Conflict & Fragility Learning Agenda

For the Strategic Impact Evaluation and Learning Programme

siel Strategic Impact Evaluation & Learning | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office | **ipa** Innovations for Poverty Action | **J-PAL** ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB

Background

What is the Strategic Impact Evaluation and Learning programme?

The **Strategic Impact Evaluation and Learning (SIEL) programme** of the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is a six-year learning partnership between FCDO's Evaluation Unit, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL). Launched in 2024, SIEL is here to support your efforts to understand what programmes and policies are most effective in driving impact. SIEL provides funding, resources, and technical capacity to help you make FCDO's global programmes more effective by generating evidence-based insights through impact evaluations. All FCDO staff are eligible to apply for impact evaluation funding and support through SIEL via semi-annual calls for Expressions of Interest.

What is a learning agenda?

SIEL Learning Agendas identify key evidence gaps in a subset of FCDO's strategic priority areas **to help generate evidence on FCDO programmes through SIEL's centralised funding process**.[i] The **Conflict and Fragility Learning Agenda** is intended to **guide future impact evaluations** of FCDO programmes and to target research to understudied areas with high potential to inform FCDO's work moving forward. The agenda is *not* an exhaustive list of evidence gaps, nor is it binding, but provides examples of the kinds of policy-relevant research questions that could be explored through SIEL and other FCDO-funded programmes. The agenda calls specific attention to questions that may be well suited for evaluation using (quasi-)experimental impact evaluation methods, though to effectively answer many of the questions laid out below, a wide range of research and evaluation techniques will be required that extend beyond the scope of SIEL.[ii]

> ### What is an impact evaluation?
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> Impact evaluations estimate programme effectiveness by comparing outcomes of those (individuals, communities, schools, etc.) who participated in a programme against those who did not. For a brief overview of different impact evaluation methods, see this resource. For an introduction to randomised controlled trials (RCTs), a form of impact evaluation, see here.

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[i] SIEL will focus on four strategic areas: humanitarian assistance, growth, climate and nature, and conflict and fragility, with migration, gender, and technology as cross-cutting themes. This learning agenda can also be used to guide evidence-generating activity beyond impact evaluation in those areas.

[ii] Given SIEL's focus on impact evaluations, the evidence cited in the 'emerging insights' boxes throughout this document primarily draw from (quasi-)experimental research. References to (quasi-)experimental work are denoted in bold text in the endnotes.

How was the learning agenda created?

The agenda was produced through close consultations with FCDO staff, including members of FCDO's conflict cadre, and staff from the Migration and Conflict Directorate (formerly Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation) and the Integrated Security Fund. It was informed by FCDO resources, including FCDO Best Buys reports, FCDO Areas of Research Interest (2023), and FCDO's Review of Areas of Spend. It also draws from evidence produced via numerous research programmes supported by FCDO, including J-PAL's Crime and Violence Initiative and Governance Initiative, IPA's Peace and Recovery Initiative, XCEPT, PeaceRep, the Serious Organised Crime and Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, and the International Centre for Tax & Development, as well as evidence gap maps on building peaceful societies, strengthening intergroup social cohesion, and conflict and atrocity prevention.[iii]

Who is the learning agenda for?

This learning agenda is intended to spur interest in impact evaluation and wider evidence generation among FCDO staff working on conflict and stabilisation programmes, for example, conflict and governance advisers, programme managers, and development directors. Whether you're looking to inform your programme design with robust evidence, enhance your evaluation skills, or collaborate with top researchers, SIEL offers the tools and support you need to drive meaningful change— on conflict prevention and response and other strategic priority areas. SIEL is open to those who want to evaluate initiatives at the design stage, or initiatives which have already been completed and robustly evaluated, where there is interest in uncovering the long-term impact.

SIEL can help you generate the evidence you need

To fill these priority evidence gaps, SIEL is partnering with FCDO teams to provide funding and training for a range of evaluation methodologies, from large-scale RCTs to smaller, nimble studies that can quickly test new ideas. If you are designing an intervention in one of these areas and would like to find out the best way to deliver it, generate evidence about its impact, or test the long-run impact of a past programme, reach out to our Help Desk at siel@poverty-action.org or visit SIEL's website. We are eager to help you think through evaluation opportunities.

[iii] The latter gap map on conflict and atrocity prevention was produced by Integrity Global with support from UK International Development.

