

# Violence, Conflict, Development: What's new? Shifting ideas and practice, 1989-2023

**SOAS Global Development Working Paper**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mats Berdal for introductions to some of the interviewees, whom I thank and name separately in a footnote in the text. Dasha Nasonovskaia provided helpful assistance early in the thinking that generated this paper and Jack Howells provided research assistance later on. Above all this paper owes a great deal to working over decades with colleagues on the Violence, Conflict, and Development (VCD) MSc, especially Jonathan Goodhand and Zoe Marriage, and to generations of student cohorts studying VCD since 2000/01. Thanks to Mats Berdal, Sarah Batmanglich, and Jonathan Goodhand for astute comments on drafts of this paper, as well as to those of my interviewees who also read and commented helpfully on an earlier draft. None of these individuals is responsible for any sins of omission or commission in this paper, which, while benefiting greatly from many of their insights, cannot be held to reflect their views. The paper also benefits from the comments of participants at a Symposium in honour of Astri Suhrke at the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen in June 2023, organised by Mats Berdal and Torunn Wimpelmann. Astri herself has long been an inspiration, a thoughtful interlocutor, and an enduring reader in my mind while writing.

**Suggested Citation:** Cramer, C, (2025), “Violence, Conflict, Development: what's new? Shifting ideas and practice, 1989-2023”, SOAS Global Development Working Paper No. 1, London: SOAS University of London.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00043308>

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# Violence, Conflict, Development: What's new? Shifting ideas and practice, 1989-2023

## Abstract

Thinking and practice related to the connections between 'development' and violent conflict has evolved since the early 1990s. While giving some quantitative indication of trends, this paper primarily draws on a set of interviews with individuals with sustained senior experience in government departments and international organizations, combined with reflections drawn from research and teaching in this field. The paper is inspired by the work of Astri Suhrke who more than most has probed and written on the relevant themes and debates. I trace a narrative arc, with different strands of scholarship, debate, and practice, that reflects a growing sophistication of analysis and integration of ideas and disciplines; a rising confidence in outsiders' (especially Western agencies') ability to 'solve' apparently internal conflicts in low- and middle-income countries; a series of failures leading to a crisis of faith, above all in the 'liberal peace' and possibly also in 'development'; a big change in the geo-political context; and key areas where ideas, and ways of thinking, are shifting, though policy-oriented organizations may not be catching up. Sub-plots including the eternal quest for effective systems of classification. I conclude by highlighting gaps and possible areas where analysis and practice may focus more in coming years.

**Keywords:** Violence, Conflict, Development, Peace, Complexity

## Introduction

From around the mid-1990s to the early 2000s there was an increasingly institutionalised body of thinking and practice on the connections between 'development' and violent conflict, underpinned by the end of support for policy-relevant research that could feed into peacebuilding and development. It was notable among other things and by contrast with many publications at the time for emphasising four different, potentially overlapping, causal relationships between violent conflict and development (Gleditsch et al, 2003).<sup>1</sup> SOAS, University of London launched the MSc in Violence, Conflict and Development in 2000/01. At the LSE there was a module on 'complex emergencies' taught within the development studies department. Kings College London has a Conflict, Security and Development Research Group. And there were other initiatives. But how has this field evolved since then? Is there a neat and linear progress – a steady accumulation of knowledge, leading to better aid and policy programmes? (An immediate answer from one interviewee for this paper, an official in an international organization, was a 'disconcerting no'.) Do the trajectories of research and knowledge production differ from those of policy and practice? What new ideas (and questions) have shaped recent research agendas and interventions? This paper is intended to begin a structured conversation about such questions – how the field has changed, and where it is headed.

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<sup>1</sup> Development as inherently conflictual; underdevelopment as a cause of conflict; the developmental costs of conflict; and conflict as a catalyst for development and peacebuilding.

The perspective I bring to this dialogue is that of a political economist with an initial training as a historian, who since the late 1980s developed an interest in violence and violent conflict and their relationships with the processes of economic development.<sup>2</sup> Scholars with a political science background, with a specialism in anthropology or geography, with a sustained expertise in war studies or peace studies, and so on, would all have different perspectives on this question of what has changed and how it has changed in this broad and not very tightly defined field. That this ‘field’ - or overlapping area of a Venn diagram of fields, and in the world of policy the borderland linking Aidland (Apthorpe, 2011) and Peaceland (Autesserre, 2014) - should not be overly institutionalised, that interdisciplinarity should not be pursued ‘by committee’, is a concern for Kalyvas. Warning against the watering down that disciplinary rigidity produces, Kalyvas (2020, 5) instead hopes for ‘specific researchers or teams of researchers to actually take the initiative to draw and translate from other fields into their own field and then produce that fertilization’. Suhrke (e.g. Adelman and Suhrke, 1999, Suhrke and Samset, 2007; Berdal and Suhrke, 2011) provides one source of inspiration in this, drawing on anthropology, sociology, political economy, political science, history, and international relations.

Not only is this paper subjective, shaped by my own intellectual formation; it is also necessarily personal in other ways, ways that are not always made explicit in the academic literature but arguably are always present. When we teach academic models, methods, and theories, when we introduce intellectual debates, and when we deal in what some may consider arcane obsessions with the coding rules for datasets or the provenance of the evidence behind sweeping claims and so on, we try to remind ourselves and the students that the subject matter and the reason for studying it is not merely ‘academic’. We are trying to make sense of, identify patterns in, horribly real experiences of suffering and to probe relationships between these and other ‘variables’.

How we manage the influence of this on the social science work we do is probably varied and best consigned to the confession booth of an analyst’s couch; but it is arguably not ideal to bury it too deeply behind the guise of science. Thus, I do know that certain direct observations and experiences have shaped some of my own thinking (much as a colleague explains to incoming cohorts of students that the ideas they study may not immediately have much effect on them but that some much later set off connections, relevance, insights, like unexploded ordnance). To give an example, I took a picture during work on a rural labour market survey: of a drawing done with a charcoal stick on the outside of a rudimentary hut in a settlement of semi-legal Mozambican refugees from war, living in north-eastern South Africa in 1993 – a drawing by a young girl of what had happened to her mother at the hands of Renamo soldiers (Fig.1).<sup>3</sup> Aside from the immediate affective impact, that image helped crystallise ideas about processes of

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting of my own perspective also that I created – and for most years since have convened – the MSc in Violence, Conflict and Development at SOAS, University of London, in 2000/01.

<sup>3</sup> The forced displacement of Mozambican women, turfed off their land by rural insurgency, and their absorption on extremely unfavourable terms (given their legal status) in export-oriented South African capitalist agriculture (Sender and Johnston, 1996) involved, effectively, a process of class formation and echoed the process of primitive accumulation (Cramer, 2006).

conflict, forced displacement, and economic change, including class formation. For these Mozambicans were now living, in South Africa, off a combination of charitable donations and incomes earned especially by women on local, often large export-oriented farms. The displacement of people from lives of peasant reproduction, and their pitching into wage employment, drawing them into capitalist relations of production, reverberated with the dynamics of ‘extra-economic compulsion’ that Marx observed in the enclosure movement in England that was so central to the ‘primitive accumulation’ of the early spread of capitalism (what Adam Smith had earlier called ‘original’ accumulation). Like the scatter plot of a statistical regression, it suggested a pattern and raised questions worth probing.

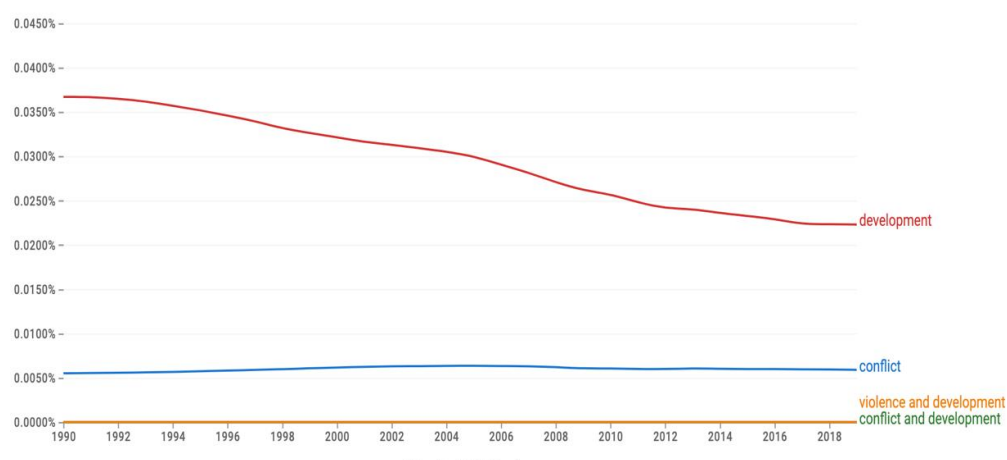
Driving back from that same refugee settlement to Johannesburg we heard on the radio that the leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP), Chris Hani, had been assassinated. Hani’s killing pitched South Africa and its transition into tumult – there were fears that it might unravel. Amid rising political violence and deep divisions, the previous year political negotiations had been called off. Only nine days before Hani’s assassination new talks had begun. Mandela later told a journalist he would have liked to write a book about ‘how close South Africa came to civil war’ (Malala, 2023, 5) and the killing of Chris Hani brought that prospect very near. This was a ‘touch and go moment’ as the ANC politician Mac Maharaj put it (ibid, v), a ‘tipping point’ (Lenton, 2013) that might go either way and in the event it may have accelerated the democratic transition. But that was utterly unclear at the time and if it did it owed much to highly specific and personal dynamics of leadership and political relationships (Malala, 2023). There may be something in this episode about the limits to reading off outcomes from ‘political settlement’ analysis or any other model and about the importance of accounting for contingency and relations between specific individuals. Wood (2007), for example, models three different ways in which contingent events may shift behaviour, politics, and institutional arrangements: through stochastic variation in individual behaviour, through the effect on relative interests and preferences of exogenous events, and through intentional responses to prevailing convention in order to provoke a shift to a more favourable convention. Wood also gives the example of the assassination of Chris Hani, noting less its possible effect on the end of apartheid but emphasising more how it may have affected post-apartheid policies (on which see also Padayachee and van Niekerk, 2019) and the scope for ANC unity.

