBAV report (covering the period 2004–09) estimated a total of 526,000 victims of lethal violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 1), this represents a slight decline in the total number of fatalities per year.

The impact of wide-scale violence and armed conflict is devastating on a country’s public institutions, national economy, infrastructure, and social cohesion (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 31).

The economic cost of armed violence is staggering: in 2010 alone the cost of homicide in the world was estimated at USD 171 billion (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015). Low- and middle-income countries bear a disproportionately high share of the burden of armed violence, which stops and in certain cases even reverses their development attainments (De Martino, 2012).

Beyond the loss of lives, the number of those who survive firearm injuries and subsequently experience often life-long physical and psychological consequences, such as disability and trauma, could be approximately as many as three times the number of persons killed (Alvazzi del Frate, 2012, p. 94). Those affected in other ways by

armed violence remain literally uncounted.

A unified approach: measuring ‘violent deaths’

The violent death of a human being is the most extreme consequence of armed violence, and is treated seriously in all societies. For this reason it is likely to be recorded more accurately than other violent events (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 43). As a consequence, the number of persons who die violently is frequently used as a proxy measure for insecurity in both conflict and non-conflict settings. Violent deaths may occur in any context, either in open conflict or in societies at peace, and their recording may fall under different rubrics depending on the surrounding context. But research has demonstrated that different forms of violence are often connected to one another (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 15).

Virtually all states recognize ‘homicide’ in their criminal codes; thus homicide statistics represent the bulk of information on violent deaths. However, ‘homicide’ becomes a weak indicator of violence when peace is broken and various forms of violence appear. Boundaries are blurred between conflict-related, political, economic, and

criminal violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 43), and homicide statistics alone do not portray the real extent of the burden of violence. Data on persons killed in conflicts (i.e. direct conflict deaths), acts of terrorism, riots and other forms of civil unrest, pre- or post-electoral violence, political crises, and the excessive use of force by the police, is unlikely to be counted as ‘homicides’. The same applies for certain forms of violence against women, honour killings, and dowry deaths, which may fall outside the scope of homicide statistics. The unified approach adopted by the GBAV reports allows for the counting of all violent deaths under one single composite indicator, which groups the different rubrics together and collapses available data from multiple sources across all settings (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, pp. 44–45) (see Box 2).

The GBAV reports’ experience of using the ‘violent deaths’ indicator and the well-established methodology developed for its collection and analysis are of value to the current discussion around targets and indicators for Goal 16. First of all, there is a clear link between the violent deaths indicator and the relevant target (16.1). The indicator provides evidence to support the formulation of policies for the prevention and reduction of violence. It is also

instrumental in assessing and monitoring the implementation of the policy. Secondly, the indicator is applicable to and comparable across all countries and territories, irrespective of ongoing armed conflict and the poor capacities of national institutions. Thirdly, it does not require major administrative structures at the state level. The range of institutions collecting data on the various dimensions of violent deaths is large, from national institutions to international or national casualty recorders, such as agencies, organizations, or individuals that document conflict events and casualties from multiple sources. In the past decade the availability of data on violent deaths has improved substantially in terms of both coverage and comprehensiveness (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015, Box 2.2). Countries have a greater capacity to establish and maintain systems for recording violent deaths and to disaggregate the collected data, although large gaps are still present, especially in Africa.

Filling the gaps

Over the last ten years the debate at the national and international levels to develop public policies based on solid evidence has gained momentum and importance. In the framework of the post-2015 agenda, the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda called for a 'data revolution' in order to improve

the quality of statistics and information available to people and governments (UN, 2013, p. 21).

The UN Secretary-General also relayed this call in his synthesis report (UNGA, 2014). Data and statistics disaggregation³ is seen as central to ensuring that all social groups are taken into consideration when delivering public policies, or, in other words, that 'no one is left behind' (UN, 2013, p. ix).

'Thus, as we implement the new [sustainable development] agenda, we must: base our analysis on credible data and evidence, enhancing data capacity, availability, disaggregation, literacy and sharing' (UNGA, 2014, para. 65).

The need for measurable targets and indicators for policy-making and programming has been one of the central messages of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development since its launch in 2006. The work conducted on the GBAV reports since 2008 and the linked database, as well as on other related activities (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2010), has followed the path of increasing the quantity and quality of its data, with emphasis on the disaggregation of information.

