The Cost Ineffectiveness of Armed Conflicts in Africa, 2000–2025

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Abstract

From around 2013, the number of armed conflicts in Africa increased to such an extent that over three quarters of the continent's population were less secure in 2023 than they were a decade earlier. After reviewing the types of armed conflict, this article explains the main costs which they incur and then assesses the effectiveness of major armed conflicts on the continent between 2000 and mid-2025. Expressed in cost effectiveness terms, the resort to armed conflict to deal with differences and disputes during this time was very high in cost and very low in effectiveness. An attempt is then made to answer the following two questions: Why do countries persist with military approaches to meet security objectives? Are there more cost-effective alternatives available? The evidence is clear that the range of activities falling under the umbrella of peacebuilding are far more cost effective than armed conflict. A support structure would be required to organise and oversee their use and might involve the establishment of government ministries of peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts, also known as wars and "organised violence", can be categorised in various ways. The long-established Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) devised four categories—wars between states, civil wars, extra-state (between a state and a non-state group based outside the state's territory) and internationalised internal conflicts where a state and/or its opponents receive support from other government(s) and where foreign fighters are involved. The Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) used UCDP data in defining an armed conflict as being where one of the parties was the state, for the issue to be control of government and/or territory and for there to at least 25 battle deaths (both combatants and civilians caught up in fighting) in a year.

More recently, the Human Security Centre (2005) identified three categories, in line with revised UCDP categorisations:

- State-based conflicts, in which the state is one of the parties involved
- Non-state conflicts, also known as "communal violence", which involve parties other than the state
- One-sided violence against civilians carried out by states and/or non-state actors.

Most recently, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has measured "political violence", which covers violence against civilians, battles, explosions/remote violence and excessive force against protesters and mob violence.

Armed conflicts can also be categorised according to their intensity in any year. SIPRI defines a low intensity conflict (LIC) as having between 25 and 999 battle deaths in a year, high intensity conflicts (HIC) as having between 1000 and 9999 and major armed conflicts as having more than 10 000. A conflict can move between intensity categories depending on the number of deaths occurring in any year.

Based on the Human Security Centre categorisation, Harris and Hove (2019) summarised the experience of armed conflicts for the period 1946–2011 as follows:

- Worldwide, the number of state-based conflicts peaked in the early 1990s, then declined to an average of 30 to 40 such conflicts in any year, the vast majority being low intensity and concentrated in peripheral areas. In Africa, there were 22 state-based conflicts in seventeen countries during 2011, which resulted in 6 600 deaths.
- Non-state conflicts increased between 1989 and 2011; these often ended within a year and resulted in under 6 000 battle deaths across sub-Saharan Africa in 2011.
- From 2002, there was a downward trend in one-sided violence in sub-Saharan Africa, with less than 1 000 deaths per annum in total in 2010 and 2011.

From 2013 onwards, owing largely to violence associated with jihadist groups allied to Islamic State, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of wars and in battle casualties worldwide, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which identifies "security and the rule of law" as one of its four pillars of governance, reports a deterioration in security and safety between 2014 and 2023 across 54 African countries based on five indicators:

- Absence of armed conflict
- Absence of violence against civilians
- Absence of forced migration
- Absence of human trafficking and forced labour
- Absence of crime
- Public perception of security and safety

The principal cause of the deterioration was an increase in the number of armed conflicts over the decade, particularly those involving one-sided violence against civilians, and worsening public perception of security and safety. As a result, the populations of 43 countries (which contained 78 per cent of the continent's population) were less secure in 2023 than they were ten years earlier.

Table 1 summarises the armed conflicts in Africa in 2024 which resulted in 25 or more battle deaths. Several countries, it should be noted, were host to multiple conflicts and/or conflicts of different types; hence the difference between the number of conflicts and the number of countries. All the countries, except Sudan, were in sub-Saharan Africa. The 28 state-based conflicts occurring in seventeen countries resulted in over 16 000 deaths in total, an average of 590 per conflict, while the average number of fatalities for non-state and one-sided conflicts were 82 and 453, respectively.