To balance a highly individual perspective, and after in the next section noting but not developing far some quantifiable trends, the paper combines a reading of the literature with the insights of a sample of individuals with sustained senior experience working at this intersection of development with armed conflict and broader social violence. Most have this experience as ‘practitioners’ in the policy and aid fields. Some have crossover experience in national/international organizations and in academia.

**Figure 1: Eastern Transvaal, April 1993**

## Capturing trends

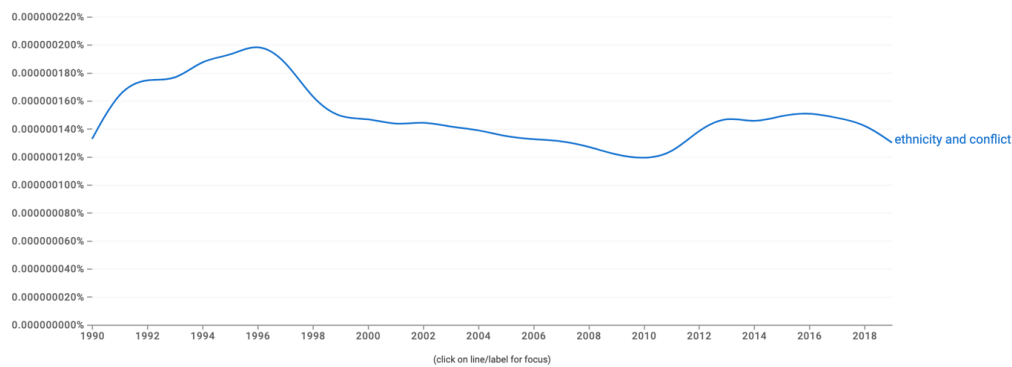
Different approaches may be taken to identifying trends in the violent conflict and development literature and related institutional practice. ChatGPT did not prove especially useful other than, first, confirming prior hunches and providing a fairly straightforward summary of some key shifts over time. It did, however, help to probe some aspects and generate some new references – an example is the brief discussion of machine learning for conflict prediction models below. Some bibliographic work provided illustrative confirmation of trends (e.g., see below, the increase in dataset article publications). Experiments with Google N-grams may have a certain initial value. The first thing I found was a sustained decline in the use of ‘development’ in the Google book corpus, but nonetheless a really tiny and largely unchangingly tiny incidence of ‘conflict and development’ (Fig.2).<sup>4</sup> There are things that make some intuitive sense, though not really adding greatly to knowledge. For example (Fig.3), it does make sense that ‘ethnicity and conflict’ were combined quite a lot, relatively, in the early to mid-1990s and then tailed off.

**Figure 2: Development, conflict, conflict and development**

Source: Google N-Gram (May 2023).

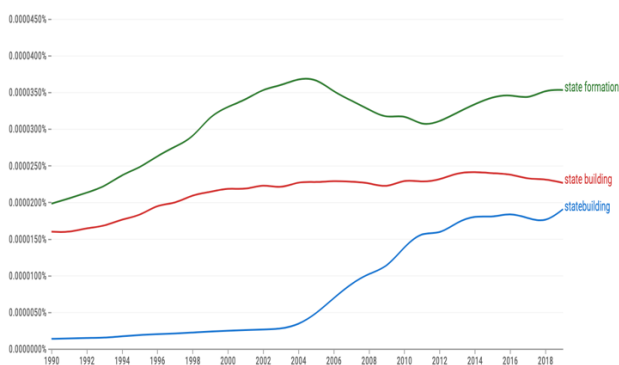
<sup>4</sup> Benedicte Bull, in a symposium for the Norwegian Research Council in September 2021 outlined a ‘crisis in the narrative of development’ and the varied responses to such a crisis.

**Figure 3: Ethnicity and conflict**

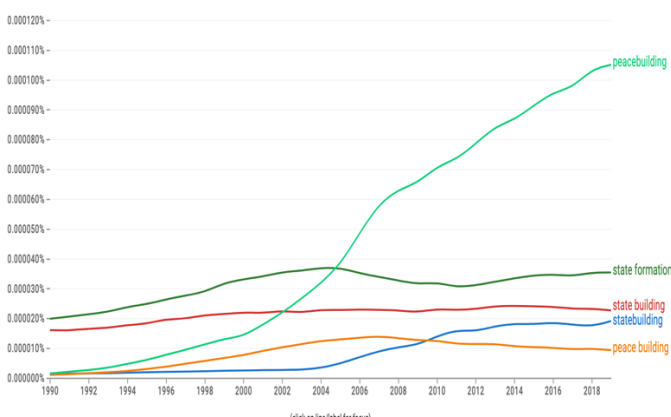


Source: Google N-Gram (May 2023)

**Figure 4a: State formation, statebuilding/state building...**



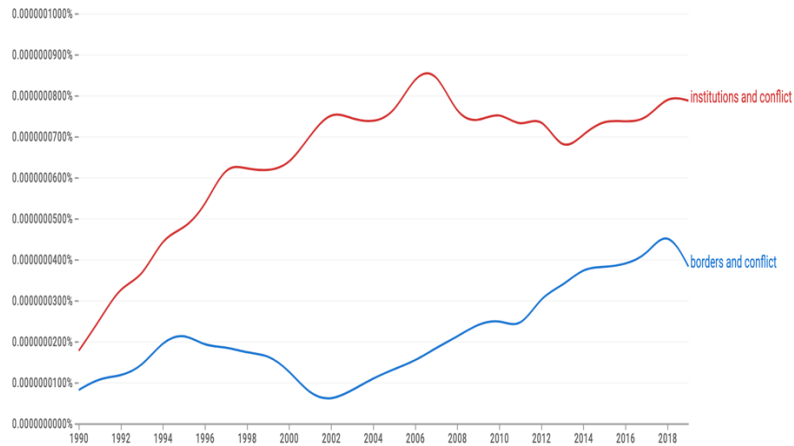
**Figure 4b: and peacebuilding**



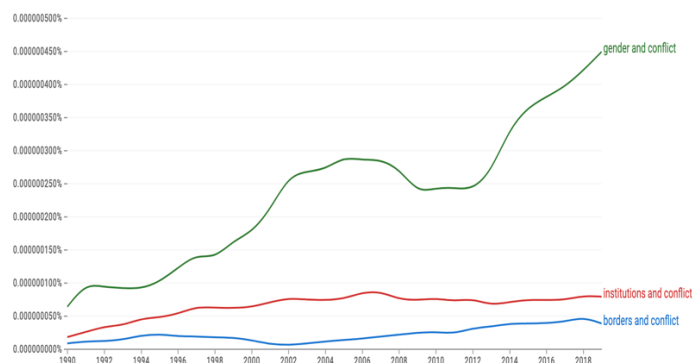
Both institutions and borders have featured more and more (Fig.5a), again confirming something we might intuitively expect. Development more broadly has had to engage more with institutions and with the spatial dimensions of socio-economic change and structural transformation, and our understanding has been enhanced as a result. Something similar has been the case with conflict, helped not least by initiatives like the work underpinning the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) – from early on ACLED showed clearly the clustering of violence not just, say, in ‘Uganda’, but specifically in Uganda’s borderlands with neighbouring countries. And then, again not

surprisingly but quite effectively captured in the N-gram (Fig.5b), there has been a far more rapid increase in the frequency of discussion related to gender and conflict. As for climate change, see below (Figs. 10a and 10b).

**Figure 5a: Institutions, borders...**



**Figure 5b: ...gender**



It may also be possible to gauge change through the expansion of postgraduate degree programmes. Data on [mastersportal.com](https://www.mastersportal.com) indicates that there are 18 Master's degree programmes in the UK, as of 2024, addressing conflict and development, with titles including Violence, Conflict and Development; Conflict, Security and Development; Peacekeeping, Conflict and Development; Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding; Conflict, Governance, and Global Development; Security, Conflict, and International Development; Humanitarianism, Conflict and Development, and so on. Clearly, interest in the overlapping fields of conflict and development has expanded. That may reflect widespread awareness that the relationships between violent conflict and development are not straightforward (as in what in the wake of the First World War, for example, was known as the 'liberal interpretation' of war, i.e. that all war was exclusively negative in all its respects).<sup>5</sup>

Beyond these cursory indicators of trends, I set out to explore trends through a different approach, reaching out to a number of people with sustained, senior experience of more

<sup>5</sup> This view formed from the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the UK and by the end of that century was generally established, underpinning the early rounds of analysis of the First World War (Milward, 1984).



practical, intervention-oriented work. This involved purposive snowballing. My sample was not representative, and it has biases built in, some of which I tried and only partially managed to correct. This fairly small, non-representative sample of what are effectively elite interviewees helped me forge at least one perspective that may encourage further discussion: interviewees were employed or had been employed at the World Bank, in the ICRC, at SIPRI, in the Swedish government, one academic with experience as a UN official, and in the British government (some in what had previously been the Department for International Development, DfID). Chatham House rules prevailed for the most part. My interviewees had worked often in diverse roles as project officers, managers, analysts, advisors, and in at least two or three cases may be thought of as ‘thought leaders’ quite influential in the evolution of ideas in this field and how they are translated into guidelines for practice.<sup>6</sup> The conversations were free flowing but were loosely structured around three questions: what has changed, over the past 25 years or so, in conflict itself (including the broader global context), what has changed in ideas and knowledge about conflict and development, and what has changed in policy/practice?

