

# Evidence hungry, theory light: Education and conflict, SDG16, and aspirations for peace and justice

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## Abstract

This paper explores two alternatives for supporting the idea that education is essential for building peace: 1) to prove this idea through empirical evidence; and 2) to substantiate it theoretically. It concludes that privileging evidence over theory can fail to specify how education must change in order to build peace and justice, allowing for the circulation of the idea that any and all education will necessarily build peace, which is currently unsupported either by empirical evidence or theoretical argument.

## Key Words

Education in emergencies

Evidence

Justice

SDGs

## Introduction

Since the early 1990s, there has been considerable work to draw attention to the urgency of educational need during and after conflict and to increase resources to education in conflict recovery. This stems from the conviction that education can and will contribute towards building peace. Efforts to build the case for education have often focused on finding evidence to support, even to demonstrate, this conviction. There were and remain efforts to find and synthesise existing research that might provide evidence to support the ways in which education can prevent conflict and build peace as indicated in the renewed interest in a Strategic Research Agenda to guide the education in emergencies community (e.g. Mendenhall, 2019). However, there is a considerable body of social theory that raises questions about this conviction. The sociological cannon – Marx, Gramsci, Bourdieu, Foucault, Du Bois, and others – all offer explanations of the ways in which education maintains and even deepens unequal power relations. If these theorists are right, generating evidence about the ways in which education might build peace could be an impossible task.

In this short paper, I want to explore the two alternatives for supporting such a conviction. The first is by gathering evidence to demonstrate its veracity and effectiveness. This is arguably the path that the Education in Emergencies (EiE) community has pursued, privileging studies and, where possible, randomised controlled trials. The other is by engaging with the theoretical ideas that can underpin such a conviction – those ideas that seek to illuminate how education might change from something that is unjust and perpetuates injustice to something that isn't and doesn't. The implications of these ideas suggest changes that

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education might require in order to build peace. To outline these two alternatives, I first look at a key piece of statistical evidence that is currently profiled by the Global Partnership for Education in their work to direct more resources towards education in conflict. This striking statistic raises a number of questions, including around the nature of education that EiE actors should promote and the goals for promoting that form of education. Then, I turn to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda and the theoretical ideas about peace and justice that are and are not present there, exploring the pathways that these open and close for education to contribute towards peace. The paper argues that in absence of theoretically informed pathways for change, both EiE work and SDG goals can fail to specify how education must change in order to build peace and justice. This allows for circulation of the idea that any and all education will necessarily build peace, which is currently unsupported either by empirical evidence or theoretical argument (e.g. Harber, 2019).

### **Making a case for education: Demonstrating conviction with evidence**

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) (2018) recently announced on twitter that ‘each year of education reduces the risk of conflict by 20%.’ Following GPE’s tweet questions were immediately raised by researchers. So, five years of education means a 100% reduction of conflict, asked Robin Shields. Prachi Srivastava recalled one of the early insights in education and conflict research, that the content of education can just as easily foment conflict as it can prevent it, urging the recognition that not all and any education can prevent conflict. I asked, where does this figure come from? What is the evidence to support such a statement? When I investigated further, exploring the ‘Data and Results’ page of the GPE’s website where this claim is again stated, I found a single reference.

The reference was to a 1999 report written for the World Bank by the Oxford economist Paul Collier. The report builds on his earlier quantitative multi-country research into conflict and its causes, from which he and colleague Anke Hoeffler (1998, see also 2004) advance their controversial greed versus grievance thesis. In this work Collier and Hoeffler (1998; 2004) test economic (‘greed’) versus grievance (real or perceived inequalities, problems,

or injustices in a society that might unify a group in rebellion) motivations for conflict, using a series of proxy variables for each. Greed proxies include: the availability of primary commodities (proxy for ‘lootable resources’), the proportion of young men between the ages of 15-24 in a given society (since they are considered those most likely to join a rebel force) and years of schooling/ ‘endowment of education’ (which is used a proxy for the income earning opportunities of young men in order to try to understand the degree to which they have other opportunities aside from joining a rebellion). Proxy variables designed to represent grievances include the degree to which a society is fractionalised by religion and by ethnicity, measurements of income and asset (land only) inequality, regime type (as proxy for access to political rights), and the rate of economic growth in the last few years (as a proxy for government economic competence). With these variables as potential predictors of war, Collier and Hoeffler develop an empirical model, using data on the outbreak of conflict between 1965-1995, to test the explanatory power of greed and grievance variables for the outbreak of conflict. The dataset includes 24 civil wars for which the researchers have full data, which they use in a first model, and a further 16 for which minor estimations or assumptions can complete the data set, which they add to a second analysis.

