



# Options for Measuring Conflict Deaths in Goal 16

This paper is intended as a contribution to the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) as it begins the process of ‘tiering’ and setting standards for global indicators. Specifically, it provides an overview of different approaches to indicator 16.1.2, “Conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population, by sex, age and cause”. It argues Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data is robust enough for immediate use, but that internationally-agreed methodologies will need to be developed for official statistics on conflict deaths.

## Recommendations

- In the short term, use the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data to establish a global baseline and subsequently monitor the “*number of reported direct conflict deaths*”.
- In the medium term, agree upon standardised approaches to measuring direct conflict deaths at national level for eventual use in the Annual Progress Report.
- Similarly, in the medium term, develop standardised approaches to measuring indirect conflict deaths.

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## Developing metadata for indicator 16.1.2 on conflict deaths

In September 2015, world leaders agreed on the transformational 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with an ambitious set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Member States identified peace as one of five cross-cutting development priorities for the world, captured in Goal 16 to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

Mandated by UN General Assembly resolution 70/1 and composed of representatives from 28 National Statistics Organisations (NSOs), the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) proposed in February 2016 a framework of global indicators. These core indicators will serve as the basis for an Annual Progress Report tracking the world’s progress

towards meeting the SDGs and will be used for follow-up and review processes (they will be complemented by national, regional and thematic indicators). Global data will be *primarily* aggregated from that provided by NSOs using standardised methodologies, though the IAEG-SDGs notes the need for partnerships with civil society, academia and the private sector.

A number of global indicators have been proposed for Goal 16. The IAEG-SDGs has proposed four indicators for target 16.1 to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”. One of these four indicators is indicator 16.1.2: “Conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population, by sex, age and cause”. This indicator is of clear relevance to monitoring peacefulness and is in line with the political ambition established by member states.

But this indicator is not only relevant: it is technically feasible; robust global data already exists. Nonetheless, because it is not currently used in official statistics, the indicator will likely be

rated by the IAEG-SDGs as a “tier II” indicator, which is not commonly used, or even as a “tier III” indicator, for which metadata – the underlying definitions, methodologies and sources – still need to be agreed upon. This paper aims to review a number of options for the IAEG-SDGs to consider as part of this tiering process. Furthermore, the IAEG-SDGs also needs to establish a global baseline for indicators, which this paper also reflects upon.

The indicator is currently worded to capture conflict-related deaths. Presently, the research community has established methodologies for measuring *direct deaths*, but so far no agreed method for measuring *indirect deaths* exists. In order to simplify the measurement in the initial phase, a focus on *direct* conflict deaths only, i.e. those that result directly from violent injuries, is warranted. But note that in some conflicts ‘indirect’ deaths — those arising from war-exacerbated disease or malnutrition — can be considerably larger than those caused by deaths from injuries. This fact, and the political

Name	Definition of conflict	Methodology	Coverage	Timelines
<b>UCDP</b>	Contested incompatibility that concerns government or territory or both where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. Of these two parties, at least one is the government of a state.	Cross-referencing of news sources	Global	Yearly, monthly planned
<b>ACLED</b>	Political violence is the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation. ACLED defines political violence through its constituent events, the intent of which is to produce a comprehensive overview of all forms of political conflict within and across states. A politically violent event is a single altercation where often force is used by one or more groups to a political end, although some instances – including protests and non-violent activity – are included in the dataset.	Data coded from secondary sources	Africa and parts of Asia	Monthly
<b>IISS</b>	Conflicts are defined as inter-state or intra-state. Inter-state: involving states in armed conflict with another state. Intra-state: taking place between states and non-state armed groups, or between non-state armed groups. These conflicts can sometimes spill across international borders without being considered international conflicts between state parties.	Expert coded	Global	Yearly
<b>WHO</b>	Unclear	Household surveys	Unclear	Unclear
<b>OHCHR</b>	Unclear, specific to the Ukraine conflict	Public reports, witness and victim reports. Reports from directly affected persons	Ukraine	Unclear
<b>UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan</b>	Events where civilian casualties resulted from armed conflict	On-site investigations when possible	Afghanistan	Unclear
<b>Iraq Body Count</b>	Iraq-specific	Deaths records	Iraq	Unclear
<b>Syrian Observatory for HR</b>	Syria-specific	Activist reporting, gathering of reports, verification of identities	Syria	Unclear

imperative to measure violence-related death rates everywhere, is reflected upon in the recommendations.

### Options going forward

To the best of our knowledge, NSOs are not comprehensively collecting data on direct conflict deaths. However, several research institutions, UN agencies, and NGOs have already developed systematic approaches to measuring deaths (of both combatants and civilians) from armed conflicts that can be built on. These data have been tested extensively by the research community, and have already been widely used in official reports of various United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the OECD, as well as a number of member states.