After an initial characterisation of the ‘early’ part of the narrative, a cluster of themes emphasised in the interviews shapes the flow of the paper.<sup>7</sup>

## **From the End of History to Polycrisis<sup>8</sup>**

In trying to characterise a trajectory over the past roughly 25 years in the field of violent conflict and development there are two separate strands that have varying thickness over time and that are wound into each other to different degrees over time as well: one strand of knowledge production, research, ideas; and another of practice, policy, intervention. That makes it difficult to come up with a single, simple arc. Nonetheless, with some risk, a first stab might trace an arc from some crude but confident beginnings, through a period of blossoming intellectual thinking, relatively strong links between thinking and practice communities, and despite fierce arguments a great confidence in liberal intervention, followed by a loss of that confidence – a loss of confidence that may both hide interesting ‘under the radar’ developments and that may yet prove productive, generative of what come to be new and widely adopted methods, models, and ideas.

Without wanting to caricature the beginnings of this period, it was a time of simplicity and crudeness of thinking. Far from the ‘end of History’, for Dan Smith (interview, 2023) this was the beginning of the end of the Stone Age. The end of the Cold War had given many

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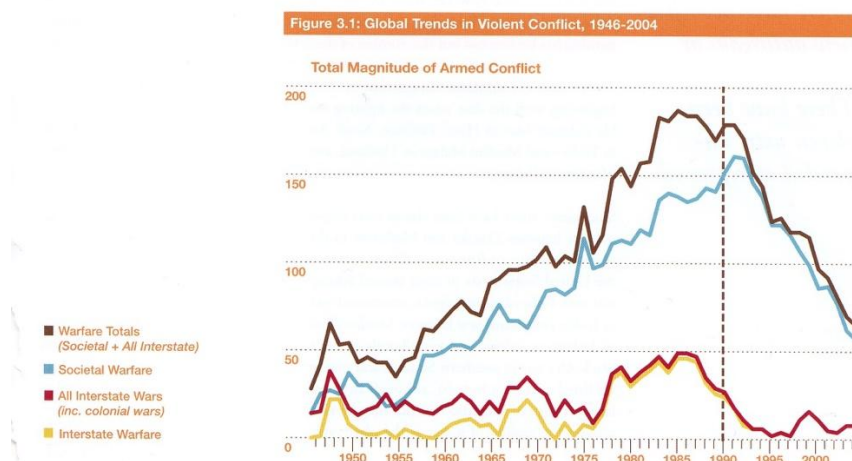
<sup>6</sup> I’m hugely grateful for the time given by the following people: Nabila Assaf, Sarah Batmanglich, Colin Ashley Bruce, Christian Dennys, Anders Frankenberg, Joelle Jenny, Mukesh Kapila, Funmi Olonisakin, Matt Preston, Nigel Roberts, Tom Rodwell, and Dan Smith. Most of them were happy to be quoted but I decided to treat almost all comments under Chatham House rules.

<sup>7</sup> There were also interesting insights and observations in the interviews to which I cannot do justice here – discussions of the evolution of international humanitarian law in the context of the rise of autonomous weapons; growing commitment in the World Bank to engage during conflict, e.g. in Yemen; and more.

<sup>8</sup> Polycrisis is the term favoured by Adam Tooze, though also taken up by the World Economic Forum, to describe not only a disparate set of crises but the way that the interaction among them makes for a whole more overwhelming than the sum of their parts. It has some relationship to ideas of complexity (see below). See, for example, Adam Tooze, ‘Welcome to the world of the polycrisis’, *Financial Times*, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

people in the West a kind of adrenalin rush. This was the beginning of the simpler versions of liberal peace hubris – congealing into the triple transition that some observed: the parallel security transition, political transition, and economic transition (Ottaway 2003) though others regarded it as ‘bargain basement imperialism’.<sup>9</sup> It was a period of extraordinary confidence that a few years of declining incidence of violent conflict meant that the world was on course for ‘a world more peaceful than at any time in the last century’ (Marshall and Gurr, 2005) (see Fig.6). In retrospect, many people did not read the small print of history and fell for the promises of what turned out to be a speculative bubble.

**Figure 6: ‘a world more peaceful...’**



Source: Marshall and Gurr, Peace and Conflict 2005 (CIDCM)

It was also a period when the Washington Consensus (the set of market liberalization and deregulation policies at the heart of IMF stabilization and World Bank structural adjustment programmes) was still riding high, though it was on the cusp of being challenged by new thinking about institutions and governance. Because history had ended, lingering wars could not have much to do with politics or ideas so must be largely criminal affairs, perhaps just pathologies of demography and underdevelopment – ‘new wars’ if you like, where the barbarians of Kaplan’s (1994) ‘coming anarchy’ hadn’t had the email about the end of history but where with a well-judged intervention and some elections they’d soon be on message. The Human Security Centre (2005) banged the drum of a clear trend towards peace and harmony. And then of course we were all reminded that the road to the end of history and the beginning of perpetual peace was built by the better angels, liberal through and through, of our nature (Pinker 2012).<sup>10</sup>

If the end of the Cold War emboldened Western governments and international organizations to accelerate the end of history through liberal interventions, it was nonetheless realised that there was a need for new knowledge and better foundations for these interventions. Development and conflict-related understanding and intervention were in the early days of being fused together. Boutros Boutros Ghali in

<sup>9</sup> See also Paris (1997, 56) on peacebuilding as ‘an enormous experiment in social engineering that involves transplanting Western models of social, political and economic organization into war-shattered states’.

<sup>10</sup> For a critique of the ahistorical analysis in Pinker’s book, see Dwyer and Micale (2021).

*Agenda for Peace* called for ‘an integrated approach’. The challenge of overcoming a lack of coordination was captured in de Soto and del Castillo’s (1994, 74) metaphor for the parallel peace process and IMF economic reform programme in El Salvador: ‘It was as if a patient lay on the operating table with the left and right sides of his body separated by a curtain and unrelated surgery being performed on each side’.

And people trying to think through different conflicts (not just characterising them all as ‘new wars’) began to think of new (post-Cold War) taxonomies. This was the beginning of a rich vein of work probing the coding rules that separated one class of violent phenomena from others (‘civil wars’ from internationalised internal wars from societal wars from regional conflict complexes; regular versus irregular wars and symmetric versus asymmetric conflicts (Balcells and Kalyvas 2014); and so on). Some of its beginnings were quite quickly put away in the bottom drawer. One was a World Bank classification exercise that divided conflicts into one of two types: ethnic/religious or ideology/other (Fig.7): that provides a useful parlour game to encourage students to begin thinking through the significance of classification and coding rules.

And then of course it was a time of another extreme high point of confidence, otherwise known as ‘economics imperialism’ (Fine, 2000; Lazear, 2000), the idea that all social phenomena could be explained by the relentless application of the axioms of neo-classical economics. That allowed for the simplest approach to the question of how to bring together ‘development’ with ‘violent conflict’: the latter was just a function of the lack of the former and economic ideas and motivations could unlock the mysteries of violent contestation. From this perspective, the poor had a ‘comparative advantage in violence’ (Hirschleifer, 1994) and the economic idea of opportunity cost was (almost) all that was really required to understand why people join insurgencies. The confidence went quite far at times, for example in one economist’s insistence at a conference in Bonn that he was introducing to the discussion of post-war reconstruction ‘hard science’ where pretty much everyone else dealt only in ‘waffly crap’. From that basis, economic growth, and aid or ODA, were all you really needed to bring lasting peace (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Astri Suhrke (Suhrke and Buckmaster, 2006), among others, threw a well-aimed spanner in the works of that over-confidence.

Armed with new taxonomies and ideas, marching to songs of easy progress and the end of war, governments and organizations became increasingly engaged in peacebuilding, statebuilding, and development-as-conflict-prevention activities. A nexus was born. Thomas Weiss (2013, cited in de Soto and del Castillo, 2016) wrote of how peacebuilding had ‘become *the* growth industry in the United Nations’. As Dan Smith put it (interview, 2023), the ‘Stone Age’ – in which development and conflict were different worlds - ended around the early 2000s. From then on there was more of an audience for ideas about how these worlds interacted, and gradually there came to be a critical mass of researchers, knowledge, institutional practice. And there was a proliferation of organizational forms underpinning this activity and related research. The World Bank expanded its activities on conflict affected countries, DfID devoted more and more resources to overlapping work on institutions, development, and conflict (and conflict prevention) and funded research on these. The OECD took an interest. The UN created the Peacebuilding Fund. In Norway the Research Council created the PovPeace portfolio board to support

research on development and conflict and their interaction. And so on. But of course, there was no consensus and many of the early hubristic pronouncements generated heated debate, rich critique, and new research.

