Effect of aid assistance and aid conditionalities on nature and scale of violence and atrocities

Aid assistance and aid conditionalities overall have harmful effects on violence and atrocities like insurgent attacks.

Geographical region: Global, South Asia, Sub Saharan Africa

Effect size: Harmful effect (g= -0.018)

Confidence in the study findings: low confidence (4 studies; 35 ES)

Short Summary

Foreign aid does not always reduce violence. The effects of foreign aid on violence vary based on context and the type of aid. Military aid increases conflict. Cash aid can also escalate conflicts, while project and humanitarian aids have minimal effects. Concentrated aid funding increases military and civilian fatalities, whereas dispersed aid has weaker links to violence. In contested areas, aid can provoke insurgent attacks, while in secured regions, it may reduce violence. We have low confidence in the cell due to a limited number of studies.

Long summary

The Intervention

The interventions in the cell are different modalities of aid. Different papers use different classifications of aid. Technical and cash aid stabilize regions, while military and concentrated aid may escalate violence. Counterinsurgency aid reduces violence in secured areas but increases resistance in contested zones. Strategic allocation and monitoring are essential to ensure aid fosters stability rather than worsening conflict.

How the intervention is expected to work

Foreign aid interventions aim to influence conflict dynamics by addressing economic instability, governance deficits, and humanitarian needs. Technical and cash aid can strengthen institutions and improve livelihoods, reducing grievances that fuel violence. However, military and concentrated aid may escalate conflict by altering power balances and increasing competition among groups. Counterinsurgency aid is effective in reducing violence in secured areas but may provoke resistance in contested regions. Strategic allocation, monitoring, and adaptation to local conditions are essential for ensuring aid mitigates rather than exacerbates conflict.

The evidence base

Primary studies

The cell includes four impact evaluations. The four studies employ quantitative and primarily observational, with some employing quasi-experimental methods. They analyze using

statistical techniques such as fixed effects models, propensity score matching, Bayesian estimation, and spatial analysis.

The studies are conducted in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, and various sub-Saharan African nations.

Systematic review

There is one narrative systematic review of 24 studies, which concludes that aid to conflict zones is not effective in reducing violence.

Evidence findings

The interventions had mixed effects with technical and cash aid reducing violence, while military and concentrated aid escalate conflict. Aid conditionalities shape outcomes, as counterinsurgency aid decreases violence in secured areas but increases it in contested zones. Strategic allocation and monitoring are crucial to ensuring aid mitigates rather than exacerbates violence and atrocities.

Included studies

Said (2017) investigates the relationship between foreign aid and civil conflict, suggesting that foreign aid can play a crucial role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It categorizes different types of foreign aid, including Official Development Assistance (ODA) such as project aid, humanitarian aid, technical aid, and loan aid, as well as Other Official Flows (OOF) like military assistance and cash assistance. The research focuses on UN member countries with a population of 500,000 or more as of the year 2000. The study included 156 countries. The study employs a quantitative research design. The final sample size is 6,473 country-year observations. The author found that civil conflict incidence, was recorded in 14% of the observations, with 900 instances of civil conflict occurring across the sample. The average country received ODA equivalent to 5% of its GDP, with project aid constituting 3% of GDP, the largest category of ODA. Between 1945 and 2000, there were 314 incidents of civil conflict recorded in the 1990s alone, compared to only 48 incidents in the 1950s. The study found that military assistance and cash assistance had varying impacts on civil conflict, with specific percentages of aid to GDP reported for each category. The results indicate that technical aid ($\beta = 5.03$, $p < 0.05$), loan aid ($\beta = 27.40$, $p < 0.1$), military assistance ($\beta = 12.85$, $p < 0.01$), and cash assistance ($\beta = -2.11$, $p < 0.05$) show statistically significant relationships with civil conflict incidence, while project aid and humanitarian aid are not significant. Economic and demographic indicators such as GDP per capita ($\beta = -18.04$, $p < 0.01$), ethnic dominance ($\beta = 1.33$, $p < 0.01$), geographic dispersion ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$), and policy ($\beta = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$) also exhibit significant associations. The confidence assessment of the study is high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Strandow (2014) investigates how foreign aid to conflict-affected regions impacts the intensity of civil conflict, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The focus is how aid distribution can influence territorial control contests between warring parties, increasing or decreasing violence. Two factors are central: funding concentration (aid given in specific, high-value locations versus diffused broadly) and barriers to exploiting aid (aid types that are easier or harder to misappropriate by either state or non-state actors). This quasi-experimental study, using propensity score matching, analyzes geo-coded aid data and battleground control records to explore the relationship between violence intensity and aid disbursement patterns in sub-Saharan Africa (1989–2008). The dataset spans 19 years, covering numerous localized battlegrounds and subnational observations matched by geographic and conflict variables. The results showed an increase in military fatalities by 47% (log-transformed measure) without matching adjustments, and post-matching, it was Increased by 43%, equating to an average rise of 3.26 fatalities (109 %, or 3.3 fatalities compared to if there were low or no funding