Preventing conflict, restoring peace, and building stability in fragile settings

Conflict and state fragility are on the rise, posing complex obstacles to achieving global development and foreign policy goals. The World Bank estimates that nearly two-thirds of the global population facing extreme poverty will be living in fragile or conflict-affected states (FCAS) by 2030.[1] In 2024 alone, approximately one in eight people were exposed to conflict.[2] This has resulted in escalating rates of battle-related deaths, which reached a nearly three-decade peak in 2023 following the onset of numerous large-scale, global conflicts, including in Ethiopia and Ukraine.[iv] [3] With the more recent resurgence of conflicts in places like the Middle East and Sudan, it is likely that these numbers will remain high.[4] [5] Moreover, other sources of instability—including intercommunal violence, violent crime, expanding gang presence and organised crime, criminalised politics, and democratic backsliding—threaten security at regional, state, and local levels.[6] [7]

Beyond the human toll of conflict, violence and instability divert resources away from development goals, erode trust in institutions, and hinder economic growth by deterring foreign investment, all of which can perpetuate cycles of fragility.[8] Additional evidence on the impact of FCDO-supported programmes can support the development and delivery of more cost-effective and efficient conflict prevention and stabilisation investments globally.

Critical evidence gaps must be addressed

While the body of impact evaluations on effective strategies for preventing and responding to conflict and the drivers of instability has grown in recent years, important evidence gaps remain.[9] [10] [11] [12] [13] [14] [15] This learning agenda focuses on areas where *impact evaluations* can help fill these gaps and provide actionable insights for peacebuilding and stabilisation actors while acknowledging that a wide range of research methods are necessary for assessing broader conflict and fragility trends. These gaps are organised around four key categories: 1) anticipating and preventing conflict before it erupts; 2) ending conflict and building peace; 3) increasing stability in fragile settings; and 4) responding to emerging state security threats, including transnational and organised crime and violent and religious extremism.

[iv] The Peace Research Institute Oslo defines 'battle-related deaths' as 'Fatalities caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat, including civilian losses.'

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1. Anticipating and preventing conflict before it erupts

Given the high costs that conflict imposes on society, strategies that better anticipate and prevent violence and conflict could free up resources for other critical development and diplomatic priorities. Recent estimates from the International Monetary Fund suggest that investing in conflict prevention yields returns between USD$26 and USD$103 per every USD$1 spent, with higher returns in countries that have recently experienced violence.[v][16] A broad literature examines the key risk factors that may lead to conflict—including political exclusion, weak institutions, economic inequality, democratic transitions, and horizontal inequalities.[vi] However, further research is needed to better understand which interventions are most effective in responding to these risk factors to prevent conflict and violence from occurring or escalating, including by better identifying early warning signs of conflict and building individual and community resilience to future shocks.

1.1 What are the key risk factors that may trigger conflict, and how can they be better identified in advance?[vii]

- What role do political elites play, and what strategies do they employ for mobilising groups into violence, including using social and traditional media to spread mis/disinformation and hate speech? What approaches are most effective at countering these tactics?
- What role do regional dynamics—e.g. cross-border migration, transnational crime, or regional powers supporting proxy armed groups—play in triggering conflict, and how can interventions be designed to address these cross-border dynamics?[viii]
- How can advanced technologies, including AI, identify early warning signals and map conflict trajectories to inform response strategies? How can these technologies be best paired with data generated by actors on the ground?
- Can interventions that foster greater connections between citizens and security actors—e.g. community policing—effectively anticipate and prevent conflict from emerging?

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[v] These figures expand on past estimates, which have suggested that preventing conflict could result in anywhere from GBP£4 billion to GBP£56 billion in savings annually. However, only 3–4 percent of overseas development assistance (ODA) to fragile contexts is earmarked annually for conflict prevention activities (Pathways for Peace 2018; Mueller 2017).

[vi] See, for example, on political institutions (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013); on weak institutions (Fearon and Latin 2003); on economic inequalities (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Blattman and Miguel 2010; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013); on democratic transitions (Hegre et al. 2001); and on horizontal inequalities (Horowitz 1985; Stewart 2008).

[vii] With funding support from UK International Development, the Center on International Cooperation at NYU is currently conducting a systematic evidence review examining why armed violence occurs and how it can be prevented, which will define critical risk and protective factors.

[viii] The FCDO-supported XCEPT programme is generating research on cross-border conflict dynamics and effective response strategies.

- What key factors help protect communities from violent conflict breaking out, and how do we bolster them?

1.2 How can risks be better addressed before escalating into conflict?

- How can preventive diplomacy efforts—including mediation, negotiation, and crisis management—be strengthened to address tensions before they turn into violence? At what levels are these efforts most effective (e.g. when organised between political elites, security actors, regional actors)?
- What role do community mediation and dialogue play in identifying and resolving local grievances, and to what extent does this prevent broader violence from taking hold? How can these interventions be improved to ensure the inclusion of women, youth, and other marginalised groups?
- How can legal institutions be strengthened to handle disputes in a timely and fair manner? Does this help prevent disputes from escalating into violence?
- What are the advantages and limitations of informal, customary, and formal dispute resolution methods in fragile states, and how can these approaches complement each other in addressing grievances from local to national levels?