**Figure 7: The order of wars (an early 1990s World Bank classification scheme)**

TABLE 1  
CIVIL WARS BY YEAR AND TYPE, PARTITIONS, WAR RECURRENCE, AND LOW-LEVEL VIOLENCE

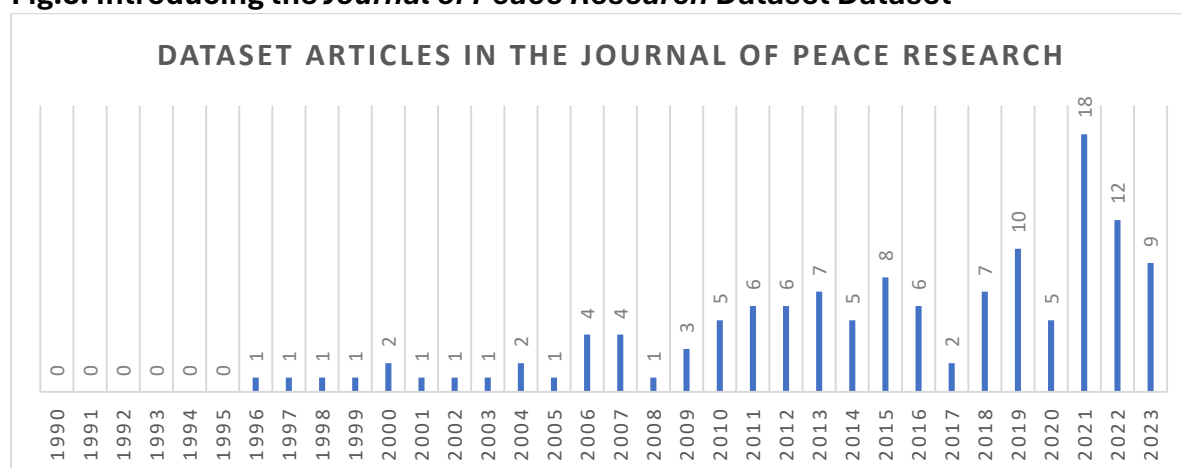
<i>Country Name Where Civil War Took Place</i>	<i>Year War Started</i>	<i>Year War Ended</i>	<i>Did War End for 2 Years?</i>	<i>Did Residual Violence End for 2 Years?</i>	<i>Was There a Partition?</i>	<i>Type of War (Identity or Not?)</i>
Afghanistan	1978	1992	no	no	no	ideology/other
Afghanistan	1993	ongoing	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Algeria	1962	1963	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Algeria	1992	1997	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Angola	1975	1991	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Angola	1992	ongoing	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Argentina	1955	1955	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Azerbaijan	1988	1996	yes	yes	yes	ethnic/religious
Bangladesh	1973	1994	yes	yes	no	ethnic/religious
Bolivia	1952	1952	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Burma	1948	1951	yes	no	no	ideology/other
Burma	1968	1982	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Burma	1983	1995	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
Burundi	1965	1969	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
Burundi	1972	1973	yes	yes	no	ethnic/religious
Burundi	1988	1988	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Burundi	1991	ongoing	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Cambodia	1970	1975	yes	no	no	ideology/other
Cambodia	1979	1991	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Central African Rep.	1995	1997	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Chad	1965	1979	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Chad	1980	1994	yes	yes	no	ethnic/religious
China	1967	1968	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
China-Taiwan	1947	1947	yes	no	yes	ideology/other
China-Tibet	1950	1951	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
Colombia	1948	1962	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Colombia	1978	ongoing	no	no	no	ideology/other
Congo Brazzaville	1992	1996	no	no	no	ideology/other
Congo/Zaire	1967	1967	yes	yes	no	ethnic/religious
Congo/Zaire	1975	1979	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
Congo/Zaire	1960	1965	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Congo/Zaire	1996	1997	no	no	no	ethnic/religious
Costa Rica	1948	1948	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Cuba	1958	1959	yes	no	no	ideology/other
Cyprus	1963	1964	no	no	yes	ethnic/religious
Cyprus	1974	1974	yes	yes	yes	ethnic/religious
Djibouti	1991	1995	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Dominican Rep.	1965	1965	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
El Salvador	1979	1992	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Eritrea	1974	1991	yes	yes	yes	ethnic/religious
Ethiopia	1977	1985	yes	no	no	ethnic/religious
Ethiopia	1974	1991	yes	yes	no	ideology/other
Georgia	1991	1993	yes	yes	yes	ethnic/religious

Source: World Bank (one of three pages)

Another way of seeing this period (it is impossible to put dates on it) would be as a flourishing of inter-disciplinary research and a growing awareness of the scope for a range of different methodologies. Astri Suhrke was one scholar at the heart of these

debates, collaborating with people from different scholarly and disciplinary backgrounds in work on Rwanda, Afghanistan, and beyond. In the broad development field, although economists continued to dominate, they had to engage more and more with society, history, politics, and institutions. And once you do that you can't really avoid violence. At least to some extent, neo-classical economists shifted ground a bit, influenced by Stiglitz and others working on market imperfections and their implications for states and institutions but also by North, Wallis and Weingast (2009) on limited access orders, by Khan's (2010) work on political settlements, and the related work on elite bargains (Lindemann, 2008). So the post-Washington Consensus, such as it was, evolved and development organizations focused increasingly on institutions. People working on violent conflict developed a range of analytical approaches that in one way or another engaged with a broader 'political economy' of conflict. There was a momentum to develop 'conflict sensitivity' in organizations and government ministries – a momentum that has not completely petered out everywhere (below, I discuss the World Bank's Risk and Resilience Assessment tool). Where some of the earlier more economic approaches thought that inequality was irrelevant, there was the development of work on horizontal inequalities by Stewart et al (2008), Cederman's (2013) work on inequalities and grievances, Tilly's (1998) work on categorical inequalities, and so on. Other issues came also to attract greater attention, including spatial and borderland dynamics of conflicts (ACLED; Goodhand, 2008).

In fact, ACLED was a good example of another feature of this (ongoing) period, a flourishing of large datasets and the evolution of new research methods. Barely an issue of the *Journal of Peace Research* goes by without the introduction of a new dataset these days (Fig.8 below). (One senior UK civil servant argued that 'we are getting better at combining datasets', but that it's not clear that this is leading to different or better practice; another official in an international organization was unsure if the more sophisticated datasets even get used.) However, realities of budget constraints and funding fashions could undermine the systematic construction and maintenance or institutionalisation of datasets, making trends sometimes difficult to identify and update. One example was World Bank data on post-conflict lending. When I contacted officials at the Bank in order to see if there was more recent data to update a slide used in teaching it turned out the Bank had dropped this issue, partly because, they told me quite reasonably, it was proving too difficult to know how to put categorical boundaries around 'post-conflict' loans: given the increasing discussion of development as a form of conflict (and recidivism) prevention, it had become too difficult to draw non-arbitrary lines distinguishing post-conflict from 'normal' loans to many countries: what was and was not post-conflict in the aftermath of conflict, for how long might a project loan be considered post-conflict, etc. Another example was when I worked on a DfID-commissioned project on conflict prevention and contacted two scholars in Sweden about whether they were planning to update their dataset on conflict prevention – they had been unable to secure funding to update and develop the dataset. Meanwhile, there is sometimes a sense that the rigour of classification systems can put at risk a more fluid form of thinking. As one International Organization interviewee put it, institutionally she resists excess classification in the analytical framework she works with, focusing instead on specific features but not 'reading off' from scores. And yet, she says, she is always met with the question: 'but can we do a typology?'

**Fig.8: Introducing the *Journal of Peace Research* Dataset Dataset<sup>11</sup>**

A third feature of this period was the growing body of work criticising the practice and foundations of the so-called liberal peace.<sup>12</sup> Some of this criticism complained that interventions weren't liberal enough; some that they would be more successful if there were some sensible institution-building first, before the big liberalizations got underway (Paris, 2004); and some that the problem lay in the liberalism itself, which, as some critics pointed out, often wasn't really very liberal anyway (Jahn, 2007).<sup>13</sup> As with the problems of classification noted above, it was far from clear whether 'liberal peace' was a sensible label, not least as it became entangled with military 'interventions' led by what some called neo-conservatives but the historian Michael Howard (2002) thought better tagged as 'muscular liberalism'. One interviewee argued that the liberal peace never existed: it was a 'mirage'. Arguably, from a different perspective, these interventions were a form of 'empire statebuilding' (Cramer and Goodhand, forthcoming) or 'bargain basement imperialism' (Ottaway, 2002).

It was becoming more difficult to keep a straight face while making grandiose claims for the success of liberal interventions in Mozambique, Sierra Leone, El Salvador, and so on. And then Afghanistan happened or kept happening. And Iraq happened. And Libya happened. Jahn (2007) argued that post-Cold War liberal internationalism, at least at first in the form of democracy promotion, simply repeated the foundational ideological contradictions of Cold War era modernization doctrine: romanticizing liberal democracy in the West (aka Global North), assuming the passage to this liberal ideal was universally natural (thus only requiring fairly simple release of blockages), and 'homogenizing countries in transition' (therefore, not requiring any careful understanding of specific context). For Jahn, then, rather than history ending in 1989, what followed was a tragic repetition of modern history.

<sup>11</sup> This chart is illustrative only: some of the coding may be dubious, but it gives a sense of the growing number of articles introducing or reporting on updates to datasets (largely but not all cross-national and varying in timespan origins from the 1810s to 2000) or on complications with these datasets. It does not include articles that report findings from quantitative analysis drawing on existing datasets or primary survey datasets, etc.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting the rich and radical historical origins or antecedents of the liberal peace, as explored for example in Hirschman (1977).

<sup>13</sup> For a long-run historical argument about the imperial underpinnings of contemporary justifications for intervention see Benton (2024).

## Failed states of mind (and self-licking ice creams)

Notwithstanding allergies to neat categorical boundaries, it is difficult to pinpoint the end of the liberal peace. Most people interviewed for this paper seemed to agree that it is no longer with us, and if anything, they probably date this to around 2011. Yet there are those who argue liberal peace ideas have not disappeared but are ‘expressed in newer ways’ (interviews, 2023), for example through support for greater local accountability in service delivery. Part of the difficulty, of course, is that the very idea of the liberal peace is elusive, means different things to different people, and is not always invoked explicitly by those deemed to be its promoters. In this, it is not unlike neo-liberalism. Arguably, while the foundations of both are teetering, part of their power might have lain precisely in this elasticity.<sup>14</sup>

It was commonly agreed by respondents that an era of confidence – in what once passed for the international community - has passed.<sup>15</sup> And that there is no real institutional intellectual leadership globally any more in this field: one leading scholar with considerable experience of engaging with governments and international organizations questioned whether we can even still think in terms of a singular field. As one person who remains supportive of the fundamental liberal ideals of development and peacebuilding put it: ‘there has not been a commensurate investment in evidence’ to keep up with shifts in practice and context. There is a recognition that this has to do with failures, and to some extent with a failure to learn from failures.

