Christopher W. Blair discussion of: Public policies for peace

Christopher W. Blair

Princeton University, USA

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC POLICYMAKING TO SUPPORT PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

In 2024, more than 12.5 per cent of the global population was exposed to conflict. Incidents of political violence surged 25 per cent worldwide in the same period (ACLED 2024). Significant combat in Sudan, Ukraine, and Myanmar, unprecedented destruction in Gaza, criminal violence in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, and major civil and communal strife in Nigeria, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan mark some of the worst episodes of armed conflict in the twenty-first century. Global geostrategic upheaval and drastic cuts in foreign assistance underscore the importance of cost-effective policy interventions for conflict prevention.

In "Public Policies for Peace," Elena Esposito and Austin Wright review and evaluate a wide array of interventions governments have pioneered for reducing conflict and spurring economic development in fragile societies. Surveying diverse economic and security strategies ranging from education and labor market policies to welfare and trauma programming, Esposito and Wright distill lessons from decades of well-identified empirical research. Usefully, the authors show how different public policies shape the incentives driving individuals and groups toward violence. Additionally, Esposito and Wright's sweeping review offers insights relevant for countering multiple forms of armed conflict, including terrorism, crime, insurgency, and communal violence. By synthesizing findings across economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, the article lays out a roadmap for evidence-based peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

Conceptually, a few notable details of Esposito and Wright's work warrant mentioning. First, the authors concentrate on policy levers that are under the direct control of governments rather than international organizations or private actors. Second, as noted above, they adopt a broad definition of conflict-related violence. Esposito and Wright

Economic Policy October 2025 pp. 927–929 Printed in Great Britain
https://doi.org/10.1093/epolic/eiaf021

view various forms of violence like civil wars, terrorism, organized crime, and interpersonal aggression, as phenomena lying along a continuum. Especially in fragile states with weak central institutions, shocks and stressors shape when and where violence occurs, what form it takes, and how violence evolves dynamically in response to state policies. Third, the authors highlight how violence stems from overlapping mechanisms: opportunity costs, grievances, and nonmaterial or psychological motivations.

Empirically, the authors offer a qualified, positive answer when asked whether governments and public administrators can enact domestic policies for conflict mitigation. While not all well-intentioned policies are effective at reducing violence, Esposito and Wright highlight several successful programs. For one, active labor market programming paired with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be effective, even among high-risk populations. At the same time, targeted, tailored interventions outperform broad, untargeted efforts. Second, the authors find that early-childhood educational initiatives bear particular fruit. School programs emphasizing soft skills, conflict resolution, and socio-emotional development are effective, especially when started early. Third, the authors show how shocks and stressors can catalyze political violence, and how the efficacy of public policies to insulate against shocks hinges on institutional quality. Methodologically, the authors advocate for improved descriptive evidence from understudied contexts, where drivers of violence are poorly understood. In parallel, Esposito and Wright champion new efforts to develop comprehensive, high-resolution microdata on conflict. Finally, they note, more interventions should embed theory into programmatic design, so that remaining puzzles can be disentangled and causal mechanisms clarified.

The article certainly advances our understanding of how policymakers can design and administer programs intended to prevent conflict and spur development. Yet, a few areas not fully covered in the manuscript deserve deeper attention going forward, particularly given contemporary battlefield trends. First, interstate conflict is back. From the 1990s to the early 2020s, militancy was the chief source of instability worldwide. In the last few years, however, hostilities have flared between state competitors, including Russia and Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and Thailand and Cambodia, among others. Although high-intensity interstate wars entail unique policy challenges, we know exceedingly little about building peace in places wracked by this form of combat. Much more work is needed to understand whether and how the programmatic interventions Esposito and Wright consider can succeed in areas affected by interstate war or great power competition.

More generally, more attention should be paid to the transnational dimensions of intrastate conflicts. It is well understood that transnational phenomena like interstate rivalries, cross-border insurgent sanctuaries, and flows of goods and people impact the conduct and nature of civil wars (e.g., Salehyan 2009; Lee 2020; Blair 2024, 2025). Cross-border spillovers shape the efficacy of public policies in significant ways, particularly when states pursue them without coordination with other regional actors. For instance, Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov (2025) find that a costly development and governance campaign in Afghanistan succeeded in reducing insurgency, but only in areas where insurgents lacked access to foreign support and sanctuary. This example suggests that

more attention should be paid to the ways external actors and phenomena can interfere with public policies implemented domestically. The ubiquity of transnational actors and pressures in conflict zones also belies Esposito and Wright's focus on public policies that lie within the control of governments and do not depend on international cooperation. Virtually all policies will be shaped to some extent by outside, cross-border forces.

Esposito and Wright also largely gloss over the role of technology in shaping public policymaking. Today, transformative technologies like drones and artificial intelligence are reshaping the global economy and the modern battlefield. More systematic approaches are needed to fully map the multitudinous ways these and other technologies could affect the efficacy of public policies for peacebuilding. While some technological innovations like deepfakes could be used to supercharge influence efforts and undermine conflict mitigation programs, others like the green revolution and telemedicine can function as developmental boons. Understanding how technology is regulated, and how it can be embedded in policy interventions to promote peace is an important priority for research going forward.

Overall, Esposito and Wright offer a rich, detailed, and rigorous synthesis of what governments can do to counteract the drivers of insecurity and underdevelopment. As violence continues to escalate worldwide, the evidence-based blueprint they offer will serve as a useful primer for policymakers and scholars interested in peacebuilding. Future work should more explicitly examine how prominent policies can be scaled in areas affected by interstate or transnational conflicts. In addition, the role of technology in policymaking is only likely to grow. This makes it essential to craft systematic assessments of new technological innovations, which might pose opportunities and challenges for peacebuilding and development.

REFERENCES

ACLED (2024). 'Conflict Index', pp. 1–2.
Beath, A., Christia, F., and Enikolopov, R. (2025). 'Can Development Programs Counter Insurgencies? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan', *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 17: 80–116.
Blair, C. W. (2024). 'The Fortification Dilemma: Border Control and Rebel Violence', *American Journal of Political Science*, 68: 1366–85.
——. (2025). 'Border Fortification and Legibility: Evidence from Afghanistan', *American Journal of Political Science*, 1–22.
Lee, M. M. (2020). *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State*. Cornell University Press.
Salehyan, I. (2009). *Rebels without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*. Cornell University Press.

Economic Policy, 2025, 40, 927–929
https://doi.org/10.1093/epolic/eiaf021
Discussion