



THEMATIC PAPER:

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN PEACEBUILDING AND SUSTAINING PEACE

Implementation of the 2030 Agenda through a human rights approach and combined with UN global policy initiatives, such as Human Rights Up Front, can be a tool to address violations of economic, social and cultural rights that trigger and drive violence, conflict and fragility. Given the interconnected nature of today's conflicts and crises, the UN's policy and operational responses to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and sustaining peace should utilize the full range of tools and resources from across the human rights, peace and security and development pillars.

1. VIOLATIONS OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS AS TRIGGERS AND DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

Many conflicts and occurrences of social unrest today have been caused or fuelled by measures or policies that have resulted in increased social or economic inequality, or violation of individuals' economic, social and cultural rights, such as increases in the price of food or public transport, fuel, persistent unemployment, diminished living standards and cuts to social services and spending.¹

Economic policies, such as austerity measures, negatively impact the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights; they may also exacerbate gender inequality as women's employment is often more precarious and women are often more likely to engage in unpaid labour to make up for reduced public services, particularly health and social care.

Among other factors, food crises can also trigger conflict and social unrest:² notably, studies have identified a specific food price threshold above which protests become likely, highlighting that the timing of riots in 2008 and violent protests in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 coincided with peaks in global food prices. Additionally, tensions among populations or communities competing for control of natural resources required for food production, such as land, water and seeds, as well as social, political and economic inequalities in access to food, can heighten existing grievances and drive conflict. For example, as noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, the absence of measures to counter the devastating effects of droughts in terms of access to food for all groups created the conditions which, combined with other factors, triggered the civil war in Syria.³

The root causes of inequality lie in deeply-entrenched patterns of discrimination based on socio-economic status, race, gender, religion, disability, migrant status, country of origin and other status. It is vital, therefore, to address inequality and violations of economic, social and cultural rights explicitly and in a demonstrable manner in order to mitigate social tensions and avert the outbreak and escalation of social unrest and conflicts.

The human rights framework offers normative and practical guidance in this regard. Notably, the widely-ratified International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires States to devote the "maximum available resources" to guarantee a minimum core of rights, without discrimination or retrogression, and ensure an equitable distribution of resources to reduce disparities. The 1986 Right to Development Declaration upholds the right of all to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development. It calls for equality of opportunity in access to basic resources and services and affirms that equality of opportunity for development is a prerogative of nations and of individuals who make up nations.

2. INTEGRATING ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS IN JOINED-UP RIGHTS-BASED ANALYSIS FOR PREVENTION, PEACEBUILDING AND SUSTAINING PEACE

As elaborated in **OHCHR's thematic paper on joined-up rights-based analysis for prevention**, the analytical approach to human rights has a specific role to play in UN prevention, peacebuilding and sustaining peace, including the development of cross-agency analysis to identify risks and promote effective mitigating action. It has also demonstrated value in providing targeted support to Member States in responding to these challenges.

1 Jacopo Ponticelli and Hans-Joachim Voth "Austerity and Anarchy: Budget Cuts and Social Unrest In Europe, 1919-2009", December 2011.

2 See Julia Berazneva and David R. Lee, "Explaining the African food riots of 2007-2008: An empirical analysis", *Food Policy*, vol. 39, April 2013, pp. 28-39; Henk-Jan Brinkman and Cullen S. Hendrix, "Food Insecurity and Violent Conflict: Causes, Consequences, and Addressing the Challenges", Occasional Paper No. 24, World Food Programme, July 2011; Hendrix, C.S and Brinkman, H-J, "Food insecurity and conflict dynamics: causal linkages and complex feedbacks", High-Level Expert Forum, Rome, 13-14 September 2012; and Mark Notaras, "Food Insecurity and the Conflict Trap", *Our World*, 31 August 2011.

3 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food: mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/16/49/Add.2, para. 13.