1.3 What programmes build resilience to future conflict shocks?

- Can anticipatory action programmes that preposition aid change communities' and individuals' responses and resilience to conflict and crises?
- What types of climate adaptation and mitigation strategies can most effectively build resilience against negative weather shocks, thereby reducing risks of future conflict? Can peacebuilding and conflict prevention programmes be integrated to mitigate the potential negative effects of climate shocks on conflict?
- What kinds of interventions—including psychosocial support services—can best help individuals heal from prior traumas and disrupt cycles of violence, and how can individuals be incentivised to take these up?
- Can economic development interventions—such as cash transfers, employment and vocational training, and other livelihood programmes—reduce the potential economic drivers of violence, or are more structural economic reforms needed?
- What role does education play in building long-term resilience, and how can educational systems be designed to foster critical thinking, tolerance, and peacebuilding values?
- How do community safety initiatives, including auxiliary and local policing, and the perceived legitimacy of security actors contribute to resilience in fragile settings?

Behavioural approaches to violence prevention: Training individuals to think differently in challenging situations, including via cognitive interventions, can reduce violence and make communities safer.[17] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and other mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions have also been shown to improve mental health and well-being in post-conflict and humanitarian settings, but much of this literature has focused only on short-term effects.[x] [24] [25] [26] [27] Collectively, this research contributes to a broader body of emerging evidence that points to the **importance of addressing historical traumas for populations exposed to recurrent or long-term violence**.[xi] [28] [29] [30]

Dispute resolution: Effective systems of dispute resolution are an essential part of maintaining a lasting peace and preventing violence, but formal institutions for justice provision are often inadequate or non-existent in fragile contexts. Where the state does have existing institutions, **information interventions can help reduce trial delays, clear up case backlogs, and increase citizens' use of state systems**.[31] [32] [33] Improved coordination between state and communal authorities may also expand access to justice and help resolve violent disputes.[34] However, state and customary dispute resolution mechanisms may appeal to citizens differently. Those disadvantaged by customary forms of dispute resolution, including women, may be more inclined to report issues to the state.[35] [36] **In contexts where the state has limited reach, training local communities in techniques to resolve disputes, including via alternative dispute resolution and mediation training, may reduce local violence**.[37] [38] [39] [40]

Economic and livelihoods interventions: Economic interventions have varied in the degree to which they have reduced conflict. **When delivered in isolation, vocational training interventions have had limited impacts on measures of social cohesion, aggression, or pro-government attitudes**.[41] [42] [43] However, studies from Liberia and Afghanistan find that **pairing skills development with**

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economic incentives, such as capital inputs or cash transfers, may be more effective than vocational training alone.[44][45] These findings add to a growing literature on the impact of cash transfers on conflict when delivered either in isolation or alongside complementary interventions. For example, in Liberia, unconditional cash transfers were effective in shifting recipient behaviour away from criminal and antisocial activities when combined with a CBT-inspired intervention, and in the Philippines, conditional cash transfers were effective in reducing insurgent influence and conflict.[46][47] Emerging quasi-experimental research also suggests that economic programmes like Index-Based Livestock Insurance or workfare programmes can equip households to be more resilient to climate-related shocks and can mitigate the risk of conflict.[48][49][50]

2. Ending conflict and building peace

Effective strategies are needed to support conflict cessation, combatant disengagement, and the long-term sustainability of peace agreements. Despite the growing need for peacebuilding interventions, ODA spending for peace has been decreasing, reaching a fifteen-year record low in 2021 of GBP£3.86 billion, roughly 11 percent of total ODA spending.[xii][51] Given limited funding, evidence is needed to unpack a range of critical questions to ensure that resources are being allocated to the most effective approaches for building and sustaining peace.

2.1 What diplomatic, economic, and political strategies can disrupt cycles of violence and help facilitate peace negotiations?

- How can diplomatic, economic, and/or other pressures be effectively designed and applied to bring parties in conflict to the table to negotiate a peaceful transition?
- How do different diplomatic strategies (e.g. coercive diplomacy versus collaborative diplomacy) affect the quality and sustainability of peace?
- How effective are economic measures—including sanctions, trade negotiations, and tackling illicit financial flows—at putting pressure on conflict parties to negotiate peace and under what circumstances? Which populations benefit most, and which are most negatively impacted?
- How can sanctions be designed to minimise harm to civilian populations and avoid exacerbating humanitarian crises while still encouraging conflict parties to negotiate peace?

