



PRIORITIZING RESEARCH AND LEARNING WITHIN THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY STRATEGY

Adam Lichtenheld, Ifeoluwa Olawole, and Ryan Sheely

FEBRUARY 2021

Peace is waning around the world. The number of armed conflicts has reached a 30-year high, forced displacement remains [at record levels](#), and civil unrest is [on the rise](#). The COVID-19 pandemic—and an unprecedented effort to distribute vaccines across the globe—will likely [exacerbate these trends](#). To help address the threat of violent conflict and its [myriad consequences](#), the Biden Administration [is set to implement the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability](#), as mandated by the 2019 [Global Fragility Act](#). A key requirement of the Fragility Act is to enhance the effectiveness of U.S. assistance by “improving assessment, monitoring, and evaluation” by implementing agencies. As such, the Global Fragility Strategy (GFS) will use research and learning to inform and guide implementation, as one of its core objectives is to

* **Image Information:** A member of a Mercy Corps partner organization in Uganda conducts a self-administered survey as part of a program focused on strengthening civil society capacity. Photo Credit: Sanjay Gurung.



“develop a robust evidence base to address the long-term causes of conflict and fragility.” This brief highlights a set of priority areas of inquiry to help build that evidence base, and a set of key principles for how research and learning can be embedded in the new approach to partnership and integration proposed by the GFS. Given the Biden administration’s [stated commitment](#) to evidence-based policymaking, the GFS must be used to better understand what works in conflict prevention and stabilization, and why. Otherwise there is a risk that the implementation of the strategy will be guided by political priorities and anecdotal evidence, which will undermine its ability to meet its goals.

A research agenda focused on the GFS should:

- Use diverse and rigorous methodological approaches to generate evidence on context-specific drivers of conflict and the effectiveness of programs focused on violence prevention, conflict mitigation, and stabilization.
- Focus on filling evidence gaps in several key thematic areas related to conflict and fragility, including social cohesion; conflict early warning and response; youth, gender, and violence; governance and democracy; security sector reform; climate and conflict; and digital threats and misinformation.
- Use research and learning to provide evidence about the impacts of different implementation modalities, including how programs are layered and sequenced.
- Develop processes for integrating research agendas and evidence across implementing agencies to avoid duplication, inefficiency, and the fragmentation of evidence and learning.
- Require that programs include a dedicated research budget that allocates approximately 15 percent of project funds towards monitoring, assessment, evaluation, and research.
- Include locally-defined metrics of success and impact, not just conventional, externally-defined indicators.
- Build a diverse research network that includes local and international researchers and knowledge brokers from academia, civil society, and government.

Priority Areas of Inquiry

Because the GFS focuses not only on resolving conflict and stabilizing fragile countries, but also on anticipating and preventing violence before it starts, it needs to incorporate an understanding of both general and context-specific drivers of violent conflict. The last two decades have witnessed an explosion in academic and policy research on the causes of [violence](#), [conflict](#), and [instability](#). There has also been a proliferation of high-quality publicly available data on violence and its underlying causes from third-party sources such as the [Armed Conflict and Location Event Data](#) (ACLED) Project, the [Fragile States Index](#), the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#), the [Center for Systemic Peace](#), and the [Varieties of Democracy](#) (V-Dem) project, among others. The GFS explicitly acknowledges that this growing body of data and research must form the foundation for country strategies and programmatic approaches.

At the same time, the GFS also highlights the need to support research that moves beyond identifying general risk factors for violent conflict and which helps to better understand the conditions under which particular

factors are more or less likely to produce conflict. In doing so, the GFS needs to delineate between different types of conflict (civil, intercommunal, interpersonal, and criminal) and levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro), because the proximate and underlying drivers of violence may vary depending on the scope and form that it takes. Given the elevation of conflict prevention in the GFS, research also needs to focus on understanding not just when peace fails, but also why it endures.