### Our recommendations

We believe that sufficient data exists today to allow for immediate and robust-enough global monitoring of *reported* direct conflict deaths. Nonetheless, we also recognise that more work needs to be done to develop official national-level monitoring processes which can go beyond reporting rates. As such, we recommend that:

1. In the short term, a global baseline is established using Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data, which is subsequently used for the Annual Progress Report while methodologies are further developed;
2. In the medium term, the IAEG-SDGs or relevant groupings like the Praia Group develop internationally-agreed methodologies for official measurements of direct conflict deaths at national level;
3. In the medium term, the IAEG-SDGs or relevant groupings work with the expert community to develop meta-data for monitoring indirect conflict-deaths.

### Short-term: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset

The UCDP *Battle-Related Deaths (BRD) Dataset* provides annual updates of deaths from state-based conflict (involving the state and one or more other conflict actors), one-sided violence (state against civilians), and non-state conflict (involving two or more non-state conflict actors) for all countries in the world. The dataset has a

time series extending back to 1989.

A clear rationale for recommending the UCDP BRD dataset for this purpose is: first, that it builds on a clear and concise *definition* of armed conflict; second, that UCDP has developed a set of rigorous and transparent coding criteria; and third that UCDP is an independent and impartial organisation.

The UCDP armed conflict definition clearly delineates armed conflict from criminal violence by focusing on the political underpinnings, *the incompatibilities*, which constitute the conflict. The definition is group-based, meaning that it also enables us to distinguish armed conflict from massacres, what the UCDP labels ‘one-sided violence’ or clashes between non-state armed groups (‘non-state conflict’). Obviously, these restrictive criteria will in certain circumstances exclude specific cases that individuals themselves would label ‘conflicts’. Ultimately, however, this is precisely the role of a clear and concise definition.

The UCDP BRD dataset only includes ‘battle-related’ deaths. Battle-related deaths are defined as deaths, both military and civilian, caused by the warring parties of a conflict that can be directly related to combat. This limits battle-related to only include *direct* deaths. Other war-related deaths that are indirectly caused by combat, such as epidemics caused by a breakdown in the health system, are not included.

As for the coding criteria, the UCDP draws on a wide array of publicly available printed and electronic data sources that include newspapers, news agencies, journals, research reports, as well as documents issued by multinational organizations and NGOs. To the extent possible, UCDP attempts to track all sources back to primary sources to avoid double counting. UCDP staff reads each source and decides whether to include it in the battle deaths count. Furthermore, UCDP assess potential interests of the source in misrepresenting political or violent events.

These counts are, of course, *estimates* of the actual count of battle deaths. This is readily admitted by UCDP. They strive to publish as credible estimates as possible and therefore publish a range of estimates, high, low, and best, for each conflict. Nonetheless, it should be noted that for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

estimates have been used widely, and will continue to be used for a number of SDG indicators. Few indicators are perfect; the UCDP data is not better or worse than most and can do a robust-enough job of tracking trends, i.e. telling us if the world is making progress. Widespread agreement exists on its methodology and quality – it could even be considered a tier I indicator by the IAEG-SDGs.

Overall UCDP battle deaths estimates are likely to be on the conservative side. However, we believe a conservative, consistent (i.e. unbiased), and comparable estimate is infinitely better than a rough, poorly defined estimate or no estimate at all. That it is produced by an independent and impartial research organisation is important given the potential politicisation of the issue of conflict deaths. Nonetheless, the UN Statistics Division, working with specialist UN agencies that already track conflict data (UNDPKO, WHO, OCHCR) could validate UCDP data for use in the annual progress report. We would suggest that the precise framing of the indicator be changed to “number of reported direct conflict deaths”.

### Medium-term: NSO methodologies and indirect conflict deaths

In the medium term, however, more discussion will be required to establish international agreement on official measures of direct conflict deaths at national level. Whether through the IAEG-SDGs or other bodies, NSOs could lead on the development of such methodologies in consultation with experts, practitioners and UN agencies. The methods need not rely on ‘reported’ rates; a different set of methodologies from what is used by UCDP could be developed, for example drawing on survey-based approaches or by using networks of violence observers. New approaches should also make it possible to disaggregate by age, sex and cause. Given that NSO capacity and political space will almost always be restricted in conflict settings, hybrid national-international partnerships will need to be formed between designated UN agencies, NSOs (or other relevant official bodies) and independent data collectors that all use the internationally-agreed methodologies and best practice. After methodologies have been agreed and relevant capacities developed, data should be aggregated by a designated UN agency for use in the Annual Progress Report.

In parallel to developing consensus on methods for official statistics on direct conflict deaths, it is imperative that the international community of statisticians and experts develops a measure of indirect conflict deaths, which not only cause more death, but often have a much larger impact on social welfare and wider development. Some methodologies already exist and have been tested; these should be built upon.