As Collier (1999: 4) summarises, ‘the results overwhelmingly point to the importance of economic arguments as opposed to grievance’, the outbreak and maintenance of conflict is motivated more by economic incentives than by ‘group grievances beneath which inter-group hatreds lurk, often traced back through history’ (1999: 1). The youth and education related variables are important for arriving at these results, supporting the argument that opportunity costs matter – when young men have limited opportunities they will ‘greedily’ pick up arms as an opportunity for personal gain. Improve their educational opportunities (and the overall educational endowment of a society) and this greed motivation will decrease along with the opportunity costs of warfare. The 20% reduction in conflict with each additional year of education, highlighted by the GPE, comes from regression analysis using means across variables (or, in other words, playing with hypotheticals within the predictive model): ‘at the mean risk of civil war, a one year increase in education per head reduces the risk of civil war by 20%’ (Collier and Hoeffler, 1999: 12).

It is interesting that this hypothetical finding, nearly twenty years old still seems convincing enough to support the messaging of an influential organisation like the GPE. The greed versus grievance argument has been heavily disputed in economics, political science, and development studies (e.g. Ballentine and Sherman, 2003; Burdel, 2003; Murshed and Tadjoeeddin, 2008; Justino, 2009). Indeed, a general absence of educational opportunity for young people, or a situation in which inequalities in access and/or outcome disadvantage particular groups in society can itself be considered a grievance. Researchers exploring horizontal inequalities as drivers of conflict adopt this approach (e.g. Stewart, 2008; Østby, 2008). For example, Østby (2008) explores the effects of vertical inequality (inequalities between individuals) and horizontal inequality (inequalities between groups). In Østby's model, years in education is an indicator of horizontal social inequality and she finds this to be positively related to the outbreak of conflict, therefore finding support for the grievance hypothesis in contrast to Collier's work.

In addition to the leaps from hypothetical to actual and the academic argument around Collier's conclusions, the 1999 observation around increases in education and decreases in conflict is not supported by the actual global developments in education and rates of conflict over the last twenty years. Levels of education have increased substantially at a global level since the late nineties (e.g. UNESCO, 2015). This increase in education has not been accompanied by a reduction in armed conflict, which has been increasing in recent years. Rates of armed conflict did fall over the 1990s and 2000s. However, the escalation of several conflicts in the mid-2010s combined with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict meant that since 2014 there was both an increase in the number of armed conflicts around the world (the highest since 1999) and in the number of battle related deaths, with 2014 seeing the highest numbers in the post-1989 period (Petterson and Wallenstein, 2015).

The fact that Collier's work is still quoted is indicative of the appetite for statistical evidence about education and conflict in donor and international agencies. The statistic, and others like it, serve an important function for the EiE community – demonstrating the urgent need for education for those affected by conflict and emergency and also 'proving' that investment in education in such

contexts can make a positive difference. Research evidence such as Collier's has been crucial for building a confident, outward looking EiE community who have been successfully raising the profile of EiE on international agendas (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013). However, this case has largely been built on the power of numbers, the impact of statistics that can show both the scope of the problem and the degree to which education can help. The GPE's statement, and the wider donor case for EiE, is a largely atheoretical engagement both with the statistical evidence that drives it and with the debate around the production of that evidence. In this example, the theoretical assumptions that lead to education becoming a proxy variable matter. For Collier (1999), education is conceptualised at the level of individual opportunity cost and 'greed', whereas for Østby (2008) education is seen as an entitlement, around which inequalities may create or exacerbate cleavages amongst social groups. Policy makers attending to these findings while seeking to support education in conflict prevention and recovery are therefore faced not just with competing statistics but with different implications for the purposes of education – to enable individual opportunity versus to remedy inequality – and for the forms of education to be implemented – education that delivers optimal outcomes for individuals, particularly in terms of their earnings and assets, versus education that tries to level playing fields and provide an equality of opportunity and outcome.

### **SDG16 and aspiring for peace and justice: Using theories of justice to reach a conviction**

Alongside the EiE community's hunger for evidence, and the atheoretical engagement with it, is a wider, well-documented and growing production of indicators within international development, intensified since 2015 and the launch of the SDGs, with its expanded menu of targets (e.g. King, 2017; Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Peace and justice, which were never explicitly part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda, are included within the SDGs, in which SDG16 calls for peace, justice and strong institutions. However, the text and targets for SDG16 give little indication of how either peace or justice are conceptualised. For instance, the most definitive statement about what peace and justice are in the introductory text is that '...to build

more peaceful, inclusive societies, there needs to be more efficient and transparent regulations put in place and comprehensive, realistic government budgets' (UN, 2018: np). Regulations and budgets seem meagre against Galtung's (1969) conceptualisation of positive peace as the absence not just of physical forms of violence but also of structural and cultural violence. The current 'lead indicator' for measuring progress against the attainment of the SDG16 goal is 'the number of victims of intentional homicides per 100,000 population, by sex and age.' While intentional homicides are clearly part of violent, conflictive and unjust societies, their reduction alone is not equivalent to peace, justice or inclusion.