concentration). Civilian Fatalities (Low-Barrier Aid): Increased civilian deaths by 30% without matching adjustments. There was no statistically significant effect post-matching in the overall model for education aid. The Impact of Education Aid (Military Fatalities) Initially, it showed a smaller or more negative effect. Post-matching resulted in a 75% increase, corresponding to an additional 2.61 military fatalities. Findings suggest that areas with concentrated aid funding see increased military fatalities, while areas with low-barrier, easily lootable aid experience higher civilian fatalities due to heightened competition and looting. This pattern highlights how aid types and concentration impact conflict dynamics differently. The study is rated as high and medium confidence quantitative study.

van Weezel (2015) examines the effect of foreign aid on conflict intensity at a sub-national level in three African countries: Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The main question is whether aid allocations influence local conflict levels, potentially by either deterring or intensifying conflict in these areas. This study uses a spatial analysis using 1,000 pre-existing district-level observations from the selected countries from 1999 to 2008 on aid distribution and conflict intensity with Bayesian estimation to evaluate foreign aid and conflict data. Aid data is mapped to conflict data, allowing for spatial and temporal analysis of aid's impact on conflict. Findings show that, in general, there is little evidence to support a strong effect of aid on conflict intensity. There is a minor negative link with conflict of non-fungible assistance, with a decrease of only about 0.2% in conflict intensity when moving from low to high aid levels, which is statistically weak. The spatial analysis also reveals that conflict is localized in peripheral areas, while aid is often concentrated near capitals. The province-level results contrast with the district level, where the magnitude of the estimated effect is near 0, and the probability of a negative link is just 0.46. This large difference in probability could be because, at the district level, there is no link between aid and conflict. Results showing that conflict onset at the province level is 0.11 and 0.36 at the district level, with log conflict intensity values of 5.36 and 5.08, respectively. Foreign aid, lagged by one year, has an average log value of 16.63 at the province level and 14.44 at the district level. Foreign aid has a small, statistically insignificant effect on conflict onset, with estimates of 0.4 (95% CI: -0.8 to 1.7) at the province level and 0.4 (95% CI: -0.1 to 0.9) at the district level, while ethnic polarization at the district level shows a significant effect (1.2, 95% CI: 0.5 to 2.0). Increasing aid levels correspond with a 0.2% decrease in conflict intensity at the province level, with an 82% probability of a negative link, while at the district level, the effect is nearly zero (46% probability of a negative correlation). The study is high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Sexton (2016) examines the effects of counterinsurgency aid, specifically the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), on insurgent violence in Afghanistan. The study suggests that insurgents strategically respond to aid by resisting through violent means, especially in contested areas not under government control. The study uses observational data on CERP spending and various measures of insurgent violence (bombings, enemy actions, and explosive hazards) at the district-week level in Afghanistan from 2008 to 2010. The authors employ an empirical strategy that focuses on the week-by-week variation in CERP spending to isolate the causal effect on violence. The key findings are: Civilian aid only reduces insurgent violence when distributed in districts already controlled by pro-government forces. Civilian aid allocated to contested districts causes a significant increase in insurgent violence. Military defence infrastructure projects in contested areas greatly increase insurgent attacks, while humanitarian aid has no effect. Results show that in contested districts, $100,000 of aid spending increases bombings by 0.08, enemy actions against pro-government forces by 0.05, and explosive hazards by 0.10, indicating that aid provokes insurgent violence in these areas. However, in secured districts (controlled by U.S./pro-government forces), the same amount of aid reduces bombings by 0.08, enemy actions by 0.07, and explosive hazards by 0.16, suggesting that aid only decreases violence where military control is already established. The lagged effects show that past aid spending does not significantly reduce future violence in contested districts, but its violence-reducing impact persists in secured districts over time. The study is rated as low confidence quantitative study

as it is an observational study, the authors acknowledge that the effects of aid on violence can be overridden by macro level strategic changes in the conflict, as demonstrated by the case of the Northern Distribution Network.

Zurcher (2018) is a narrative review of the effect of aid on violence in countries affected by civil war. A vote-counting approach is used reporting that only in seven out of 24 cases did aid have a violence-reducing effect compared to nine in which there was a violence-increasing effect. There was no effect in six of the studies, and a heterogeneous treatment effect in three studies. A violence-reducing effect seems to occur when aid is provided in already relatively secure environments. But when violent actors misappropriate or sabotage aid then there can be a violence-increasing effect. The review is rated low confidence as there is a single author, no published protocol, and no meta-analysis was conducted.

Confidence assessment

We have low confidence in the cell due to a limited number of studies in the cell.

Other outcomes in this study

None