[xii] The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) reports this figure in USD. This figure is a conversion from USD$5.27 to GBP£3.86 based on historical exchange rates from 2021.

- Can humanitarian negotiations create spaces that enable broader political negotiations and under what conditions?
- What role do political settlements, including power-sharing agreements, play in negotiating peace?

2.2 How can formal and informal peace processes be designed to promote inclusive and sustainable peace?

- How can peace processes and political settlements be designed to ensure broad inclusivity—not only of women, youth, and minorities but also of paramilitary or criminal organisations—and does this promote sustainable peace?
- What is the impact of women's participation in peace processes on the effectiveness and durability of peace agreements?
- How can the duration, timing, and staffing of peacekeeping missions be optimised in different settings?
- How effective are transitional justice processes in addressing past human rights violations, delivering justice, preventing conflict recurrence, and restoring the social fabric of communities? Is it best to take a holistic approach—i.e. by integrating truth-seeking, justice, reparation, and guarantees of nonrecurrence?

2.3 What strategies are most effective for demobilising and reintegrating former combatants?

- What programmes—including disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) and community violence reduction (CVR)—can incentivise recruited members to disengage from armed groups or reduce their incentives or ability to commit violence in ways that stick?[xiii] How can political will be built to sustain such programmes over the long term?
- What strategies are most effective at breaking down command chains and group identities? How do these approaches facilitate reintegration?
- How does the group composition of reintegration programmes (e.g. based on age, rank, or education of former combatants) impact their effectiveness?
- What are the gender-specific needs and challenges that female combatants face during reintegration, and how can interventions be designed to effectively respond to these unique barriers and gender roles?
- What interventions are most effective in increasing community members' willingness to accept former combatants into their communities? How does this differ based on the characteristics of former combatants (e.g. age, gender)?

[xiii] For example, through income support, employment and livelihoods programmes, government services, or interventions that address social and political ideologies.

- Is directly addressing wartime grievances and confronting past atrocities critical for promoting social cohesion, or can social cohesion emerge from simply incentivising people to work together? How can grievances best be addressed without triggering trauma in post-conflict settings?
- What role does memorialisation play in post-conflict settings? Can developing a shared narrative help build commonalities between groups and provide a physical space for remembering victims?
- How can social cohesion programmes be tailored to better address different forms of societal division (e.g. ethnic, religious, cultural, political)? Are these programmes better at overcoming some divisions than others?
- How can social cohesion interventions be designed to ensure inclusivity of marginalised groups, particularly women and youth?
- What role can political inclusion play in fostering social cohesion?
- Can improving economic conditions reduce social divisions?
- What is the role of news, social media, communication technologies, and their regulatory structures in influencing intergroup dynamics and promoting social cohesion?

Emerging insights snapshot: Lessons from recent impact evaluations

Social cohesion: Relatively inexpensive interventions have shown potential in increasing trust and social links between groups. Interventions that foster cooperative contact between conflicting groups can build everyday, local cohesion by reducing discriminatory behaviours, but transformative change is much harder to achieve, especially amid conflict.[52] [53] [54] Perspective-taking interventions that encourage individuals to view a situation from another's perspective have been effective in strengthening social capital and networks, including towards refugee and displaced populations.[55] [56] [57] [58] [59] Communications and media interventions have also positively impacted social norms around dissent and dispute resolution and encouraged interpersonal discussion following conflict.[60] [61] [62] However, it is important to guard against potential unintended negative impacts of programmes aiming to increase social cohesion, as it is possible that bringing opposing groups together in a single programme or raising greater visibility of intergroup grievances could cause distress or increase the perceived threat of other groups if not carefully implemented.[63] [64] [65] [66] [67] [68]

Peace processes and transitional justice: A broad literature suggests that peacekeeping operations can help prevent violence from beginning or recurring, but variation in mission structure makes it difficult to generalise conclusions from this work.[69][70][71] Transitional justice interventions—particularly those that involve prosecutions and criminal reparations—have also been associated with sustaining post-conflict peace by addressing past human rights violations.[xiv][72] In Sierra Leone, one of the first randomised evaluations of a community-based reconciliation programme found that while it increased forgiveness of perpetrators and strengthened social capital, it also worsened psychological health.[73] These findings suggest that populations may not self-heal from trauma following conflict but also that reconciliation processes should be restructured in ways that reduce their negative psychological costs while retaining their positive societal benefits.[xv]

Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR): Observational literature points to the mixed and often limited impacts of DDR programmes.[74][75][76] Consistent with these findings, one quasi-experimental study of a DDR intervention in Burundi found little indication that the programme led to improvements in political reintegration or attitudes towards peace.[77] However, recent experimental evidence from Colombia finds that a civic inclusion campaign increased former FARC rebels' trust in democracy and support for politically moderate views.[78] Emerging experimental and quasi-experimental evidence also suggests that media platforms may offer an effective, low-cost approach to encouraging both defection and reintegration.[xvi][79][80][81] In Northeastern Nigeria, for example, a randomised evaluation found that recorded messages from religious leaders promoting the full reintegration of former Boko Haram members increased individual support for reintegration and willingness to interact with ex-fighters in social, political, and economic life.[82]

[xiv] These findings are based on the Transitional Justice Evaluation Tools' comprehensive dataset of more than 10,000 published resources on transitional justice worldwide available here. In contrast to the findings of transitional justice approaches involving prosecutions and reparations, those that involved transitional justice or amnesty did not show sustained impacts on future peace.

[xv] These findings are consistent with findings from the XCEPT research portfolio noted under the 'Behavioural approaches to violence prevention' insight under section 1 above.

[xvi] However, it is worth noting that, historically, radio has also served as an effective tool for inciting violence (see, e.g., Adena et al. 2015, DellaVigna et al. 2014, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Therefore, consideration should be paid to the dual role that media platforms can play in fragile settings.

3. Increasing stability in fragile environments

Building and strengthening both formal and informal institutions is crucial for reducing the likelihood of conflict (re)occurring in fragile settings. When state capacity is weak, it can create power vacuums, foster corruption, and undermine the rule of law, thereby exacerbating grievances that may trigger social unrest.[83] [84] [85] Strong institutions—such as effective judicial systems, transparent public services, inclusive political processes, and trusted security bodies—are critical for ensuring that citizens' needs are met and enabling longer-term growth.[86] [87] However, a range of evidence gaps remain regarding how best to build effective, resilient, and inclusive institutions in fragile and conflict-affected environments.

3.1 What approaches are effective in improving citizens' trust in and perceptions of legitimate state actors following conflict?

- How can citizen trust be (re)built in legitimate state authorities in areas where their reach is limited and malign non-state actors have emerged as alternative service providers?
- In contexts where the state cannot fully extend or project its authority, how can state and non-state actors collaborate effectively to deliver both services and security?
- What role do non-state actors play in delivering services to citizens that may be excluded by government institutions, particularly in places where state institutions marginalise minority groups?
- Are institutions that are more inclusive of women and minorities and/or are more locally representative perceived as more trustworthy, accountable, or legitimate?

3.2 What strategies support the development of effective, capable, and inclusive institutions in post-conflict contexts?

- What are the short- and long-term impacts of power-sharing arrangements in fostering inclusive governance without reinforcing ethnic, sectarian, or political divisions in post-conflict settings?
- How can post-conflict electoral processes be designed to most effectively promote free, fair, transparent, and nonviolent elections that build public trust in state institutions?
- How can we strengthen the ability of women and marginalised groups to participate fully in political processes?
- What mechanisms can promote institutional accountability and ensure that public officials are held responsible for their actions, including delivering on commitments agreed during peace processes, in post-conflict settings?
- How can we better identify key moments of opportunity to support new, stable institutions to emerge?

3.3 What role can security sector reform (SSR) play in building safe environments and maintaining peace?

- What strategies are most effective in ensuring that security institutions (e.g. military, police) are professional, accountable, and inclusive of diverse social groups, particularly in contexts with fragile peace agreements?
- How does the organisation, management, and demographic composition of security forces impact their effectiveness and responsiveness?
- How can security forces be trained to proactively deliver services that meet community needs without abusing their authority or using excessive force?
- What strategies are most effective at shifting security actors' behaviours and social norms on sensitive topics, including on gender-based violence?
- What is the impact of militarised policing and military involvement in public security on civil liberties, human rights, community trust, and sustainable peace?
- What role can community engagement play in strengthening oversight and ensuring that security forces are responsive and accountable to the needs of local populations?
- What are the most effective civilian alternatives to traditional policing and security provision in fragile or post-conflict settings, particularly in locations where the state's reach may be limited?

3.4 How can basic service delivery be restored, improved, and sustained following conflict?

- In areas characterised by cyclical political instability and conflict, how can the delivery of basic services be sustained over the long run? How can we promote access to services for the most vulnerable?
- Do multisectoral programmes that combine humanitarian assistance, livelihood support, and peacebuilding yield better outcomes than siloed approaches?
- What are the long-term costs and/or benefits of delivering services via humanitarian aid, including on local capacity and local markets?
- How can post-conflict states build tax capacity to leverage resources for basic service delivery? Does strengthening public service delivery increase citizens' willingness to pay taxes?[xvii]
- What interventions have been effective in disrupting roadblock economies without exacerbating conflict or harming civilian livelihoods?