In addition to understanding when and how particular factors drive violent conflict, the GFS must seek to generate systematic evidence on the **effectiveness of programmatic approaches in conflict prevention and stabilization**. This aligns with the strategy’s pledge to employ “rigorous monitoring and evaluation...to assess policy outcomes, not just program outputs” and “evaluate progress toward reducing fragility in complex and rapidly changing environments.” To date, many evaluations and assessments of conflict programs lack theoretical and empirical rigor. For example, a [recent review](#) of the evidence surrounding peacebuilding programs discovered a dearth of randomized controlled trials (RCTs), the “gold standard” for evaluating the impact of policy interventions. While more RCTs are needed, they are not always logistically, financially, or ethically practical in fragile and conflict-affected settings. There is a need, then, for diverse methods and approaches, from quantitative analysis of observational and experimental data, to in-depth case studies, to “thick” process-tracing analyses of hypothesized mechanisms. The GFS proposes targeting a wide array of sectors for assistance, from human rights to food security. When it comes to research and learning, a review of the [existing evidence](#) on [violence prevention](#), [peacebuilding](#), and [related interventions](#) suggests several thematic areas that are particularly ripe for further investigation.

Social Cohesion: Improving social cohesion is considered essential not only for achieving “negative” peace—the cessation of violence—but also “positive” peace, or the elimination of the underlying causes of violence. Donors, policymakers, and development practitioners have sought to build horizontal cohesion (between communities and groups in society) in order to mend social cleavages, along with vertical cohesion (between state and society) in order to forge a stronger social contract. Polarization, marginalization, and exclusionary dynamics within society are [generally associated](#) with higher levels of conflict. Yet pushing for greater interaction, collaboration, and inclusion also carries risks: it can generate new



ZAKI TIM BEE COMMUNITY LEADER ZONGO, NIGERIA

“This conflict in Benue State has led to heightened violence and hatred between farmers and pastoralists. I am glad we had an opportunity to interact better during the Mercy Corps training and peace committee.”

These trainings were part of Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN), a USAID-funded peacebuilding program. Using a randomized controlled trial, the evaluation of ECPN finds that intergroup contact and mediation led to increases in trust between farmers and herders, even in the face of increasing tensions in the area where the program was being implemented.

Photo Credit: M. Madukwe/Mercy Corps

tensions and disrupt existing power structures, provoking (potentially violent) resistance and creating new sources of conflict. While there is [some evidence](#) that intergroup contact and dialogue can help improve certain aspects of social cohesion, more research is required to determine the [most effective ingredients](#) for social cohesion programming in different contexts—and the conditions under which they [actually reduce violence](#). Key research questions include:

- What kinds of activities—such as collaborative contact, intergroup dialogue, civic participation, and good governance interventions – are more or less effective at building social cohesion?
- What are the mechanisms through which improved horizontal and vertical social cohesion reduces violent conflict and promotes peace (e.g., by changing attitudes and beliefs, altering norms and behavior, improving social capital and community engagement)?
- What factors and interventions influence social acceptance and (re)integration of displaced populations, ex-combatants, and former members/associates of violent extremist organizations?

Early Warning and Response: Enhancing local conflict resolution capacities is a [key component](#) of [donor approaches](#) to stabilization in violent settings. An increasingly core aspect of such efforts are [conflict early warning and response systems](#), which aim to anticipate and mitigate violence before it erupts or escalates, and to equip decision-makers with preventive tools so they can respond in a quick and timely manner. One of the GFS’s stated objectives in conflict prevention is to “develop and/or reinforce local, national, and regional early warning systems and early action plans.” While [we know](#) that some of these interventions increase participants’ ability to peacefully manage conflict, much of this evidence is based on self-reporting. More research is needed to understand how and when these efforts [transform the ways that communities identify and proactively address grievances](#) and other underlying drivers of conflict. This research should focus on the following questions:

- Does building individuals’ and communities’ capacity to detect, respond to, and peacefully manage conflict lead to reduced political, intercommunal, and criminal violence?
- What kinds of early warning, dispute resolution, and conflict management mechanisms improve conflict-related outcomes, and what makes them effective?

Youth, Gender, and Violence: The GFS emphasizes the meaningful participation of youth, women, and marginalized groups. Many fragile contexts face substantial youth bulges, and some of the most pressing global challenges—from economic inequality to climate change—will disproportionately affect young people. Addressing the needs and hopes of youth has therefore become a primary focus of donor, government, and practitioner strategies, particularly in preventing and combating violent extremism (P/CVE). [Research shows](#) that societies that offer more opportunities and social mobility for youth tend to experience less violence. Yet there is still disagreement over the relative influence of [“greed”](#) (economic factors), [“grievances”](#) (social and political factors), and [opportunities for mobilization](#) in motivating and enabling youth to engage in violence or join violent extremist organizations, which has crucial implications for where donors and practitioners should direct their interventions.