Supporting the vision that '[d]ata are the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability' (IEAG, 2014, p. 2), consequent invest-

Box 2 The 'violent deaths' indicator

The death of a person by violent means independently from the settings where it happened (or 'violent death') is a composite indicator bringing together data from several broad analytical categories such as 'direct conflict deaths', 'intentional' and 'unintentional' homicides, and 'legal interventions deaths', as presented in Table 1. The multisource database used for the GBAV reports currently combines statistics on homicide for 201 countries and territories from a wide range of international, regional, national, and sub-national sources (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015). Homicide statistics are integrated with the number of conflict-related fatalities in countries with ongoing or recently ended armed conflicts, or situations of severe political instability and associated levels of political violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2012, p. 9). Data is collected together with a set of metadata to record its methodological features and sources.

ments have been made in the expansion of the GBAV database. As of early 2015 it included gender-disaggregated data for 104 countries and data on firearm killings from 175 countries. Available data disaggregated by gender and firearm allowed for the estimation of the total number of violent deaths for 201 countries and territories. The GBAV database would therefore provide valuable inputs for the monitoring of SDG target 5.2 on violence against women and girls. The GBAV data collection process on violent deaths at the municipal level covers over 11,500 cities in 27 countries for the period 2000–13 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, n.d.). An increase in data coverage at the city level would also support the monitoring of SDG 11 on safe human settlements (UNDESA, 2014).

Looking forward

The *Global Burden of Armed Violence* reports focus on lethal violence shows that 'violent deaths' is a realistic indicator for policy-making (towards goals and targets) and for the purpose of measuring the results of armed violence prevention and reduction programmes, at both the national and international levels. In this sense it allows collective knowledge to become actionable by various stakeholders (for instance, by states, donors, and other actors). In the framework of the post-2015 agenda, not only is this indicator directly linked to Goal 16 ('towards

Table 1 Available indicators for 'violent deaths'

Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2015)

Indicator	International organizations that provide definitions	Possible international sources	Possible national sources
Intentional homicide/assault leading to death	UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Health Organization (WHO)	UNODC, WHO, international crime and violence observatory data	Police and crime statistics, public health statistics, national crime and violence observatories
Non-intentional homicide	UNODC, WHO	Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), UNODC, WHO, observatory data	Police and crime statistics, public health statistics
Legal intervention deaths	UNODC, WHO	PAHO, UNODC, WHO, observatory data	Police and crime statistics, public health statistics, national crime and violence observatories
Battle-related deaths	Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)	UCDP	Not applicable
One-sided violence	UCDP	UCDP	Not applicable
Non-state violence	UCDP	UCDP	Not applicable
Casualties of conflict	Every Casualty	Iraq Body Count, Syria Tracker, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan	Casualty recorders such as Conflict Analysis Resource Center, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
Direct conflict deaths	Small Arms Survey (GBAV database)	Multiple sources approach, best estimate	Multiple sources approach, best estimate
Terrorism victims	Small Arms Survey (GBAV 2011)	Global Terrorism Database, International Institute for Strategic Studies, National Counterterrorism Center (US)	Various national reporting systems

peaceful and inclusive societies'), and especially target 16.1, but it also has linkages with other SDGs.

Violent deaths provide a composite indicator that receives inputs from a range of communities (for example, law enforcement, criminal justice, public health, peacekeeping) and offers the opportunity to observe the combined trends of its various components. At the same time it returns tangible results to each of these communities.

The gaps in data coverage are progressively being reduced. Because a country's wealth is usually positively related to the establishment of more effective violence-monitoring systems (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015, p. 121), the existing gaps in availability (and quality standards) can only be overcome through new investments in data collection and by strengthening the capacities for data collection, analysis, and dissemination. As the UN Secretary-General has recognized, this is a 'development agenda in its own right' (IEAG, 2014, p. 3).

The adoption of 'violent deaths' as an indicator within the SDG framework would be accompanied by a strong will among UN member states to build the necessary capacities for smooth and effective data collection. Furthermore, it would contribute to realizing the call for a data revolution, a call that sees data and statistics as comprising an instrument of change towards more transparency, accountability, and inclusion, so that no one is indeed left behind. ■

Notes

- 1 The 30-member Open Working Group was established in January 2013 by the UN General Assembly with the task of preparing a proposal on the SDGs (UNGA, 2013). However, in order to improve inclusiveness, several countries shared seats in the Open Working Group.
- 2 Armed violence is defined as 'the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death or psychosocial harm' (OECD, 2011, p. ii).
- 3 'Mechanisms to review the implementation of the goals will be needed, and the availability of and access to data would need to be improved, including the disaggregation of information by gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant to national contexts' (UNGA, 2014, para. 46).

For more information about armed violence issues, please visit:

www.smallarmssurvey.org/armed-violence.html

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence, and as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. The Small Arms Survey, a project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, hosts the Geneva Declaration Secretariat. For more information, please visit:

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About the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development

This Research Note is published in support of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development. More than 110 states have adhered to this high-level diplomatic initiative, designed to support states and civil society to achieve measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence by 2015 and beyond. For more information, please visit:

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