Table 1: Armed conflicts in Africa, 2024

Conflict Type	Number of Conflicts	Number of Countries	Number of Fatalities
State-based	28	17	16 545
Non-state	37	16	3 039
One-sided	26	16	11 787

Sources: UCDP databases; Davies et al. 2025

Using UCDP data, the SIPRI Yearbook 2025 reported that 21 of sub-Saharan Africa's 49 states had an active armed conflict in 2024. Of these, two (Sudan and Ethiopia) were major armed conflicts, eight were high intensity and eleven were low intensity. Almost all were internationalised in that they involved external state actors and/or transnational activities of armed groups and criminal networks.

Given this background, the overall aim of the current article is to assess the costs of civil wars in Africa and their effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the parties involved. It is important to distinguish between security expenditure and the costs of armed conflict, which leads to a general discussion of the former.

2. Determining an appropriate level of security expenditure

This section concentrates on financing security during times of war and peace. In brief, a state can meet its defence budget from domestic sources (taxation, borrowing, diversion from other government expenditure categories) and from foreign sources (exports, foreign aid and borrowing and reduced imports). Its non-state opponents may be funded from informal taxation, selling its natural resources and financial contributions from outside supporters.

It is an often-quoted mantra that government policies and programmes should be based on evidence as to their effectiveness. A valuable tool in identifying whether a policy or programme option should be followed is cost effectiveness analysis (CEA). The more widely known cost benefit analysis involves comparing the monetary values of the costs incurred by a programme or project compared with the estimated monetary value of its benefits. Costs are normally easy to estimate, however, the benefits may be intangibles such as saved lives and time which, although clearly beneficial, do not have straightforward market values. In such cases, CEA can be used to estimate, for example, the cost of saving a life using alternative safety interventions. The intervention which saves a life for the least cost would have a strong case for being chosen, others being equal. The standard text on CEA is Levin and Mc Ewan (2001).

The reasoning underlying CEA can be used when considering the various ways of meeting security needs. A traditional approach will emphasise a high level of military capability which, it is assumed, will act as a deterrent to attack from external or internal forces. The cost is readily measurable by the budget allocation to the military and related security sector categories, however, the benefit in terms of enhanced security is difficult to estimate.

There are two considerations in assessing the appropriate level of military expenditure for a country. First, the security challenges faced by any country must be rationally assessed. If there are no such challenges, then any military spending would be irrational in economic terms, which at least partially explains why there are some 25 countries which survive—and often thrive—without a military. Many of these are small island countries, however, there are larger countries as well which often rank highly on various international indexes, including Costa Rica, Iceland, Panama and Mauritius. More generally, there may be differing perceptions of the degree of security challenges faced by a country and there may be different levels of willingness to accept risks, that is, what level does a perceived risk have to reach before a country responds by increasing its military capabilities?

Second, there must be a rational assessment of whether military spending is the most cost effective of way of meeting security concerns if these were assessed to be significant. It cannot be assumed that high military expenditures will deter internal or external aggressors. In a neglected, but significant study, Collier and Hoeffler (2002) found that levels of military expenditures had no significant effect on the involvement in wars of 161 counties between 1960 and 1990. That is, low levels of military expenditure did not encourage involvement in wars, and high levels did not discourage them. Unless there has been a dramatic change in this respect since 1990—and there is no obvious reason to expect such a change—then the general effectiveness of the military as a deterrent is open to question.