There are the obvious grand failures. But there was also growing evidence undermining empirical claims about broader relationships between aid and peace, which gnawed away at the self-confidence of ministries and organizations. A notable piece of work here was Zürcher’s (2017, 506) systematic review finding: ‘the evidence for a violence-dampening effect of aid in conflict zones is not strong’. More than that: ‘On the aggregate, aid in conflict zones is more likely to exacerbate violence than to dampen violence’ (ibid. 508; also Zurcher, 2022). It has not helped that so much aid in contexts like Liberia, Afghanistan, and Haiti has been channelled – as Haque et al (2023, 8), put it for Afghanistan, with ‘careless largesse’ - outside national budgets, creating cumbersome parallel bureaucracies and multiple, often conflicting agendas.<sup>16</sup> De Soto and Del Castillo in 2016, reviewing the ‘obstacles to peacebuilding’ that they had discussed particularly with regard to El Salvador in 1994, wrote of the ‘bleak record’ of 25 years of UN peacebuilding (1994; 2016). There is even an argument to be made that experiences claimed as big success stories – Mozambique, for example - have not exactly been paragons of inclusive, democratic development and peace (Pitcher, 2020; Vines, 2021; Ntaka, 2023).

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<sup>14</sup> Perry Anderson, for example, called neo-liberalism ‘the most successful ideology in world history’ (2005).

<sup>15</sup> The former politician and former governor of an Iraqi province, Rory Stewart, referred to the passing of an ‘age of intervention’, effectively with respect to Western interventions in pursuit of liberal goals and not acknowledging ongoing other forms of intervention, including by non-Western powers.

<sup>16</sup> See for example de Soto and del Castillo (2016).

And then there is the plain fact that the incidence of conflict has risen – unravelling those over-confident predictions from as late as the early 2000s. As *The Economist* put it, the number of people forced to flee their homes has doubled in the past decade, as has the number of people needing emergency aid.<sup>17</sup> And, as for example in Tigray, most people die in these wars from hunger and disease, even when the casualties from direct violence are high. Conflicts have also on average been getting longer: ‘pain, prolonged’ as *The Economist* captions its chart on this, drawing on International Rescue Committee (IRC) data. And as Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) data show, so-called civil or internal conflicts have become increasingly internationalised (Davies et al, 2023). Obermeier (2023) notes that 2022 was the ‘deadliest year’ (p.1) for state-based conflicts in Africa in the post-1989 period, with battle deaths surging especially in Tigray; but also that there were, again in Africa, more non-state conflicts than state-based conflicts. Indeed, globally 2022 was the deadliest since the Rwandan genocide in 1994, driven by fatalities in Ethiopia and in the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Davies et al, 2023).

The overarching phenomenon is the changing geopolitical predicament. Dan Smith, again, suggested in our interview that there are far fewer intellectual and policy silos now but that the effectiveness of everything that had been built up, a peacebuilding architecture, has been undermined by a changed context. As Colin Ashley Bruce (interview, 2023) put it, there is a ‘fraying multilateralism’, weaker adherence to norms, and a rising disregard for international treaties. There is a growing ‘tolerance for violence’ globally, with, one person put it, ‘inertia in the African Union’ and a ‘jaded’ UN. Another spoke of increasing transgressions of norms in a more permissive global context – violations of sovereignty, ‘rape and pillage’, and a sort of global bystanding. Most interviewees emphasised in one way or another that the changed global political context has among other things undermined institutional learning from evaluations. Yet even in an apparently more unipolar era, the political imperatives of a major shareholder could dramatically undermine the effectiveness of World Bank support for Afghanistan (Haque et al, 2023), though this was only one reason for failures in Afghanistan.

Several interviewees returned repeatedly to Afghanistan: some argued that, as one UK government employee put it, ‘it is disgraceful that there has been no public inquiry into Afghanistan’. There may be a ‘common reading that the era of massive intervention is over and that most of the challenges faced in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 are irrelevant for the future’ (Blohm et al, 2024, 29). But as Blohm et al argue, ‘some government will find itself embroiled again in some kind of complex state-building or counter-insurgency project’ (ibid.). Another interviewee emphasised that Afghanistan had been an important part of the story because of the way that counter-insurgency became the predominant focus. And another stressed the significance of the militarisation of aid in Afghanistan as especially problematic: the way that the weaponization of aid programmes undermined coherence and allowed for ill-advised patronage spending. This same person pointed out that militarisation also – as before in Vietnam – favoured the creation of metrics that were then manipulated to show success. This phenomenon was perhaps best captured by a US officer, recorded in one of the SIGAR ‘lessons learned’ project interviews eventually released to the *Washington Post*,

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Why are civil wars lasting longer?’, *The Economist* (international print edition), April 2023.



who talked about the (COIN) policy-driven collection of suitable evidence through surveys as meaning that ‘we became a self-licking ice cream’.<sup>18</sup> That is perhaps only a weaponised version of the broader tendency observed by Norma Kriger (2003) towards an evaluative framework in the peacebuilding literature, in which the criteria for evaluation are typically subjective, external, and arbitrary. A British official more specifically pointed to Helmand as the graveyard of the UK’s confidence in liberal peacebuilding: he argued that before, there had been overblown ends or ideals (see also Suhrke, 2011), mismatched as they were with the level of resources, but that the Helmand experience led to a fading confidence in both the ends and the means. Haque et al (2023) emphasise three interacting factors in the World Bank’s work in Afghanistan: the contradictions between objectives and internal career incentives in the Bank, the overwhelming of the Bank’s work by the logic and force of US political and military aims, and the lack of any evidence-based ‘theory of change’ for how to build a state.

But any loss of confidence, clarity, and purpose in especially Western intervention circles is not all an effect of the messy withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover. One World Bank interviewee said that there was a momentary appetite for soul searching in the wake of the Taliban takeover, but that Ukraine undid any such prospect. On the other hand, a British official suggested that the failure had already set in and in fact Ukraine came along as the ‘knight in shining armour’, reviving enthusiasm for intervention.<sup>19</sup>

Major global rivalries have taken over, undermining the coherence of the UN, while in a number of individual countries more immediate interests appear to have taken over from a broader commitment to global engagement or ‘norm entrepreneurship’. And there has been a loss of confidence – not all interviewees would agree but some clearly do – not only in peacebuilding and conflict prevention but also in big D Development and indeed a crisis of neo-liberalism.<sup>20</sup> It is particularly easy to see that institutionally within the UK, where DfID was merged with, or subsumed into, the Foreign Office to create the FCDO. Some interviewees argued that this led to a loss of technical knowledge, a fading interest in evidence, and a downgrading of development. But even before the merger, one of them argued, politics got in the way and meant that DfID ignored even research it had commissioned itself on conflict prevention. One person went further, saying that if you

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>

<sup>19</sup> And before we declare the end of liberal peacebuilding or neo-liberal development too hastily, it’s worth noting the extraordinary push for radical market reforms *during* the war in Ukraine on the part of a coterie of economists (Becker et al, 2022; for a critique see also Tooze, 2022). The spectre of neo-liberal radicalism hovers in other domains too: one interviewee spoke of how it is good that the World Bank takes non-state organizations in conflict dynamics more seriously than it used to but that this risks playing into the hands of the market radicals with their emphasis on service-delivery-without-the-state and cash transfers as an unsustainable substitute for state formation and structural change.

<sup>20</sup> Benedicte Bull made a presentation to a Norwegian Research Council Global Development and International Relations portfolio board symposium, in 2021, on the ‘crisis of the narrative of development’ that captured this well; she argued that this crisis had its sources in three crises – climate change, rising inequality, and the loss of natural resources and biodiversity. If there is such a crisis, it is not the first time there has been one (see Duffield, 1994).

shift the concentration on conflicts from development ministries to foreign ministries it creates a problem because ‘foreign ministries don’t think’.

One reason this matters is because DfID exercised a certain ‘thought leadership’ internationally. Several interviewees rued the fading of this role for DfID, and far from exclusively the UK-based respondents. Even people at the World Bank, who also acknowledged that the Bank is certainly not a thought leader in this field now, regretted the loss of DfID’s intellectual energy and influence. As one World Bank official put it: ‘No-one has taken DfID’s place’.

If global politics, combined with mounting evidence of failed interventions, have together taken the wind out of the sails of governments and international organizations, arguably another trend that has weakened their – and not only their – ability to develop their understanding and the effectiveness of their engagements is rising risk aversion, or the securitisation of foreign intervention and of knowledge production. Duffield (2010) argued that Western governments were undermining understanding by imposing ever tougher restrictions on staff and on researchers, consigning people to safe, barbed wire compounds. Indeed, Duffield argues that the politicisation of aid fuels this ‘bunkering’ of aid and intervention, which in turn is symptomatic of a ‘deepening crisis within the development-security nexus’ (p.453). This is a trend that interview respondents confirmed. Nigel Roberts in interview argued that the institutional rules around risk and protection meant that World Bank staff engaged with populations where they were located far less than before and that the Bank had become ‘excessively cautious’. He also argued that they were deprived of responsibility for judging risk. In one of his examples, before 9/11 the country director and their local team would make decisions about engagements in the Occupied Territories; but when he went back there in 2009, decisions were in the hands of a corporate security officer and, while objectively conditions were safer, ‘you could barely move’. He had similar experiences, constraining his ability to visit and work with local ministries, for example, and restricting staff to their compound offices, in Somalia and Afghanistan.

Bohm et al (2024, 16), in their review of reviews of intervention in Afghanistan, highlight the gulf between progress in research and the personal understanding of the country among international staff, again largely thanks to being ‘bunkerized’.<sup>21</sup> Arguably, though, the problem begins before people land in the ‘bubble’. Autesserre (2014) shows how a transnational bubble – an imagined community of its own, that she dubs ‘Peaceland’ – takes shape through everyday practices and how this then shapes and constraints interventions: the ‘practices, habits, and narratives’ within Peaceland are counterproductive. ‘Since interveners usually value technical proficiency over country-specific expertise, the vast majority arrive with little to no understanding of their locale of deployment’ (ibid, 12). Their modes of operation then reproduce ‘firm boundaries’ between them and local counterparts, and local stakeholders ‘rarely feel included in the design’ of interventions.

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<sup>21</sup> See also Schomerus (2023, 9): ‘the current system of international engagement and monitoring its effect is so far removed from the contexts in which it engages that it has no way of understanding what consequences the engagement has’.