In recent years, OHCHR has promoted the inclusion of economic, social and cultural rights in early warning analysis, as prevention and post-conflict efforts often pay less attention to this set of rights. OHCHR produced a conceptual framework with risk factors and indicators based on economic, social and cultural rights and their interplay with civil and political rights. The conceptual framework, published in a thematic report,⁴ to the Economic and Social Council, is the result of independent research and extensive consultations. It identifies as cross-cutting risk factors severe inequality, lack of access to effective grievance mechanisms, lack of meaningful consultation, shrinking of democratic space for civil society and freedom of the media. Among thematic risk factors, the framework points to unequal access to natural resources, degradation in social services and unemployment. In various instances, austerity and privatization have negatively affected the availability, accessibility and quality of essential services, which have contributed to violence and instability in many countries.

4. ENTRY POINTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers multiple entry points to tackle the root causes and drivers of violence, instability, inequality and injustice. Human rights, peace, inclusion and justice are woven across the entire 2030 Agenda with 17 goals and 169 targets covering political, economic and social objectives, which are anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties. Its transformative elements also point the UN to support interventions that protect economies from being overly vulnerable to global economic volatility, which may result in poverty, inequality and violent conflict.

The overarching principle of the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind” is rooted in the human rights principle of equality and non-discrimination, and also underpins conflict prevention and peacebuilding - as affirmed by the Secretary-General when stating that inclusive and sustainable development is the best defence against the risks of violent conflict.⁵

Peace has been included as one of five key prerequisites for the achievement of all 17 goals alongside people, planet, prosperity, and partnership. Goal 16 promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies, addresses drivers of violence, such as the lack of access to justice, corruption, unaccountable institutions, exclusive decision-making, illicit financial and arms flows, organized crime, and exclusive global governance. While Goal 16 is specifically focused on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, it is important to note that a peace and conflict lens is mainstreamed throughout the goals and targets, which together can drive positive change at national and international levels for conflict prevention and sustaining peace.

The Agenda notably points to the need for the reduction of discrimination and inequalities in Goals 5 (gender) and 10 (reducing inequalities), making these goals instrumental in transforming institutions and power relations to achieve genuine, just, and sustainable peace in and across countries. Poverty, food security and agriculture addressed by Goals 1 and 2 set targets to ensure that the basic material conditions for a decent existence provide a core foundation for peace. Goals 12 through 15, highlighting the drivers and impacts of climate change, call for critical attention to the interconnections between fragility and violent conflict and the environment.

In addition, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes inclusive participation across a number of goals recognizing that power imbalances and exclusionary policies can drive violence and conflict: Goal 4, promoting education as a foundation for a culture of peace and non-violence; Goal 8 dealing with economic growth, decent work and full employment is also at the core of a productive and peaceful society; alongside Goal 9 dealing with infrastructure, which can and must be addressed in conflict and peace sensitive ways.

4 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/ESCR/EarlyWarning_ESCR_2016_en.pdf

5 A/72/707-S/2018/43, para. 5

Notably, Member States and multi-stakeholder coalitions and networks have adopted the concept of SDG 16+, which calls for an integrated approach to achieving peaceful, just and inclusive societies.⁶ As recently affirmed by Member States in the thematic review of SDG 16 in July 2019, efforts to sustain peace require a positive vision of prevention that is nationally- owned, people-centred, inclusive of marginalized people and groups, and that provides particularly, a voice for women, children, young people, and older persons.”⁷

6 SDG16+ combines SDG 16 targets with 24 additional targets from seven SDGs.

7 Joint statement from 36 countries: “The Building Peaceful Societies SDG16.1 asks us to significantly reduce all forms of violence everywhere. Once prevention has failed, violence takes a dynamic of its own, as violence leads to more violence. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the special needs of conflict affected and post-conflict countries. Efforts to sustain peace require a positive vision of prevention that is nationally-owned, people-centered, inclusive of marginalized people and groups, and that provides in particular a voice for women, children, young people, and older persons. In this regard, we support the efforts of the Secretary-General to strengthen the implementation of the relevant resolutions aimed at building and sustaining peace.”