In addition to targeting youth, donors and practitioners have increasingly focused on incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into violence prevention and P/CVE. In 2019, the U.S. government developed its [Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security](#), which seeks to integrate the needs and perspectives of women into peacebuilding and empower them to play meaningful leadership roles. [Cross-national studies](#) find that high levels of gender inequality and gender-based violence are associated with an increased risk of civil conflict, while [other research](#) shows that when women meaningfully participate in peace processes, such processes are much more likely to succeed. There is a need, then, to better understand the roles that youth, women, and

men play in peacebuilding and P/CVE and to unpack the specific impacts of program interventions on these different groups. This is particularly important because some research has shown that empowerment programs focused on women have in some contexts [widened gender inequality](#) or [created opportunities for a limited subset of women while systematically disadvantaging others](#). Key research questions in this thematic area include:

- Under what conditions are material factors (e.g., employment, education) salient drivers of youth participation in, or support for, violence, compared to non-material factors (e.g., social status, norms, trauma)? How do these different factors interact to shape support for, or resistance to, violent actors and narratives?
- What interventions effectively mitigate drivers of youth participation in, and support for, violence, and through what mechanisms (e.g., contact, grievances, opportunity, perceptions of government)?
- To what extent and through what mechanisms does incorporating women and girls into peacebuilding, P/CVE, and governance programs affect changes in gender norms and reduce political, intercommunal, or criminal violence without generating backlash?

Governance and Democracy: The GFS emphasizes “pursuing a new approach that addresses the political drivers of fragility.” Ineffective governance poses a threat to state stability and can be important in shaping the prospects for durable peace. When service delivery, public administration, and political representation are characterized by a lack of accountability and inclusion, [there is a risk of a slide or return to conflict](#). Ineffective governance can also compound natural resource conflicts, worsen inequalities, and erode social cohesion and state legitimacy. It is therefore imperative that the priority areas of research include a better understanding of the types of governance interventions that are most effective at making societies less vulnerable to violence. Recent reviews of evidence on [governance](#) and [peacebuilding](#) indicate that although rigorous evaluations on governance interventions have proliferated in recent years, there is still a dearth of evidence demonstrating the connections between these types of interventions and actual patterns of violence. One area where additional evidence would be particularly helpful is assessing the interaction between interventions targeted at increasing the capacity and accountability of decision-makers and approaches targeted at increasing the empowerment and engagement of communities and civil society organizations. It is also important to understand the extent to which the quality of governance has a direct impact on violence outcomes, as well as indirect effects as a [root cause](#) of other conflict drivers, such as fraying social cohesion, proliferating misinformation, and the rise of non-state armed groups.

There is also evidence that [democratic reforms](#) and [human rights](#) can play crucial roles in supporting transitions out of fragility and conflict. Political institutions, along with a robust civil society, can constrain elites and help them commit to political reforms, while providing outlets for people to exercise their rights. However, there are [still some debates](#) about whether, and under what conditions, democratic institutions are actually effective at preventing violent conflicts. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the importance of political institutions in understanding conflict, especially how local levels of democracy might prevent specific forms of violence. In addition, given the time needed for democratization, further evidence is needed on determinants of peace and conflict in hybrid and other non-democratic regimes. Future research should examine several questions:

- What is the relative effectiveness of increasing transparency and encouraging citizen engagement on fostering peace?
- What is the impact of civil society training programs on the capacity and activities of local civil society organizations (CSOs)? To what extent are active and empowered CSOs effective at linking communities to decision-makers and advocating for changes in policies, programs, and projects?

- Does training decision-makers at the national and local level in good governance principles lead to improved legitimacy and stability?
- Does democratic backsliding lead to increased political violence and/or vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist organizations? What kinds of interventions can help mitigate these dynamics?

Security Sector Reform: Scholars and policymakers have noted that persecution and repression by security forces has been a critical factor in radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist organizations. Countries where governments violate human rights through practices such as torture, political imprisonment, and extrajudicial killings face a higher risk of conflict. This has led donors and policymakers to emphasize the importance of security sector reform (SSR). Despite this emphasis, SSR is [one of the most pressing areas in need of evidence](#) in peacebuilding and stabilization. The GFS pledges to focus on “building legitimate, rights-respecting justice and security institutions capable of countering the full range of threats to stability.” Therefore, further research should seek to understand how these reforms can be effectively designed and implemented, and how public trust in security actors can be rebuilt or improved. Questions to explore include:

- What is the relationship between SSR and violence? How is this relationship shaped by the level of and type of conflict, the presence and capacity of the state, etc.?
- What security sector reforms (e.g., disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; legal reform, accountability mechanisms; staff professionalization) have the greatest impact on violence and civilian protection in conflict-affected contexts, and under what conditions are they effective?