The harshest commentary on this point came from Mukesh Kapila, who argued, with respect to humanitarian organizations, that ‘we have become more cowardly’, and that many humanitarian organizations want ‘kudos without risk’. Worse, he argued that the distance created by this risk aversion feeds a culture of impunity that is another feature of war that has become less restrained, more like total war (another corollary of the changing world order and decline of the liberal peace). And yet there is of course evidence that it has become more dangerous to be a humanitarian worker on the frontline, so that humanitarian workers are being caught up in what have, some suggest, become new forms of total war, with little distinction between combatants and non-combatants and wars fought through military campaigns and skirmishes, starvation tactics, infrastructural attacks, and social media.

## **The liberal peace is dead – long live something or other**

From one perspective, emphasising failures, the loss of confidence is both clear and perhaps a good thing. It means recognising that we are not dealing with the better angels of our nature so much as Walter Benjamin’s angel of history: an angel blown forwards through time, by a wind we call progress, but looking backwards at the accumulation of calamity upon disaster upon violent failure. Perhaps that is too much the mirror opposite of Pinker’s (2012) ahistorical, Whiggish history and if we have to have invoke angels, we might be better served by a Dürer-like angel of melancholy.<sup>22</sup> For there certainly have been developments both within organizations and in scholarship. Clearly, the narrative arc I have drawn is over-simplified. And it is possible that there is what – in the development economics field in the aftermath of the fading hegemony of the Washington Consensus – Ilene Grabel (2017, 6), invoking Albert Hirschman, calls a period of ‘productive incoherence’, a phase of some disorder in which pragmatism and experiment in ideas and practice may emerge more freely. As interviewees like Colin Ashley Bruce suggested, it is ‘expedient to accommodate a variety of views’ and, as noted above, there are still ‘liberal’ initiatives expressed in newer, less grandiose ways. But other interviewees feared there were too many constraints to allow for productive routes out of incoherence.

Pretty much all my interviewees felt that there had been a sustained improvement in the sophistication and subtlety of knowledge within the field, including within government departments and international organizations. They spoke of a greater awareness of political economy, a deeper understanding of the complexity of actors, a reach for richer models of analysis in applying conflict sensitivity to project planning and evaluation, an awareness in the World Bank, for example, that the economic tools were not only inadequate but could be part of the problem in some contexts. One reading of work in the World Bank, for example, is that its understanding of conflict, and of the linkages between conflict and development, has come a very long way from that early taxonomy of ethnic/religious versus ideology/other conflicts, or from the somewhat infamous *Breaking the Conflict Trap* report of 2003 (Collier, 2003).<sup>23</sup> The *2011 World Development Report* (World Bank, 2011) was one significant break with that earlier contribution and

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<sup>22</sup> A useful antidote to Pinker is Dwyer and Micale (eds) (2021).

<sup>23</sup> Note also Acemoglu’s scathing critique of the Bank’s research on civil war, a contribution to Banerjee et al (2006).

under Nigel Roberts' stewardship, but within what are the impossibly difficult constraints of the production of WDRs, it made a genuine effort to think in multi-disciplinary ways, to engage with different types of evidence, and to try to learn from at least some of the critiques of mainstream approaches. The Bank increasingly understood, too, that violent conflict could not be pinned wholly on extreme poverty and the lack of development, recognising that the majority of conflicts, certainly around the mid-2010s, were taking place not in the least developed but in middle income countries (World Bank, 2016). And then there was the joint WB/UN *Pathways to Peace* report (World Bank, 2018), of which not all interviewees were fans at all, but they acknowledged it did try to reflect a greater interest in a fuller range of conflict actors.

Perhaps more significant than these flagship reports in recent years, though, has been the evolution of the Bank's Risk and Resilience Assessment (RRA) tool, or analytical framework, applied in particular to countries on the Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations (FCS) list. RRAs reflect a conscious effort to absorb learning and in a way are the Bank's institutionalisation of both conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity. People involved with RRAs see them as grappling with complexity (see below) and then translating that for operations departments. They are unusual within the Bank in being far more open to being led by qualitative research. But there is a sense that there are ongoing tensions around them: that some of their proponents are interested in working with qualitative models, systems thinking, and non-linear understandings of complexity, but that the overarching commitment at the Bank remains to linear modelling, 'technical' approaches, and quantitative analysis. It seems that the true work of gelling together different disciplinary approaches has some way to go. And as one person put it, there ought to be greater interest in developing models and approaches of 'adaptive management'.<sup>24</sup> And of course the Bank's FCS list is itself a questionable classification system.<sup>25</sup> There is also a sense that 'operations is king' at the Bank, so that however interesting the RRA approach may be, ultimately the decision falls to those who implement programming whether to actually use this analysis or not. Meanwhile, others emphasised that the Bank remains too focused in its programming not so much on quantitative methods but on quantity itself: on the numbers of jobs created, for example, rather than on their quality, or on service delivery totals rather than on the quality of services provided (see Haque et al, 2023). Again, this may well come back to the inertia of institutional incentives within the Bank (and of course within other organizations).

Some of these developments reflect the growing calls, from the early 2000s especially, for a 'local turn' in peacebuilding. Such calls were able to draw on much older traditions, for example within development studies, going back at least to the 1960s. The local turn in peacebuilding had both an analytical/theoretical dimension – the need to focus more on local perspectives on peace and to allow local voices to be heard – and a practical dimension in calls to redesign peacebuilding interventions to incorporate such voices and perspectives in planning, institutional design, and resource allocation. The local turn has had different strands; in fact, it reflects a sometimes-uncomfortable coalition of

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<sup>24</sup> This may reflect ideas including those on adaptive or experimental governance in De Búrca et al (2014).

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/harmonized-list-of-fragile-situations>

ideological standpoints. It has also been through different phases, with, for example, Paffenholz et al (2023) suggesting that there is currently a third wave of the local turn.

As Ejodus (2021, 41) argues, for all the differences within the local turn itself and the difficulties it has faced, ‘the common ground of this theoretical and policy shift has been an increased analytical and normative value attached to local actors, processes and culture in both understanding, narrating and practicing [sic] international peacebuilding’. It has been observed that the local turn got little material traction among international organizations, so that attention then shifted more to the ‘hybrid’ dynamics and outcomes involving the encounter between external intervenors and local actors. There has also been critique of the proponents of and literature on the local turn, including the argument that too often it involves projecting an inappropriate homogeneity onto ‘the local’ and that it can reflect a romanticization of the local. Critiques have challenged ‘the analytical value of the local turn, its normative underpinnings and its practical effects’ (ibid., 41). Meanwhile, Day (2022) argues that there is an almost meaningless binary distinction between ‘the local’ and ‘the external’ and that the reality is a complex interaction between them in which neither category is formed or reproduced independently of the other. Some, meanwhile, have argued that when external interventions are designed with a local turn in mind, if they are at all, then that simply reproduces problematic colonial tropes of indirect rule (Ejodus, 2021, 50). In that context, ongoing debates about and within the ‘local turn’ have more lately led to arguments that seek to liberate the core ideas from an ameliorist stance of rescuing the liberal peace by minor tweaks and instead to encourage a deeper decolonization of peacebuilding analysis and design (Randazzo, 2021).

## **Stating the bleeding obvious – the last big idea**

I asked interviewees about changes in thinking and evidence, about shifts in big ideas. If there was one idea that most of them cited and that seems to have played a leading role in such organizations in recent years it was thinking about ‘political settlements’ (Di John and Putzel, 2009; Khan, 2018; Kelsall et al, 2022). For some interviewees this more or less stood for political economy. Indeed, it does seem that it is nowadays almost impossible not to say one is ‘doing political economy analysis’, as reflected in various frameworks designed to identify ‘drivers of change’, etc. And if political settlements analysis is one way of channelling political economy it is perhaps related – a point I’m indebted to Jonathan Goodhand for – to the fading confidence in liberal peacebuilding to the extent that elite bargain and political settlement thinking confronts the dimension of *power* missing from most liberal intervention models and indeed most mainstream development thinking.

It is certainly an idea that rose to prominence probably in the 2010s. It surely represents one of the main sets of ideas that has been influential both in the development field and in work on violent conflicts; and it is interesting to see how it has become mainstreamed, for example recently in the contribution of an economist with long DfID experience, Stefan Dercon (2022), in his book *Gambling on Development*, which deals in political settlements and elite bargains. Political Settlement work has offered a useful way for development organizations and aid ministries to engage with ‘the political’, or to ‘work

with the grain'. Arguably, it is sufficiently open and flexible to make it more appealing than the contortions of failed states indices. It has clearly influenced World Bank RRAs and it obviously played a big role in DfID thinking, carrying over to some extent into the FCDO era. But it is also striking that some of these interviewees discussed it mainly in terms of its not having been superseded by any major intellectual advances. As one person put it: political settlements is stating the obvious, but its usefulness is that sometimes the bleeding obvious needs stating.

