

# Education and Conflict

## *What the Evidence Says*

This policy brief summarizes the key conclusions from the first systematic review of the empirical, quantitative literature on the relationship between education and civil conflict.

Evidence from 30 statistical studies indicates that

- Increasing education levels overall has pacifying effects
- Rapid expansion of higher education is not a threat
- Education inequalities between groups increase conflict risk
- The content and quality of education might spur conflict
- Terrorists are well-above-average educated

The policy recommendations in this brief emerge from consulting work conducted for UNESCO's 2011 *Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report*. We recommend that (a) future research pay increasing attention to subnational and individual level effects; (b) new data be collected to study how conflict is affected by the content and quality of education; and (c) policies be implemented to reduce education inequalities.

**Gudrun Østby** *CSCW/PRIO*

**Henrik Urdal** *CSCW/PRIO & Harvard Kennedy School*

## Introduction

The relationship between education and conflict has attracted increasing interest from both education and conflict researchers over the last decade. However, to date, most of this research has been qualitative, for three reasons. First, the research agenda has been driven primarily by the concerns of practitioners and researchers ‘in the field’. Second, there is a lack of comparable international data. Finally, the link between education and conflict is complex.

To inform policy there is a need for systematic knowledge of the conflict potential for several dimensions of education. We need to address questions like:

- What is the impact of increasing education levels on the risk of political violence?
- Could rapid expansion in higher education lead to unmet employment expectations and hence greater conflict risk?
- How does unequal access to education between individuals and groups affect conflict?
- How do education content and quality affect conflict?
- Are highly educated individuals more likely to join certain violent groups such as terrorist organizations, and if so, why?

On the occasion of UNESCO’s 2011 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: The Hidden Crisis—Armed Conflict and Education*, a commissioned background report was conducted at CSCW/PRIO to review the quantitative literature on education and conflict. This policy brief summarizes our main findings.

## The Arguments

Scholars have focused on the relationship between education and civil war that dates as far back as Aristotle. In systematizing the different theoretical contributions it can be useful to distinguish between arguments relating to the *levels, expansion, inequality, and content* of education.

### Education Levels

The first type of argument presented in the literature pertains to levels of education (usually in terms of enrolment or attainment) or

government investment in education. Most of these propositions share the premise that more education fosters peace. However, there are at least three different explanations provided for this relationship:

- Increased government spending in education can reduce people’s grievances, both directly, and indirectly through spurring economic development and social equality.
- Increased education opportunities simply make it less attractive for young people to enlist as soldiers rather than pursuing a civilian career
- Higher education attainment may promote a ‘culture of peace’ that encourages political participation and channels conflicts of interest through peaceful political institutions.

### Rapid Expansion of Higher Education

The second argument featured in the academic literature is that rapid expansion of higher education could increase the risk of political instability.

When countries respond to large youth bulges by expanding access to higher education, they may produce a much larger group of highly educated young people than the labour market is able to absorb. Prevailing unemployment among highly educated youths may cause frustration and grievances that could in turn motivate political violence.

### Education Inequality

Third, inequalities of education opportunities between individuals and groups could breed grievances and cause conflict. It has been argued that inequalities that follow group boundaries, such as religion or ethnicity, are particularly conflict-conducive, even more than inequality between individuals. Schooling policies might be used by governments to discriminate against certain minority groups, and this could enhance group grievances among disfavoured groups and cause them to mobilize against the state to alter the status quo.

### Education Content

Finally, some of the education-conflict literature is concerned with the *quality* and *content* of education. Expanding access to relatively low quality education may raise expectations that do not match employment opportunities.

Education can also be used as a means of indoctrination, which can fuel militarism or violent religious extremism that might increase the probability of civil conflict. Education content that advocates particular political or religious messages might increase an individual’s propensity to join a militant organization.

## 30 Statistical Studies

We have examined statistical studies that tested the education-conflict relationships described above. We identified thirty studies that provided statistical evidence of the effect of some kind of education measure on some kind of political violence (primarily civil conflict).

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend away from country-level studies (macro-level) to investigations of the education-conflict link at the level of subnational units (meso-level) or individuals (micro-level).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the different levels of analysis among the thirty studies reviewed in the report.

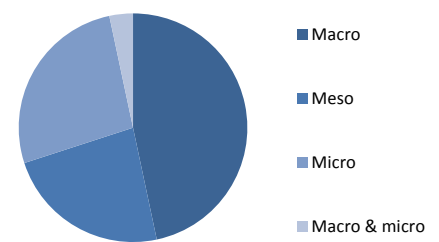


Figure 1: Level of analysis (N=30)

Twenty-two articles in our sample are either cross-country (macro-level) or subnational (meso-level) studies. The subnational category analyzes the link between education and conflict at the regional, municipal or city level.