Climate and Conflict: Competition over natural resources – namely land and water—is at the root of many conflicts around the world, and researchers have found a [strong relationship](#) between resource scarcity and violence. Climate change is aggravating these problems through increasing drought, desertification, and extreme weather events, which studies show [raise the risk of violent conflict](#). Some of the solutions to these challenges, such as land redistribution policies, have also been associated with increased conflict risk. At the same time, [conflicts are prevalent](#) in countries with easily-lootable resources, which can be used to fund rebellion. Although natural resource management (NRM) programs [have been shown](#) to improve resource use and livelihood outcomes, there is little evidence regarding their impact on conflict and violence. Further research should seek to understand when resource extraction leads to conflict and what kinds of programs can successfully mitigate these risks, along with the broader effects of climate variability on conflict and stability. Key research questions include:

- What are the specific channels or mechanisms through which climate variability increases the likelihood of violent conflict, particularly intercommunal conflict (e.g., by weakening governance, increasing economic inequality, intensifying resource competition, etc.)?
- What types of programs (e.g., land demarcation, shared use policies, community-based NRM) successfully mitigate the effect of climate variability on violent conflict, and through what mechanisms (e.g., by building cohesion and trust, improving access to resources, diversifying livelihoods, enhancing dispute mechanisms, changing perceptions of government, etc.)?
- What motivates participation of citizens in some extractive conflicts but not in others? What role might consultation before mining and drilling in resource-rich contexts play in reducing the rate of extractive conflicts?

Digital Threats and Misinformation: The role that social media has played in spreading [election disinformation](#) and [inciting mass violence](#) in multiple countries is raising concerns over its potential for these digital tools to contribute to conflict and instability. Evidence suggests that social media can shape public

perceptions on a range of issues and provides an effective platform for stoking political and social tensions and organizing campaigns of violence. We know little, however, about when, where, and how online activities actually contribute to offline violence and through what mechanisms. There is also a need to generate further evidence on the extent to which interventions such as using social media for targeted peacebuilding messages and training communities in social media literacy can be effective in preventing [the weaponization of social media](#). Research in this area should focus on the following questions:

- How, and under what conditions, does online activity lead to offline violence?
- What kinds of interventions are effective at mitigating conflict and preventing violence by countering hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, and social media weaponization?
- Can online programming contribute to peacebuilding and violence prevention? If so, what kinds of programs, and what makes them more or less effective?

Strategic Integration, Partnership, and Learning

The GFS emphasizes a collaborative, integrative approach to implementation across agencies, donors, and country stakeholders. In that vein, the strategy should seek to generate evidence and learning regarding not only *what* diplomats, development practitioners, and peacebuilders are doing to address violence and fragility, but *how* they are doing it.

Specifically, implementing agencies and partners should incorporate research, data, and evidence into the broader implementation of the GFS in the following ways:

Investigating how specific collaboration and implementation models impact program outcomes:

Complex, multi-sectoral programs like those championed in the GFS are becoming increasingly common, but given their complexity and the challenges of coordinating across sectors and partners, they are difficult to evaluate. Process-focused research is usually left to performance evaluations, which often lack the rigor and resources needed to assess impact. Instead, there should be greater emphasis on understanding how the implementation of a complex array of program components influences long-run impacts. The multi-dimensional focus of the GFS implicitly raises the question of how interventions incorporating different sectors or thematic areas should be combined, sequenced, and scaled up from the local level to the national level. Different approaches – like those that align humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities [around a resilience agenda](#) – should be tested. This can inform donors and policymakers about how to combine individual programs into an effective overarching approach to addressing conflict, violence, and fragility in a given country or region.