Another aspect of budgetary allocations concerns the security philosophy of the country. Will it, for example, emphasise military forces as being for defence purposes only or will these also have an offensive capability? It should be noted that distinguishing between defensive and offensive weapons can be difficult. Will it focus on sophisticated weapons or will it rather have large numbers of men in uniform? More broadly, will a country use soft power aimed at building friendships with its neighbours and so reduce the likelihood of attack, or will it rely on military power to act as a deterrent? In short, what security philosophy will it adopt? A key question here is whether preparing for war is seen as the best way of achieving peace? The answer will be influenced by a country's security context.

Another relevant consideration concerns trade-offs between military expenditure and other government expenditures. Such trade-offs can be difficult to identify, however, the pressure on European countries to increase their military expenditures following the Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted them. In February 2025, for example, the British prime minister announced that the UK's military expenditure will increase to 2.6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2027 and that the additional 13.4 bn British pounds per annum would be funded by reducing foreign aid from 0.5 to 0.3 per cent of Gross National Income from 2027 (House of Commons Library 2025).

To summarise, the appropriate level of military expenditure should, like any other government expenditure category, be based on a rational assessment which weighs up perceived need and the perceived cost effectiveness of the military in meeting that need. Its cost effectiveness ratio can be compared with those of alternative ways of building security. Rules of thumb such as spending a certain percentage of GDP on its military have no basis in logic, since they take no account of a country's security needs or the most cost-effective ways of meeting these needs.

3. The costs of armed conflicts

In this section, focus is placed on the resource costs of armed conflicts as opposed to the financing of national security considered above, although the two can intersect at times. Four major cost groups can be identified. First, there are the costs of repairing and replacing various forms of capital which have been run down, damaged or destroyed because of war. These forms of capital can be human, physical, social and environmental. Some can be repaired or replaced quickly, but others will take many years; some, like human lives, can never be repaired or replaced. Second, there is the cost of lost output. Some of this loss, like the extraction of mineral resources, may be delayed rather than permanently lost, however, some are time specific and are not recoverable. Third, there are the opportunity costs of the increased military expenditure, both immediately and in the longer term when domestic and foreign debts incurred to pay for war have to be repaid. Finally, there are several ongoing costs which may be incurred in the long term.

When the extent and magnitudes of these costs are considered, it is obvious that prevention of war will always be preferable to recovery after war. Here are the main components of these cost groups:

1. Costs of repairing and replacing various forms of capital
   - Human capital – death and wounds, physical and psychological, to combatants and non-combatants from violence and displacement
   - Physical capital – destruction, damage and deterioration due to non-maintenance of public and private assets
   - Social capital – damage to established interpersonal, societal and commercial norms and procedures
   - Natural capital – damage to the natural environment
2. Lost output
   - Temporary – delayed until armed conflict comes to an end
   - Permanent – time specific and not recoverable
3. Losses from changes in government expenditure
   - Additional military expenditure due to the armed conflict
   - Reduced allocative inefficiency as resources are diverted to the armed conflict
   - Costs of servicing war debt reduces financial resources for other government expenditure allocation
4. Ongoing costs following the end of armed conflict
   - Ongoing care of wounded and traumatised former combatants and civilians
   - Intergenerational transfer of physical and mental trauma with negative effects on future productivity and output
   - Minefields and unexploded ordinances deter agricultural activity
   - Entrenchment of violence and criminality as ways of behaviour, resulting in higher costs of violence prevention and containment

Estimating these costs is complex. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) provides annual estimates of the economic impact of violence which it defines as 'the expenditure and economic effect related to the preventing, containing and dealing with the consequences of violence' (IEP 2025: 44). The total economic impact of violence is the sum of direct costs (the immediate consequences of violence for victims, perpetrators and public systems), indirect costs (the longer term costs which occur after violence such as reduced output as a result of physical and psychological loss and damage) and a multiplier effect (the economic benefits which would occur by diverting expenditure from violence-related activities into more productive activities). The global economic impact of violence for 2024 was estimated to be US$19.97 trillion (11.6 per cent of global GDP), of which 45 per cent was made up by military expenditure.