As shown in Figure 2, most of the macro- and meso-level studies focus on the conflict potential of various levels of education, but there are also quite a few studies that examine the impact of some kind of education inequality. Only three studies consider the impact of education expansion, and none of these studies examine the effect of education content.

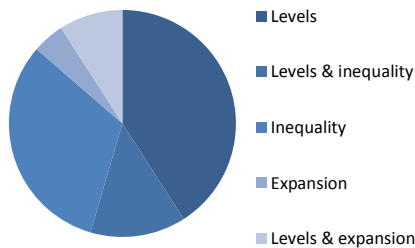


Figure 2: Education focus of macro- and meso-level studies (N=22)

The remaining eight studies are micro-level investigations of individual countries. These focus on the predisposition of individuals to engage in various forms of political violence in light of their education level.

### Key Findings

A major objective is to single out from existing empirical evidence some explanations for political violence that are particularly relevant to policy makers.

These thirty studies provide a complex set of findings on the education-conflict link, largely due to the great variation in levels of analysis, dimensions of education, and types of political violence under study. We identified four ways in which some dimensions of education can affect political violence. These effects are shown in Figure 3. Below, we elaborate on the main findings.

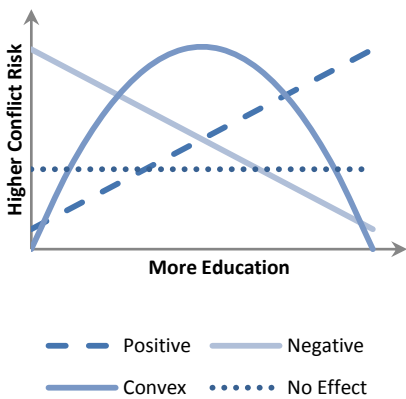


Figure 3. Possible effects from education to conflict risk

#### 1. Higher Levels of Education Breed Peace

Overall, there seems to be broad empirical evidence of a general negative relationship

between the level of education and conflict. In other words, there is good reason to believe that countries with higher average levels of education do indeed have a lower risk of experiencing armed conflict.

Figure 4 shows a more nuanced picture of this evidence. It distinguishes between the individual impacts of the increase of six indicators of education level: primary education, secondary education, tertiary education, years of schooling, literacy rates, and government spending on education.

The most common indicator of education level is secondary education enrolment or attainment. This seems to provide the most suitable discriminator in assessing the role of education in conflict. However, it seems that increasing education at any level is good for peace and stability.

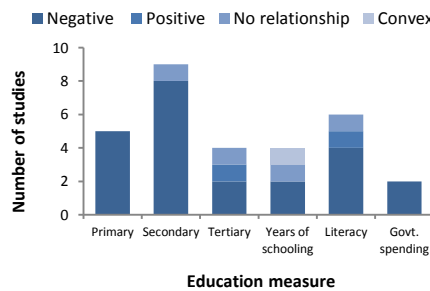


Figure 4: Conflict potential of education levels: Macro- and meso-level evidence (N=15)

#### 2. Education Expansion is Not a Threat

So far, only three studies have tested the violence potential of rapid expansion in higher education. According to their joint findings, expansion in higher education seems to have no bearing on the risk of political violence (including civil conflict, riots, or urban violence) – not even in the context of large youth bulges.

One study found some evidence that the combination of large youth bulges with expansion in higher education was associated with an increased risk of terrorism. However, this finding needs to be re-tested with better data.

#### 3. Inter-Group Inequality Matters

The overall conflict potential of disparities in education opportunities seems to be consistent with a key finding in the broader ine-

quality-conflict literature: Inequality between individuals does not affect conflict, but inter-group inequality does, as shown in Figure 5. Systematic differences in access to education between ethnic, religious, and regional groups appear to fuel conflict. This may be explained by the group members sharing ‘grievances’ among themselves, which in turn facilitates collective mobilization. There is also some evidence that higher levels of education inequalities between boys and girls enhance the risk of conflict.

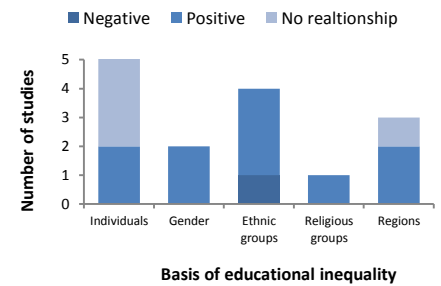


Figure 5: Conflict potential of education inequality: Macro- and meso-level evidence (N=10)

There is further evidence that inter-group education inequality is particularly likely to fuel conflict in democratic regimes. In a democratic society with sharp inter-group inequalities, both the motives and the opportunities to mobilize against the state are present.

