

Stability indexes can be deceptive tools

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Indexes that rank countries along a colour scale on world maps have become increasingly popular overviews of peace, conflict, investment and development. Yet such indexes can distort the nuanced reality of peace and conflict on the ground, which often varies on the subnational level and affects societal groups to different degrees.

What next

Despite limitations, indexes are useful tools to push debate and promote change in public policies. Nonetheless, comparing indexes shows that the concepts of peace and conflict require a more detailed approach. A single value can mask the many different elements that contribute to stability in individual countries. Greater transparency about the indicators that comprise an index and cross-analysing different indexes would mitigate these potential distortions.

Analysis

The ninth annual report on the [Global Peace Index](#) and of the eleventh report on the [Fragile States Index](#) were published this year. They show an increasing gap between the world's most peaceful countries (led by Iceland) and the most violent ones (led by Syria) and increasing levels of violence globally.

On a regional level, Europe is the most peaceful and the Middle East and North Africa the least peaceful.

Distorting reality

Indexes such as these are helpful in determining broad trends, but by lumping together different dimensions and indicators, indexes of peace and conflict simplify complex socio-political dynamics.

Analysing the three dimensions of the Global Peace Index separately shows that Central America and the Caribbean is the region with the best ranking worldwide for demilitarisation, but at the same time has the worst level of citizen security. As a result, the region is located in the middle of the general ranking, masking both the first and the second issue.

Subnational variations

Within each country levels of conflict vary. Compare eastern Ukraine to the western part adjoining Poland. Both the Fragile States Index and the Global Peace Index highlight Ukraine as a country of high concern, yet this does not reflect [reality in each part of the country](#).

Ignoring these subnational differences neglects the fact that it is necessary to prioritise certain regions when designing security, development or economic policies.

Impact

- | Businesses risk misjudging opportunities for investment by following rankings of countries that do not reflect regional differences.
- | International agencies may neglect countries that need support in specific areas yet are ranked high due to good performance in others.
- | The difficulty of measuring conflict prevention will mean that governments will continue losing billions of dollars due to violence.

180,000

The number of people who died in internal armed conflicts in 2014 -- up from 49,000 in 2010

Averaging dimensions for indexes distorts reality

Just as publicly naming a country as a "fragile state" (and in previous years as a "failed state") can stigmatise it, so tinting countries into colour or gray scales may have a similar effect. This makes it difficult for governments to change the public image of their country and attract investment in more stable parts.

Cross-border effects

Indexes conceal cross-border spillovers in conflict situations. Many Turkish citizens close to the Syrian border live in the same plight as their Syrian counterparts on the other side. Nevertheless, since Turkey is ranked higher than Syria across different indexes, the suffering of these Turkish communities is concealed. Turkey's war with Kurdish guerrillas is similarly overlooked (see [TURKEY: Guerrillas could prompt state of emergency](#) - September 9, 2015).

Perceptions of violence

Measuring levels of violence and crime can be difficult. Often crimes go unreported, especially if trust in the security services is low, although some indexes do account for people's viewpoints, for example, by including perceptions of criminality.

However, these perceptions are shaped by prior experiences and the data offered in surveys do not always reflect reality, especially when these polls take place in a context of fear. Therefore, low ratings on perceptions of criminality may reflect a lack of human engagement as a result of quick, large surveys rather than time-consuming in-depth interviews.

Most indexes also do not capture the particularities that exist with respect to violence against women or children, or other specific groups of society. Levels of sexual harassment in Egypt may be consistently underrated as most such incidents would be underreported (see [MIDDLE EAST: Sexual violence intensifies extremism](#) - September 1, 2015).

The costs of violence

Costs of violence for the global economy are also colour-ranked in world map indexes. The 2015 report on the Global Burden of Armed Violence estimated that a significant reduction in homicide rates between 2000 and 2010 would have saved almost 2 trillion dollars.

The 2015 Global Peace Index estimates that the annual economic impact of violence has reached a total of 14.3 billion dollars -- equivalent to one-seventh of global GDP. When measured as percentage of the GDP of each country, three countries that are among the least peaceful worldwide also bear the greatest burden of costs of violence containment: Syria ranked 162 with 42%, Afghanistan ranked 160 with 31% and Iraq ranked 159 with 30%.

However, these rankings overlook indicators that are perhaps not factored in. Latin America is not among the red-coloured regions on the Global Peace Index map, but it contributes most to the costs of homicides -- 250 billion dollars, according to the 2015 Global Peace Index.

In spite of featuring strong economic growth, Colombia and Brazil are the two countries with the highest costs. This is because of lack of progress in the structural, institutional and societal conditions that make peace sustainable: the countries have become wealthier, but they have progressed little on inequality and corruption that is accompanied by violent crime. In Colombia inequality and corruption has been increasing since 2005.

A nuanced approach

Indexes of peace and conflict are useful to grasp trends of conflict and violence in a given country rather than to compare the status quo of various countries at a certain moment in time.

Instead of employing them as a tool to assess general levels of peace and conflict, it could be more useful to draw on the relevant indicators or dimensions that are most relevant to planned activities. For a company that intends to bring a high number of employees to a certain country and cares for their safety, the Fragile States Index's indicator on "Human Rights and Rule of Law" would bear more relevance than the general ranking level of the country.

Using a complementary approach and cross-analysing indexes rather than choosing a single one can reduce the risk of overlooking important factors that may be concealed by the rankings.