Facilitating inter-agency collaboration in developing research agendas and sharing data and results:

Under the GFS, implementing agencies should develop systems and processes for integrating research agendas and sharing data to avoid duplication, inefficiency, and the fragmentation of evidence and learning. The State Department, USAID, and Department of Defense should collaboratively develop a shared research agenda for the GFS priority countries and regions. They should also develop a common platform for collecting and sharing data across agencies and implementing partners, and seek to make data public, where possible, both to maximize its use and to facilitate partnerships and collaborative studies with universities, think tanks, and other organizations. Breaking down barriers between agencies is key to evaluating the cumulative impacts

of interventions, rather than one-off (and often duplicative) evaluations of individual programs or agency efforts. Joint research and evaluations should become the norm, not the exception. Rather than funding one-off studies, the GFS should seek to aggregate insights from different contexts to build up the evidence base for specific interventions or modalities, potentially building on the approach of the [Metaketa Initiative](#) led by the [Evidence in Governance and Politics](#) (EGAP) network. This would require designing programs to test multiple approaches towards a specific objective across multiple communities, countries, or regions, and then measuring impact through a consistent, harmonized set of outcomes. Agencies also need to invest in collective sensemaking once evidence is produced, allocating time and resources to share key findings and facilitate their proper uptake and integration into policy and programmatic decisions.



FACILITATING LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN PROGRAM MEASUREMENT

As part of the FORA program in eastern Afghanistan, Mercy Corps trained program participants and government officials in the use of participatory research and decision-making methods.

Combining participatory methods with other research approaches can help to measure community-defined impact indicators that are both locally-grounded and scientifically valid.

Photo Credit: Colin Spurway/Mercy Corps

programmatic outcomes. Some outcomes are better captured by more localized, context-specific indicators of impact. Participatory methods and indicators—such as Participatory Impact Assessments and the [Everyday Peace Indicators](#) – provide a set of tools for measuring community-defined impact indicators that are both locally-grounded and scientifically valid. Since many peacebuilding actors tend to work at the local level, understanding local definitions of success and the process through which people come to perceive whether, when, and how interventions achieve impact is essential for learning. Generating evidence of varying local

Requiring that programs include a robust research and evaluation component: Rigorous research requires resources. In order to ensure that U.S. assistance under the GFS is informed by systematic, high-quality evidence – and that it produces reliable insights that help us better understand what works—program proposals should stipulate that sufficient funds must be allocated to research and evaluation. USAID advises that its programs devote [five to ten percent of their budgets](#) to performance management, including three percent to evaluations. Yet most of these funds end up going towards meeting routine monitoring and reporting requirements, conducting context assessments, and producing evaluations that, according to an [analysis by the Center for Global Development](#), often suffer from significant quality problems in sampling, data collection, and analysis. Each GFS program should have a dedicated research budget and should seek to allocate at least 15 percent of project funds towards monitoring, evaluation, and research.

Incorporating locally-defined measures of impact: The GFS emphasizes the importance of participatory engagement by local partners in implementing and monitoring programs. This focus provides an opportunity to deviate from the traditional donor approach of depending on aggregate, externally-defined indicators to assess policy, program, and diplomatic impact, which often obscure local-level dynamics and overlook subnational variation in

approaches—including the level of coordination with different actors, the timeline for implementation, and the metrics used to gauge success—and comparing them across outcomes can contribute towards developing general and context-specific models for impact.

Building a diverse, multi-actor research network or consortium: In addition to cross-agency and donor collaboration, the GFS provides an opportunity to expand strategic partnerships with local and international researchers and knowledge producers in order to ensure participatory engagement by communities and civil society, and to help uncover local, innovative approaches to programming. When such a research network includes a coalition of local researchers and knowledge producers, it can foster more trust among communities and increase the impact of programs addressing violence and conflict. Examples of research networks to emulate include [RESOLVE](#) and [EGAP](#), which are both strong models of bringing together researchers from across academia, civil society, and government to fill policy-relevant evidence gaps. A research network focused explicitly on the GFS would be able to expand on these existing models by allowing for direct alignment of research questions and the priority evidence needs identified by USG throughout the process of implementing the strategy.



Photo Credit: Lindsay Murphy/Mercy Corps

CONTACT

For Research Inquiries:

Adam Lichtenheld
Senior Researcher-Peace and Conflict
alichtenheld@mercycorps.org

Ifeoluwa Olawole
Quantitative Research Specialist-Peace, Conflict, and
Governance
iolawole@mercycorps.org

Ryan Sheely
Director of Research-Conflict and Governance
rsheely@mercycorps.org

For General Global Fragility Act Inquiries:

Richmond Blake
Interim Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy
rblake@mercycorps.org

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842
mercycorps.org

* Citation: Adam Lichtenheld, Ifeoluwa Olawole, and Ryan Sheely (2021). *Prioritizing Research and Learning Within the Global Fragility Strategy*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.