#### 4. Lacking Evidence on Education Content

In theory, the curriculum could be a primary mechanism that introduces children to nationalist ideology, which may later feed into support for political violence. However, there is an acute lack of systematic cross-national data on what is actually taught in schools. The only statistical study we could identify that analyzes political violence in light of education content is a micro-level study of participation in militant organizations in Pakistan. Contrary to common assumptions, Islamist militants do not seem to be emerging predominantly from Pakistan’s religious seminaries.

#### 5. Micro-Level Effects

The few existing micro-level studies of education and conflict all explore if and how the individual level of education affects engagement in various types of political violence.

Overall, people with low education levels are

more likely to be recruited to armed conflict. There is emerging evidence from Colombia and Sierra Leone that indicates that low education increases participation in both insurgent and counterinsurgent groups. There are also reports that abductees who participate in rebellion have lower education. This could reflect that areas with poor, uneducated people typically have fewer means of protection and that army leaders might therefore prefer to target such destinations for recruitment.

There is some emerging evidence from the Middle East that indicates that highly educated individuals are over-represented in terrorist activities. However, these results are preliminary and thus uncertain. Any such over-representation might be the result of education content being directly used to breed terrorism. Another explanation could be that the higher-than-average education levels among terrorists is likely to be a *selection effect*, whereby the more highly educated and qualified recruits are chosen over the less qualified.

### Recommendations

Compared to most other factors that are known to affect political violence (such as GDP per capita, mountainous terrain, and natural resource abundance), education is something that almost all governments can alter through national policy.

● **Keep up education expansion.** Overall, this review summarizes evidence that very clearly points to the pacifying effect of education, at all levels. There is little support for concern that governments should be cautious about rapidly expanding access to education, although little empirical work has been done on the consequences for civil conflict of education expansion and labor market dynamics.

While policy makers should monitor the

situation for educated youths generally, there is every reason to maintain the pressure for education expansion as a development strategy that will provide opportunities for young people. Lack of education has been identified as a particularly potent predictor in low-income countries and in countries with large youth bulges, so recent efforts to increase education levels in the poorest countries may have a significant long-term pacifying effect.

As pointed out above, the importance of using education to fight terror is *not* invalidated in spite of some emerging evidence that highly educated individuals are over-represented in terrorist activities.

● **Reduce education inequalities.** Policy makers should be committed to reduce education inequalities between cultural groups. The conflict potential of inter-group disparities in education seems to be stronger for democracies than for other regimes. Thus a reduction of group-based inequalities could contribute to peaceful democratic transitions.

● **Prioritize future research.** Apart from the overall conclusion that increasing education has a pacifying effect on conflict, most of the findings presented herein come with a great amount of uncertainty.

Future studies on education and political violence should focus particularly on the mismatch of education and jobs, on group inequalities in access to education, and on education content.

One of the most important conclusions arising from the emerging individual-level studies is that civil wars are dynamic processes. Much theorizing and many empirical studies focus excessively on the conditions that existed prior to the outbreak of war and largely overlook the ongoing process. There is an acute need for more studies at the subnational and micro

levels. Such studies can help us understand *how* certain dimensions of education are linked to certain forms of conflict.

### Useful Documents and Publications

Arjona, Ana & Stathis Kalyvas (2007) Insurgent and counterinsurgent recruitment: An Analysis of survey data from Colombia. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago IL, 28 February–3 March.

Barakat, Bilal & Henrik Urdal (2009) Breaking the waves? Does education mediate the relationship between youth bulges and political violence? Policy research working paper 5114, Washington DC: The World Bank.

Collier, Paul & Anke Hoeffler (2004) Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers* 56(4): 563–595.

Krueger, Alan B. & Jitka Malečková (2003) Education, poverty, and terrorism: Is there a causal connection? *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17(4): 119–144.

Østby, Gudrun & Henrik Urdal (2011) Education and civil conflict: A review of the quantitative, empirical literature. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education*. UNESCO.

Strand Håvard & Marianne Dahl (2011) Defining conflict-affected countries. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education*. UNESCO.

Thyne, Clayton (2006) ABC's, 123's, and the golden rule: The pacifying effect of education on civil war, 1980–1999. *International Studies Quarterly* 50(4): 733–754. ■

### THE AUTHORS

Gudrun Østby (gudrun@prio.no) is a Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) at PRIO. Her work focuses mainly on inter-group inequalities and political violence. Henrik Urdal (henriku@prio.no) is a Senior Researcher at CSCW/PRIO and Editor of the *Journal of Peace Research*. He is an expert of demographic factors and conflict.

### THE PROJECT

On the occasion of UNESCO's 2011 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* CSCW contributed a paper reviewing the literature on education and conflict (by Gudrun Østby & Henrik Urdal) and a paper explaining how EFA's conflict categories are defined (by Håvard Strand & Marianne Dahl). Please see <http://www.prio.no/CSCW>.

### CSCW/PRIO

The Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) is a Norwegian Centre of Excellence at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). PRIO is a non-profit peace research institute. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.