### Setting a 2015 baseline for global conflict deaths

For the MDGs the UN decided that 1990 would serve as the baseline year to track progress against. Clearly, a baseline is necessary to track progress towards a goal. However, for setting a baseline for 16.1.2 it should be noted that 2014 represented a very bad year in terms of conflict related deaths. Indeed, 2014 is the first year since 1989 that saw more than 100,000 battle-related deaths, with a total best estimate of 126,059. By far, most of these battle deaths, around 60 %, are incurred in the conflict in Syria. The figures are not yet fully compiled, but preliminary estimates indicate that 2015 will

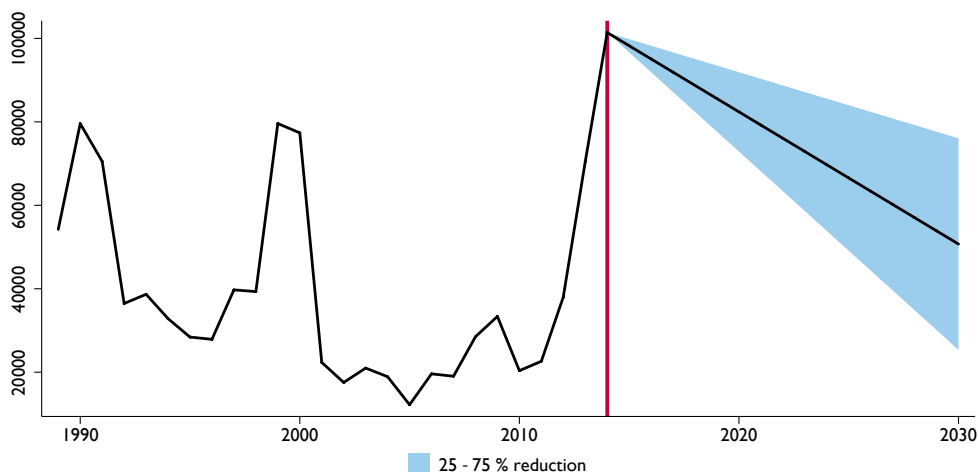


Figure 1: Total global battle-related deaths (Source: UCDP)

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### SAFERWORLD

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

see even more conflict deaths than 2014. Careful consideration is warranted given that future assessments of progress will be greatly defined by what baseline year or figure we decide to start with.

For example, figure 1 below shows observed sum of battle related deaths globally from 1989 to 2014 and then presents a range of between a 25 % to 75 % reduction in battle deaths from 2015 to 2030. The graph shows that even a 75 % reduction from 2014 levels would not bring us to 2010 levels.

### Towards a more peaceful world

Figure 2 follows the reporting scheme developed in the annual MDG progress reports. For a number of regions as well as globally, it shows the average rate of battle related deaths in the region, measured as battle deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. The three first bars show observed rates in 1999, 2009, and 2014, and the last three show what a 25 %, 50 %, and 75 % reduction would look like in the region in 2030. ■

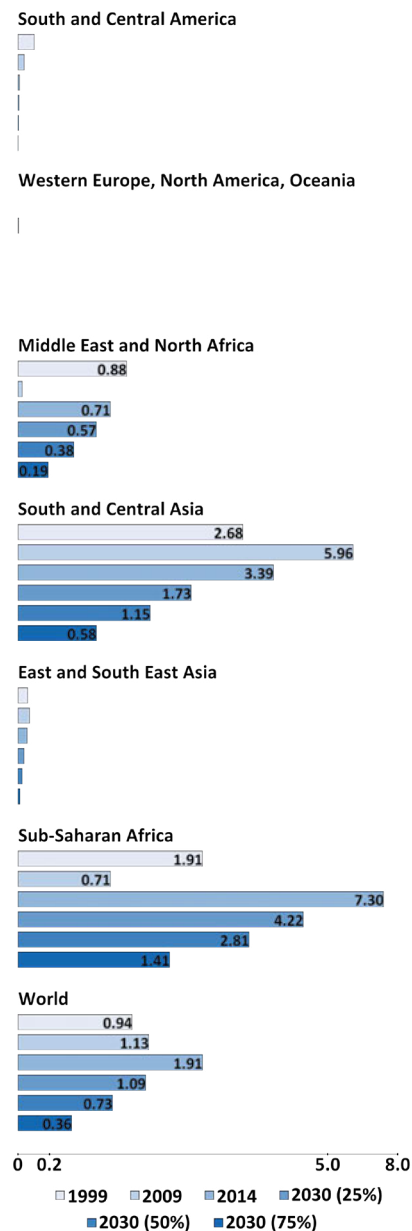


Figure 2: Battle-related deaths per capita, by region (Source: UCDP)