The IEP identifies three 'domains'—violence containment, interpersonal and self-inflicted violence and armed conflict. The armed conflict domain has increased far more rapidly than the other two since 2013 and includes the following categories:

- Direct costs of deaths from internal and external armed conflict (10 per cent of the total impact in 2024)
- GDP losses due to the armed conflict (51 per cent)
- Costs associated with refugees and IDPs (39 per cent)

In regional terms, the economic impact on sub-Saharan Africa was US$648.65 billion in 2024, by far the lowest of the eight regions (IEP 2025). Leaving the multiplier effect aside, 21.5 per cent was attributed to the armed conflict domain, 27.4 per cent to violent crime, homicide and suicide, 28.8 per cent to internal and private security and 18.6 per cent to military expenditure; the last two are in the violence containment domain. The IEP estimates for sub-Saharan Africa show that lost output and violence containment are far more costly than the direct costs of an armed conflict. Alternative estimates by Hoeffler (2017; 2018) also found that the human costs of civil wars were small by comparison with lost output and peacetime homicides, intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-fatal child abuse. This follows from the fact that most civil wars are concentrated in terms of time and location, whereas IPV and child abuse occur daily and throughout all countries.

In his classic book Breaking the conflict trap, Paul Collier (2003) estimated that a typical civil war lasted for seven years and resulted in a reduction of around 2.2 percentage points in economic growth compared to pre-war. This resulted in a 30 per cent increase in the numbers of people in absolute poverty. These outcomes persisted long after the end of the war and added to two other factors making a return to civil war more likely—a legacy of division and bitterness and an entrenchment of violence and criminality. That the costs of armed conflicts are very high and long lasting is beyond doubt. We now examine their effectiveness in the African context.

4. The effectiveness of armed conflicts in Africa

Based on data from a range of sources, Table 2 provides a summary of armed conflicts which occurred on the continent from 2000 to mid-2025 with a view to assessing the extent to which they result in victories for one side. It should be noted that there is a degree of subjectivity and interpretation in the categorisations. There was considerable variation in experiences between countries (several countries, as Table 1 showed, had multiple armed conflicts in any year) and within countries, with fluctuations in the intensity of most of these conflicts over time.

Table 2: Armed conflicts in Africa, 2000 to mid-2025

Country	Main Type of Conflict	Year Began	Main Parties Involved	Main Motivation	Status, Mid-2025
Burkina Faso	State-based	2019	Government security forces, various jihadist groups, ethnic groups	To establish an Islamic state	Ongoing
Cameroon	State-based	2017	Anglophone separatist militias, government security forces	Separatist push from English-speaking regions stemming from cultural marginalisation by the Francophone-dominated government	Ongoing, following the breakdown of a national dialogue
Central African Republic	Non-state	2012	Coalition of primarily Muslim groups, coalition of Christian groups	Intercommunal conflicts, including competition for natural resources	Ongoing, despite United Nations (UN) peacekeeping interventions
Chad	State-based	2003	Government security forces, Boko Haram and various community forces	Identity-based rivalries over land and political power	Ongoing, following the collapse of a peace agreement
Democratic Republic of the Congo	State-based	2004	Government security forces, M23 militant groups backed by Rwandan government	Competition for natural resources with strong ethnic foundations	Ongoing, despite peace agreement between the national government and the Congo River Alliance
Ethiopia	State-based	2020–2022 (Tigray)	Ethiopian government forces, Tigray People's Liberation Front	Separatism, federal versus regional power struggle	Ended by a negotiated peace agreement brokered by the African Union
Côte d'Ivoire	State-based	2002-11	Muslim north versus Christian south	Power struggle between supporters of incumbent president and opposition leader	Peace agreement in 2011 established the Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation Commission
Libya	State-based	2011–2020	Two competing governments, one based in the west and the other in the east	Political rivalry followed by the collapse of the Gaddafi regime	Negotiated peace agreement led by the UN
Mali	State-based	2012	Government security forces, French military forces, the JF-G5Sf network jihadist groups, various self-defence groups	A mix of dissatisfaction with government performance, separatism/secession and a push for an Islamic state	Ongoing. A peace agreement was signed in 2018, but has been weakly implemented
Mozambique	State-based	2017	Ansar al-Sunna Islamic state group, national government forces, SADC peacekeepers	Separatism/secession. Creation of an Islamic state	Ongoing
Niger	Sahel insurgency spillover	2015	National army, French and US forces, Islamist groups (Boko Haram)	Regional jihadist movement from Mali/Burkina Faso	Ongoing