Perhaps it is a little peculiar that few other intellectual innovations, research methods, or big ideas came up in these interviews, given that there have arguably been quite important changes both in conflicts themselves and in knowledge production – changes that some interviewees in particular were interested in discussing. 'Ideas are stuck' claimed one senior scholar with high level UN experience. Nonetheless, there are two or three main and related issues that I would want to highlight here, things that did come up in the interviews and that have a wider resonance too: technological change, climate change, and complexity. It is not that the individuals I spoke to were unaware of these things, but that ideas at best take their time to filter into practical applications in a context of complicated organizations often beset by inertia and conflicting interests internally, and especially when the overarching political context of organizations is less than encouraging.<sup>26</sup>

## **Imagined communities of conflict – technologies, globalization, and shifting conflict**

Technological change has always been at the heart of shifts in the way wars are fought and how violence helps shape societies. It has also always been at the heart of how knowledge is generated and disseminated. The invasion of Ukraine distracts attention from the extent to which conflict nowadays has taken a particular technological turn, according to some pioneered by Russia but clearly not exclusively Russia's preserve. And technical change, particularly in information technology, has contributed a new twist to the endless tension between the urge to classify – from the World Bank early taxonomy of civil wars (ethnic/religious, etc.) through battles over the coding rules for a civil war (Sambanis, 2002; Cramer, 2006), and the contortions of 'fragility', to the thresholds for inclusion on the World Bank's FCV list – and the need to acknowledge fluidity, to rub away at neat distinctions. Interviewed for the feature 'Lunch with the FT', the then outgoing head of the UK's MI6 intelligence agency, Alex Younger, sounded almost like Hardt and Negri (2000) when arguing that: 'There was a difference, call it prosaic, between peace and war; there was a difference between domestic and international; there was a difference between cyber and real, largely because cyber didn't exist. That's all blurred now and we've got hybrid and ambiguity and conflict across the spectrum'.<sup>27</sup> Pomerantsev (2020) similarly argues that 'the Russian approach

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in other work involving conversations with senior civil servants and defence officials in the UK I have found considerable interest in these ideas and their potential application. 'Complexity' is in some ways related to 'systems thinking', which itself is discussed and encouraged within the British civil service, though to what ultimate effect may be left for other discussions.

<sup>27</sup> Financial Times, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020: <https://www.ft.com/content/c544d058-6dad-4549-8319-470975281d0a>.

smudges the difference between war and peace, resulting in a state of permanent conflict that is neither fully on nor fully off. In this conflict information campaigns play a remarkably important role.’<sup>28</sup> And a staff member of the Latvian Military Academy suggested that in Russian ‘next generation warfare’, there is a shift from direct annihilation of the enemy to its inner decay; from war with conventional forces to irregular groupings; from direct clash to contactless war; from the physical environment to human consciousness (ibid).

Arguably, something of this new way of war has been evident in recent conflicts like the war in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia, where, as in Myanmar, social media at the very least greatly amplified tensions and played a role in mobilising recruits, funding, and ideological support for war.<sup>29</sup> One or two interviewees spoke interestingly about this. ‘Conflicts are messier’, suggested one, and ‘it is getting more difficult to explain why armed groups form and splinter’: this she linked to globalisation and the flow of finance, goods, and ideas. Social media works in this context as a new kind of transmission mechanism for awareness of relative deprivation, connects diasporas intimately to conflicts, and we agreed that this helped form ‘imagined communities of conflict’, to adapt Benedict Anderson’s (1983) phrase.

There is a way in which both drones and social media and related information technology work in similar ways to shape violent conflict and to shape knowledge production and the way we think we know things about conflicts. Arguably, and this is something that particularly came up in conversation with Mukesh Kapila, there is a simultaneous distancing and closeness through the combination of technology and the institutionalisation of risk aversion. The drones that made such a difference to the war in Tigray allow for close-up precision, an intimate visualised targeting, but from the sort of remote, playstation distance that military strategists have often argued helps raise the ‘kill rate’ (Grossman, 1996). Social media foments an immediacy of emotional engagement in conflicts that can overcome great physical distances from the actual battlegrounds. Meanwhile, if researchers and humanitarian agency staff are constrained by risk aversion and insurance rules, they too can often imagine they nonetheless have ever closer eyes on a war. There is a risk this double movement of proximity-with-distance makes it more difficult for organizations and governments to acknowledge when they are themselves part of the problem rather than the helpful outsiders they can like to think themselves. At the same time, Funmi Olofinwa argued (interview, 2023) that the greater possibility of proximity to means people just ‘see’ the failures of governance (national and global) better and it then accelerates mistrust of political leaders who ‘say this, but do that’.

One of the most remarkable instances of this nearness-in-distance is the work of organizations like Bellingcat, who can triangulate satellite imagery with posted mobile phone video footage to verify with shocking emotional effect exactly when, where, and

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Pomerantsev (2020) [Kindle Edition], location 1519.

<sup>29</sup> See Amnesty International (2022; 2023): <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA16/5933/2022/en/> and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/meta-failure-contributed-to-abuses-against-tigray-ethiopia/>

how an atrocity has taken place.<sup>30</sup> That technology also helps overcome historical distance, allowing for new forms of historical research and perhaps even new experiences of time. An example is Forensic Architecture's work with satellite imagery that uncovers a sustained 'environmental racism' in an 'incident' dated 1718-ongoing, in which a corridor of highly polluting petrochemical industries overlays the sites of hundreds of former sugar plantations along the banks of the Mississippi River, generating remarkably high rates of environmentally provoked illness and death among a majority-Black population living nearby, in areas where their slave forebears died in huge numbers on the plantations.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond drones and social media, attention is turning to AI and its possible implications for societies, for development, and for violent conflict and the exercise and contestation of power, as well as for knowledge production. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this properly, but it is notable that pioneers of AI, not least its supposed godfather (an unwittingly ironic moniker in the context of power and violence), Geoff Hinton, have been increasingly vocal about their fears for the implications of rapid advances in AI. Academics, development agencies, peacebuilders, and humanitarians are also starting to catch on; AI, machine learning, and web scraping are increasingly being taken up – as a new form of proximity-with-distance – to do research and to feed into new early warning systems and conflict prevention instruments (Perry, 2013; Obukhov and Brovelli, 2023). One contribution was the ICRC's paper on a 'human centred approach' to AI and machine learning in armed conflict (ICRC 2019). Engelke et al (2023) list technological revolutions (AI and machine learning, IT, automation, remote sensing, and biotech advances) among the major trends shaping the context and scope for conflict prevention, highlighting the ways in which they may intensify and scale up conflict but also the potential within them for new conflict prevention instruments.

## **Confronting the McChrystal Paradox: from 'complex emergencies' to complexity theory**

Technological change can make conflict, conflict management, and research more complicated. But it may also increase the *complexity* of these things, which is different. Complexity emphasises not just the *number* of operations that need doing or factors that need taking account of but also their *interactions*, their non-linear dynamics, and the higher level of uncertainty involved in complex phenomena. There has been, as Colin Ashley Bruce put it, a 'compounding of crises' interacting with one another. Complexity makes models that deal in traditional linear model risk assessment less useful. It may also be one reason why, thus far, machine learning and web scraping conflict prediction exercises tend to generate a high proportion of 'false positives' (Perry, 2013; Kuzma et al, 2020).

Arguably, conflicts are nowadays highly complex – though how much more so than in the past will probably be a subject of debate. The point here is simply to suggest that there

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<sup>30</sup> For example: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2021/04/01/mahbere-dego-clues-to-a-cliff-top-massacre-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/environmental-racism-in-death-alley-louisiana>



has not yet been a great deal of research on complexity in conflict and/or development.<sup>32</sup> Agencies increasingly emphasising ‘resilience’ may be making a small shift in this direction, but it is, some argue, a very limited one. Scholars like De Coning (2016) and Day (2022) have, however, begun to open up this field in ways that may provoke more work in coming years. Day’s work (specifically on UN peacebuilding in DRC and South Sudan), for example, has implications for analytical frameworks, for research methodologies, and for policies and programmes. Complexity also invokes some of the early (late Cold War, early post-Cold War) advances in the broad field of conflict and development (and humanitarianism), the work on ‘complex emergencies’. It is not that the field is coming full circle, because there are differences between the work on complex emergencies (which stressed ‘multi-causal’ emergencies rather than mono-causal understanding and which were often seen as troubling some of the assumptions of developmentalism) (Duffield, 1994; Keen, 2008; Macrae et al, 1994). It is true, however, that some of the insights of work on complex emergencies, chiefly evolving in African contexts, has over time faded from view though it generated enduring insights and was foundational for much of the field reviewed here.

I noted above one economist’s pretensions to ‘hard science’ and quest for probabilistic certainties. Social scientists have long fretted over their relationship to natural sciences and when we think of complexity, one obvious reference point is quantum physics, which in at least one strand is very much a *relational* way of thinking.<sup>33</sup> Carlo Rovelli (2022, 119), who from this perspective argues that individual objects *are* the way they interact, rephrases a comment of Niels Bohr’s: ‘The unambiguous description of any phenomenon requires the inclusion of all the objects involved in the interaction in which the phenomenon manifests itself’. Rovelli and others call this contextuality, and arguably true contextuality in our field is undermined by institutional distance, despite the promises of satellite and drone close-ups. Note the deep contrast between advocating this kind of contextualised relationality and the fundamental neglect of context specificity identified by Jahn (2007, see above) in the enduring ideology of post-Cold War liberal interventions. This idea of contextuality may provide some of the engineering of a bridge between quantitative work on conflict and development linkages, network analysis, and the kind of deep contextual understanding missing from so much policy and so much social science but exemplified in scholarship like that of Astri Suhrke (2007, 2011, 2013). Such a bridge may be related to Kalyvas’s (2020, 6) encouragement of civil war scholars to ‘move up and down the ladder of abstraction’.

An analytical approach that is confidently relational, contextual, and complex might usefully disturb many common cause and effect models, the architecture of early warning systems, and ‘best practice’ policy guides. But the difficulty with engaging with the complex, even merely the complicated, is what we might call the McChrystal Paradox: the fact that when people try to demonstrate complexity it can become too baffling for those charged with actually doing something. How to make policy-relevant sense out of

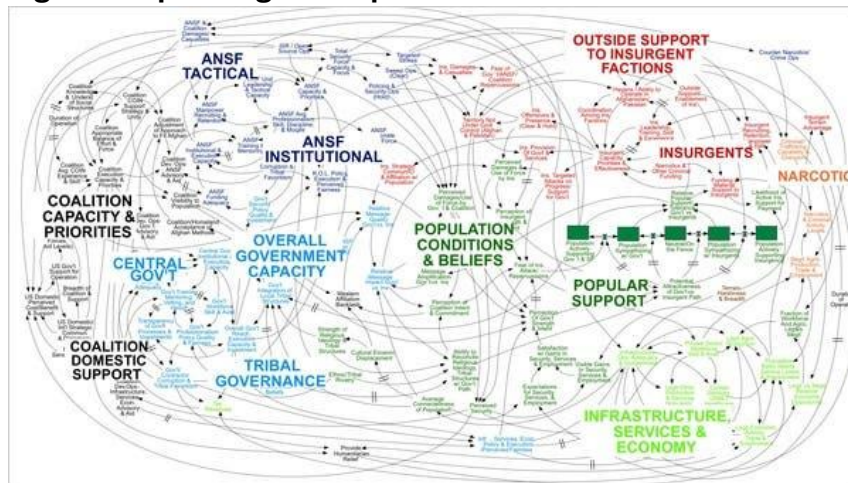
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<sup>32</sup> This is despite work on ‘economic complexity’ (Hidalgo and Hausmann, 2009) (which arguably is often trying to capture the complicated more than the complex).