[xvii] For additional questions exploring tax mobilisation in post-conflict settings, see this recent brief produced by the International Centre for Tax & Development summarising findings from a recent article by van den Boogaard et al. 2018.

Emerging insights snapshot: Lessons from recent impact evaluations

Building state legitimacy in fragile settings: Government and international actors often strive to 'win hearts and minds' by providing goods and services to communities as a means of shifting support for insurgent and criminal groups towards the state. However, evidence suggests that **non-state armed groups may strategically sabotage aid efforts to reduce their impact on civilians and/or to capture resources, which may prolong or escalate conflict.**[88][89][90][91][92][93] A quasi-experimental evaluation in the Philippines found that communities that were part of a community-driven development (CDD) programme experienced large increases in conflict casualties, which appeared to be driven by insurgent-led violence to prevent communities from participating in the programme.[94] Similarly, an experiment in Afghanistan found that a CDD intervention increased violence in the eastern part of the country, where insurgents were less reliant on civilian support, while decreasing violence and building support for the state in the remainder of the country by improving economic outcomes and shifting the opportunity costs of engaging in violence.[95] Simply improving state services may not be enough to crowd out non-state armed actors or build state legitimacy, and overpromising and underdelivering on state services can damage legitimacy.[xviii][96][97] Moreover, additional research is needed in contexts where the state is viewed as a corrupt or illegitimate actor and non-state actors may be the preferred service providers.

Strengthening post-conflict electoral systems: In the aftermath of conflict, capable and transparent election administration is required to ensure that elections are free and fair. **Increasing transparency—including by leveraging technologies to report electoral irregularities and inform voters—can reduce irregularities and improve the perceived legitimacy of elections**, which may lower the risk of post-election violence.[98][99][100] In Mozambique, Russia, and Armenia, randomised evaluations found that domestic or international election observers reduced electoral fraud.[101][102][103] In Ghana, domestic observers reduced voter intimidation at monitored polling stations.[104] While election observation can reduce fraud, election officials and party agents can circumvent monitoring efforts and technologies, for instance, by shifting fraud to unmonitored polling stations or to pre-election activities, pointing to a need for holistic efforts to monitor the campaign period, not just the polls.[105][106]

[xviii] These experimental findings echo in part insights from the FCDO-supported Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, which finds that state legitimacy in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is not solely determined by service delivery but is co-constructed through interactions between the state and its citizens, and essential services like healthcare and education can influence public trust, particularly during key moments when state presence is visible.

Strengthening tax administration and morale in low-capacity settings: Fragile and conflict-affected states must collect taxes to fund public services, but low enforcement capacity and trust in the state can make this challenging.[107] **Recent evaluations, including in fragile settings, suggest promising avenues to strengthen both tax administration and legitimacy, increasing revenue collection**.[108] In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), researchers tested several reforms to tax administration, finding that using local chiefs as tax collectors, assigning tax collectors to teams and neighbourhoods based on their ability and local likelihood to pay, and setting tax rates in tandem with enforcement strategies improved compliance and revenue.[109][110][111] Several studies have also tested whether strengthening public goods provision can improve citizens' perception of the state's legitimacy to tax and thereby compliance. In the DRC, broadening the tax base by registering and requesting taxes from citizens for the first time also increased political participation, suggesting that increased tax enforcement itself may enhance state legitimacy and citizen engagement in low-capacity settings.[112] In Carrefour, Haiti, improving municipal garbage removal boosted tax compliance, but other studies find mixed results, pointing to a need for more research.[113][114]

Improving training for security actors: Police training interventions, particularly in soft skills and gender sensitisation, can improve police-community relationships.[115][116][117] Such training has been shown to increase crime reporting and improve citizen perceptions of police interactions. Procedural justice training, which emphasises police transparency and responsiveness to community concerns, can improve officer behaviour and citizens' perceptions of police.[118][119][120][121][122] Recent evidence also suggests that training officers to improve decision-making under high stress conditions can improve policing outcomes by lowering excessive force used against civilians.[123] However, the majority of research to date has occurred in middle- and high-income contexts. While these training interventions have shown promise in improving policing outcomes, few impact evaluations have examined the effectiveness of training interventions with security actors beyond the police, including in the immediate aftermath of conflict.