Peace, justice and inclusion are all richly theorised concepts, with competing theoretical approaches offering quite different visions for their fulfilment. What we can see implicitly in the SDG16 text are indicators (the lead and several that follow it) focused around measuring a negative peace (the absence of violence), rather than a positive one (the presence of the justice). The argument could be made that this is a problem of measurement, that the presence of justice, though clearly something we would have reason to value, is difficult to measure or even 'immeasurable' (Unterhalter, 2017; Biesta, 2011; King, 2017). As well as a problem of measurement, this is also or perhaps even more so, a problem of lack of engagement with theory. Justice is seen as immeasurable because the SDGs name it as an aspiration but don't engage in any substantive discussion about what it might be.

Justice has been thoroughly theorised and debated – doing so is arguably one of the principle preoccupations of social theory. The 10 SDG16 targets go some way to specifying how justice is envisioned within the SDG agenda – in addition to mobilising security and negative peace oriented reductions in violence, the targets seem to mobilise a Rawlsian concept of justice (as a social contract between individuals) as they seek to 'promote the rule of law' (target 16.3) and measure some aspects of legal and institutional mechanisms for due process, such as proportions of unsentenced detainees within prison populations, and compliance with Paris Principles around independent human rights organisations.

Targets and indicators also show evidence of conceptualisations more oriented towards social justice that prioritise representation and participation

of marginalised groups; for example in indicator 16.7.1 which measures 'proportions of positions (by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups) in public institutions' and target 16.8 to 'broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance'. Readers will be aware, however, that social justice theorists like Nancy Fraser (2003) do not detach representation and recognition from redistribution of resources and opportunities. Note that developing countries are expected to participate more, but not also to receive more, as redistributive justice would require. Nor are they afforded space to create and shape agendas as reparative and epistemic justice frameworks might enable. Reparative, or historical justice embodies principles of redress and repair for past wrongs, such as those of slavery and colonialism (e.g. Rudolph, Sriprakash and Gerrard, 2018), while epistemic justice would seek to restore the damages done by the exclusion of individuals and groups as knowers and of their knowledges as valid (e.g. Fricker, 2007) and by the dominance of western epistemologies (e.g. de Sousa Santos, 2014).

So, within SDG16 we can identify theories legalistic, retributive and social justice (with a particular focus on recognition and representation), but do not see conceptualisations of redistributive, reparative, or epistemic justice. Engagement with these theoretical ideas might enable the SDG16 agenda to move beyond its current aspirations, which seem confined to a negative peace.

### Opening possibilities for aspiring towards (and measuring) peace and justice

Returning to the idea of possible educational indicators for progress towards these forms of justice, it is not impossible to imagine measuring the redistribution of educational opportunities and outcomes (redistributive justice) by focusing on resource allocation to the most disadvantaged and on transforming inequalities in educational outcomes across advantaged and disadvantaged social groups (already the focus of some of the indicators for SDG4). Indicators of progress towards reparative, historical and epistemic justice in education might focus on recognition of past injustice in curriculum, and in opening possibilities for historically disadvantaged groups shape and create new

curricula. Other possibilities include explorations into the legacies of educational institutions in benefiting from and perpetuating inequalities, and reparations to individuals and groups for educational exclusions, along with others.

The point here, is that these multiple ways of theorising justice beyond the legalistic and retributive are not necessarily or inherently unmeasurable. Especially, if like Unterhalter (2017), we embrace the idea of measurement as an exercise of negative capability, an exercise that sits with and acknowledges uncertainty, while trying to make practical contributions towards capturing social realities. Seen in this light, measurement is not an end in and of itself but a way of capturing collective aspirations and attempts to move towards achieving them. It is imperfect but worth attempting for the beauty of the goal rather than the precision of the indicator. If we can mobilise the resources to track the number of people and businesses who paid or were asked to pay a bribe (as SDG indicators 16.5.1 and 16.5.2 require), it is not impossible to imagine or operationalise an indicator that tracks the

degree to which a curriculum affords opportunities for epistemic justice or the proportion of educational resources dedicated towards redressing inequalities in outcomes for the most disadvantaged and historically excluded. These measures are bound to be imperfect, as are most if, not all, of the current SDG indicators, but they would be illustrative of a theoretically grounded aspiration for forms of justice that open opportunities for more than a negative peace. This would also offer a new form of evidence to the EiE community, moving away from the need to demonstrably prove that education can prevent conflict and build peace, towards the ongoing, aspirational process of educational change towards justice.

## Author Bio

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