<sup>33</sup> Both historical materialism and critical realist philosophy of science are also largely relational, by contrast, for example, with the methodological individualism of neo-classical economics.

complexity without falling into ‘hypnotising chickens’ syndrome is the challenge (Fig.9) (Bumiller, 2010).

**Figure 9: Speaking Powerpoint to Generals<sup>34</sup>**



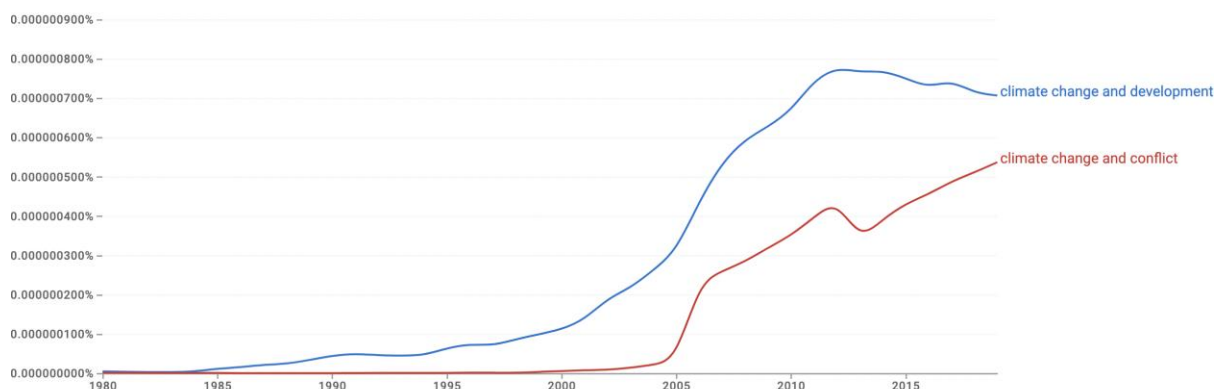
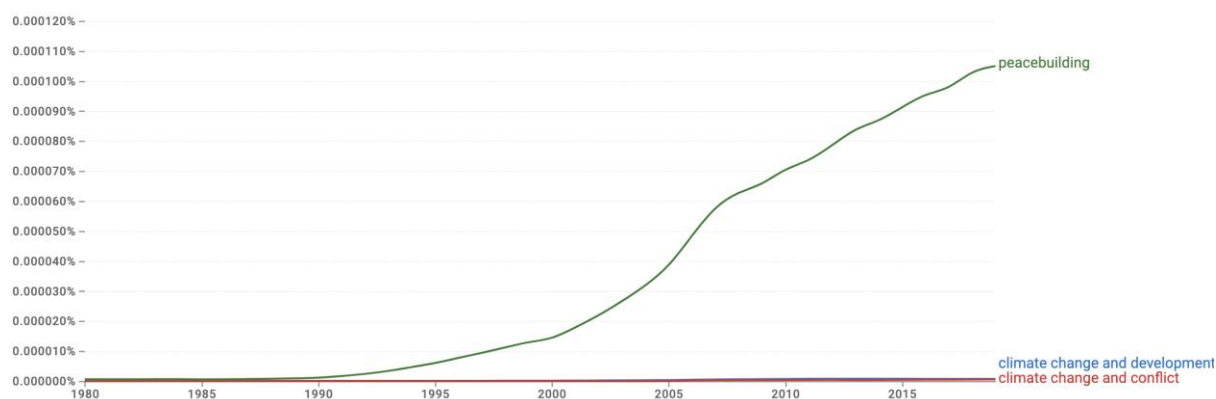
Source: New York Times, ‘We have met the enemy and he is powerpoint’, New York Times, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

## Where is climate change?

Finally, if uncertainty is a one major feature of complexity thinking, and if it is something different camps of economists have argued over for a long time, how we build uncertainty into our analytical frameworks in this field of conflict and development has to contend with acknowledging climate change. It was fairly remarkable how little my interviews discussed climate change in their organizations, though Dan Smith at SIPRI was a notable example and he has been arguing for more attention to ecological insecurity as well as showing how social scientists interested in conflict and development can draw on complexity thinking.<sup>35</sup> More widely, Google N-grams suggest that there has, predictably enough, been a rise in writing on the linkages between climate change and development, and conflict, since the early 2000s (Fig. 10a). But to put that in perspective, given the magnitude of the issue, it is striking to compare that with the incidence of discussion of peacebuilding (Fig. 10b).

<sup>34</sup> ‘When we understand that slide we’ll have won the war’, General McChrystal is reputed to have said when presented with this slide on the complexity of conflict in Afghanistan: ‘We have met the enemy and he is Powerpoint’, *New York Times*, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> And the relative lack of discussion of climate change may also have been a function of time constraints in the interviews.

**Figure 10a: growing interest in climate change/conflict/development...****Figure 10b: ...up to a point**

At one level, of course, there is an interesting narrative arc just around the question of the causal links between environments, climate change, and violent conflict. It was a concern some time ago, but arguably it was compromised by over-simplified storytelling and the lack of evidence. The discourse on this then faded away somewhat. But it has rightly roared back. Gleditsch (2021) has summarised this well, arguing that there is a change in that the stakes of the debate (pitting varieties of Malthusianism against a succession of environment, climate, and technological optimists) are higher because the global impact and severity of current climate change is so profound, but that, interestingly for the theme of changes in our field, the structure of the debate has remained unchanged.

One potentially significant feature of the way scholars and practitioners in the fields of development and of violent conflict and peacebuilding develop their work is the way that climate change intensifies and changes the character of uncertainty. High levels of empirical uncertainty already mean that the debate Gleditsch summarises is unlikely to be resolved. But there is more. Economists at the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) in Berne argue that climate change introduces the possibility of ‘green swan events’ that are quantitatively and qualitatively different from the well-known ‘black swan’ events of financial and other markets. Green swan events differ in that their effects are existential: it isn’t necessarily a matter of Keynesian uncertainty about a stormy sea becoming

becalmed in the long run (Bolton et al, 2020). They also differ in other ways, including that we have little notion of how they will trigger interactions among phenomena that unleash further unpredictable dynamics. And their argument is that if central bankers want to protect their often somewhat narrow mandate, then they need to go beyond that mandate and get involved urgently in debates and research on climate change. They are pushing policy officials in central banks, in other words, to lead the charge in overcoming what the former governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney (2015), called ‘the tragedy of the horizon’, in which the logic of political and investment cycles restricts vision to a short-term horizon without seeing how that short- and medium-term might be exploded by events till recently anyway seen as over that horizon. It seems reasonable to think that organizations like the World Bank, research funding agencies, and academics may need to make similar adjustments.

## Conclusion

Analytically, there is an argument that scholars and policy officials should listen, again, to the physicist Carlo Rovelli (2022, 130), who argues: ‘one of the greatest mistakes made by human beings is to want certainties when trying to understand something. The search for knowledge is not nourished by certainty: it is nourished by a radical absence of certainty’. Doubt and uncertainty may have blossomed in the context of a retreat among officials in governments and international organizations from over-confidence in the powers of Western intervention, but they have not necessarily blossomed productively yet. There may be less ambition, more humility, but as Blohm et al (2024, 33) conclude: ‘this humility need not lead to a retreat from...complexity, but to a more analytical, reflective, and adaptive approach to fragile environments’.

To bring this back to the start, it might be interesting to ask how the world has changed for that young girl who drew a picture on the outside of a hut in a settlement of forcibly displaced Mozambicans in what was then the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) in South Africa, and whether we have better ways of understanding and responding to the forces shaping the lives of people like her. Has there been a ‘payoff’ (Kalyvas, 2020) to the tremendous improvements in research on violence - and conflict and development?<sup>36</sup> Clearly, there are no certainties in answering that. The forces shaping her life were definitely ‘multi-causal’, in the sense captured by the complex emergency literature. Her life and those of many others like her deserved the attention of what Boutros Boutros Ghali (1992) called ‘an integrated approach’. Perhaps one thing missing in making sense of such lives is a greater appreciation not just of multiple causes and integrating disciplines but of complexity, context, and uncertainty – including the historically important role of highly unpredictable, contingent dynamics as mattered in the killing of Chris Hani and its aftermath. Schomerus (2023) may argue that the very notion of causality reflects an overly sticky, Western mental imagery and that little has really changed. Reflecting on ten years of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), she also argues (ibid., 24) that ‘the experience of having survived a violent

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<sup>36</sup> Kalyvas writes of a ‘situation...in which I feel that even though we’ve improved our work on violence tremendously – we have a lot more data, we have more sophisticated tools, a lot of work is done now with geocoding, etcetera – it is not clear to me exactly what the payoff has been in terms of real understanding, real learning.’

conflict rarely seems to lead to stable livelihoods or improved perceptions of security once the conflict ends'. Arguably, however, there has been far more progress towards integrating perspectives and disciplines in much of the work in this field and agencies, departments, and organizations have at least moved more in this direction. The rising interest in complexity theory may encourage a 'dance between detail and structure, between science and history, between form and individualism' as Boulton et al (2015, 32) puts it. And many scholars, in the front row among them people like Astri Suhrke, have helped us appreciate the beat behind this dance.

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