Strengthening community policing: Recent research suggests that community policing interventions, which aim to improve relationships between security actors and the community, may have limited impact on crime and violence reduction. A 2014 review of 25 studies on community policing found no effects on crime and violence but improved public perceptions regarding police legitimacy, performance, and disorder.[124] A more recent set of studies implemented across Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, Uganda, and the Philippines found no impact on

crime rates, citizen perceptions of insecurity or police, incidents of police abuse, or citizen cooperation with police.[125] However, it is difficult to interpret these results since the programmes faced implementation challenges and were not implemented effectively due to structural constraints, including staff turnover, inadequate resources, and insufficient commitment to the intervention, which may have limited programme effectiveness.

4. Responding to emerging state security threats

The nature of conflict has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Non-state armed groups, including insurgents, militias, and terrorist organisations, are involved in a growing proportion of global conflicts, and urban armed groups, including criminal gangs, are a growing threat to peace and economic growth in cities around the world.[126] Moreover, cyber warfare has emerged as a tool in modern conflicts, with state and non-state actors alike conducting cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, financial systems, and government operations.[127] This convergence of traditional and nontraditional threats has reshaped how conflicts unfold, making them more protracted, multifaceted, and difficult to resolve, raising critical questions for further research.

4.1 What strategies are most effective in tackling organised and transnational crime?[xix]

- What actions can the state take to combat organised crime, including through prosecution, increased governance, and tackling gang revenue streams?
- How can both local and cross-border illicit economies (such as illegal mining, deforestation, drug trafficking, and human trafficking) be disrupted?
- What is the role of 'criminal governance' in resolving local disputes, maintaining social order, and providing security? How can the state most effectively combat this form of governance?
- What are the determinants for participating in criminal and armed groups (e.g. ideology, religion, economic motivations, social norms, psychological factors, grievances), and how can interventions respond to these individual drivers to promote desistance and rehabilitation?

4.2 How can we best prevent and counter violent extremism and terrorism?

- What interventions are most effective in addressing the underlying drivers of violent extremism (e.g. economic, political, social, or ideological) and reducing the appeal of extremist groups?
- How do armed groups govern, finance, radicalise, and recruit, and how do these vary by context? How can they be countered?

[xix] For more on this topic, see the research being conducted by the FCDO-supported Serious Organised Crime and Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC-ACE) research programme here.

- How can counternarratives to extremist ideologies be developed and effectively communicated to prevent the spread of radical beliefs, especially in online and social media spaces?
- What role do family structures, peer groups, and social networks play in radicalisation, and how can these social units be leveraged to counter extremism?

4.3 How can we better prepare for and counteract emerging virtual security threats?

- What are the challenges and risks of hate speech, disinformation, or polarisation on social media—particularly in the midst of peace processes or elections—and how can these be mitigated through strategic digital diplomacy, public messaging, and social media literacy?
- What strategies are most effective at countering AI-enabled disinformation, and how can we ensure that interventions keep pace with evolving technologies to remain effective across diverse settings?
- How can states and international organisations better prepare for the growing threat of cyber warfare through education, training, and capacity building, especially in vulnerable regions?

Emerging insights snapshot: Lessons from recent impact evaluations

Responding to criminal governance and organised crime: Recent quasi-experimental research is beginning to shed light on how and when criminal and armed groups choose to compete with the state in providing public services and their strategic responses to police, security, and other state interventions to limit or consolidate their reach.[xx] In Medellin, Colombia, increased state presence may have counterintuitively crowded in gang rule as gangs sought to maintain their activities, including lucrative illegal drug trading.[128] In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, criminal groups responded differently to a pacification policing strategy across neighbourhoods, increasing lethal violence in territories that they controlled.[129] Emerging research also suggests that militarised responses to organised crime may yield negative results.[xxi] A recent experiment from Colombia demonstrated that military patrols to neighbourhoods with high homicide rates had no impacts on crime reduction or public safety but instead may have worsened crime and human rights abuses following the intervention.[130]

[xx] This builds on a substantial theoretical and observational literature on how organised crime and gangs compete with the state in providing governance institutions and public services, including property rights enforcement and dispute resolution services (Skarbek 2011; Lessing and Willis 2019; Sanchez de la Sierra 2020; Lessing 2020; Milhaupt and West 2000).

[xxi] See also a recent SOC ACE Evidence Review Paper on this topic (Kelly 2023).

Countering mis- and disinformation: Several meta-analyses have shown that **inoculation, fact-checking, and debunking can be effective in correcting misinformation, but their effectiveness often wanes over time** and is constrained by participants' preexisting beliefs, ideologies, and knowledge.[xxii] [131] [132] While fact-checking interventions may lead participants to better discern between true and false news, this updated knowledge may not affect their political opinions and behaviour.[133] Importantly, the majority of studies to date have been conducted in high-income country settings, and the findings may not generalise to low- and middle-income countries, where closed, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram are prevalent; low state capacity may increase the relative importance of informal networks for information sharing; and access to the internet is not as widespread.[134]

Preventing and countering violent extremism: There is **limited and mixed evidence on effective responses to preventing and countering extremism.** Counternarrative interventions—which aim to disrupt recruitment and radicalisation by challenging and offering alternative perspectives to extremist messaging—have generally failed to demonstrate significant impacts on preventing real or intended violent behaviours.[135] [136] For example, a pro-peace messaging intervention in Burkina Faso led to backlash by making ethnic identity more salient in a context where extremism was primarily associated with one specific ethnic group.[137] However, another recent experiment from Mozambique found that a sensitisation campaign delivered by religious leaders was effective in increasing trust in the state and decreasing support for extremist beliefs, respectively (Vicente and Vilela 2022).[138] Combined, these findings highlight the need for greater investment in research and policy innovation on strategies for countering extremist ideologies.

SIEL can help you generate the evidence you need

To fill these priority evidence gaps, SIEL is partnering with FCDO teams to provide funding and training for a range of evaluation methodologies, from large-scale RCTs to smaller, nimble studies that can quickly test new ideas. If you are designing an intervention in one of these areas and would like to find out the best way to deliver it, generate evidence about its impact, or would like to test the long-run impact of a past programme, reach out to our Help Desk at siel@poverty-action.org or visit SIEL's website. We are eager to help you think through evaluation opportunities.

[xxii] See Kozyreva et al. (2024) for a toolbox of strategies to counter misinformation drawn from 81 academic papers.

siel
Strategic Impact
Evaluation & Learning

Learning Agenda Annex 1: About SIEL

What is SIEL?

The Strategic Impact Evaluation and Learning (SIEL) programme is a new FCDO initiative. Led by the Evaluation Unit, in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), SIEL will support the delivery of FCDO's priorities by developing learning on "what works, what doesn't, for whom, and why" in development and foreign policy.

SIEL will build a strong evidence base in strategic priority areas, ensuring that FCDO interventions are effective and provide good value for money. By focusing on rigorous impact evaluations (objective tests of whether changes have occurred due to the intervention), including randomised controlled trials (RCTs), and providing adaptive management support, SIEL will help FCDO to make informed decisions that maximise positive outcomes in four strategic areas: growth, humanitarian assistance, climate and nature, and conflict and fragility.

What SIEL offers:

SIEL provides a range of opportunities and resources to support your work and professional development. Please reach out to siel@poverty-action.org to learn more about accessing the following services:

Funding and support for evaluations

- **Rigorous evaluations:** Access funding for high-quality impact evaluations, including RCTs, long-term follow-ups, and nimble evaluations.
- **Pilot studies:** Receive support for pilot projects that explore new ideas or evaluate interventions on a smaller scale before full implementation.
- **Adaptive management support:** Get ongoing support to adapt and improve your programmes based on real-time evidence and findings.
- **Matchmaking with experts:** Connect with leading researchers from IPA and J-PAL to collaborate on impactful evaluations tailored to your programme's needs.

Training and capacity strengthening

- SIEL will offer training on managing, commissioning, and understanding impact evaluations. The training sessions, open to all staff, are designed to help you understand how to use evidence to support delivery of your priorities.

Identifying, sharing, and using evidence

- SIEL learning agendas will identify key evidence gaps in the four strategic priority areas described above to spark rigorous impact evaluations of FCDO interventions. The agendas intend to guide future evaluation of FCDO interventions and target evaluations to understudied areas with high potential to inform FCDO's work moving forward.
- Research uptake: Once evaluations are complete, SIEL will support the wide dissemination of findings across FCDO and beyond. All staff will have access to key insights from all evaluations undertaken, including through webinars, presentations, and other resources. This will help strengthen knowledge management and organisational learning and deliver more impactful and sustainable programmes and policies.

Get involved

- **SIEL could be relevant to you if any of these apply:**
  - You are looking to start a new initiative or generate evidence about a past initiative.
  - You would like to learn 'what works', improve your programme and/or enhance your evaluation skills.
  - You are working in one of the priority areas for SIEL: growth, humanitarian assistance, climate and nature, and conflict and fragility.
- **SIEL offers:**
  - A partnership approach to answer the questions you need to answer, with the support of world-class researchers.
  - Training and support from leading organisations in the impact evaluation field.
- Visit our SIEL website for more information and reach out to our Help Desk at siel@poverty-action.org with any questions.

Annex 2: Endnotes

Note that bolded references indicate that the study used an experimental or quasi-experimental research design.

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