Country	Main Type of Conflict	Year Began	Main Parties Involved	Main Motivation	Status, Mid-2025
Nigeria	Multiple conflicts	2009	National defence forces, Boko Haram and other Jihadist groups, local armed groups	Separatism, inter-communal violence based on competition for and other resources	Ongoing. Government-Boko-Haram talks inconclusive
Somalia	Somali civil war (Al-Shabaab insurgency)	2012	National defence forces, African Union peacekeepers, al-Shabab insurgents, local armed groups	Competition for natural resources, with jihadist foundations	Ongoing
South Sudan	Post-independence civil war	2013-18	Political power struggle	Power struggle with ethnic tensions	Ended with a peace agreement in 2018, although tensions remain
Sudan	Darfur conflict, Blue Nile and South Kordofan insurgencies	2019	National security forces versus, the Rapid Support Forces, with the latter supported by the United Arab Emirates	Power struggle following the failure of democratic transition	Ongoing. Massive displacement of people, atrocities, starvation

Of the fifteen countries documented in Table 2, the main conflicts in four came to an end (Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Libya and South Sudan) after an average period of six years, although peace in most of these countries remains fragile and tenuous. Each ended because of a negotiated peace agreement, rather than a clear military victory. The other eleven were continuing during 2025 and have an average life span of 12 years; no such wars have lasted less than six years.

The vast majority were predominantly state-based conflicts involving competition for power between a government and one or more opponents. Since 2013, the opponents in eight countries have been Islamic groups aspiring to set up states based on Islamic principles. In addition, many state-based conflicts hosted fighting between non-state groups and some also had high levels of one-sided violence where civilians were targeted by both government and non-state groups.

In summary, over the past 25 years, armed conflict has not proven an effective way of wrestling power from governments in Africa nor has it led to clear military victories by governments. The best that can be said for armed conflict is that it may act as a precursor to a negotiated peace settlement; however, such settlements have not resulted in three quarters of the cases.

This finding holds more generally. After reviewing US military interventions aimed at bringing about regime change, Denison (2020: 3) found that these 'rarely succeed regardless of the strategy utilized and ... often produce unintended consequences, such as humanitarian crises and weaker internal security within the targeted state'. A similar conclusion was reached by Toft and Kushi (2023), using the comprehensive Military Intervention Project database. In terms of sustainable peace, Watts et al. (2017) found that more than a third of wars, once ended, recommenced within five years, which is consistent with earlier estimates that about half of civil wars recommence within ten years (Collier 2003; World Bank 2011).

Taking a longer-term perspective, the IEP suggests that clear military victories and peace agreements have become less common since the 1970s. In their words:

> *Fewer violent conflicts now end with a peace deal or clear victory. Since the 1970s, the percentage of conflicts that end with a clear victory has dropped from 49 per cent, to nine per cent, while the proportion of conflicts ending in peace agreements has fallen from 23 to four per cent (IEP 2025: 60).*

The previous sections have demonstrated that armed conflicts in Africa since 2000, have been both costly and largely ineffective in achieving their objectives. The following section strives to answer the following two questions—why do countries persist in emphasising military approaches to security objectives? and are there more cost-effective ways of meeting these objectives?

5. Alternative approaches to security

Before examining these two questions, it is important to provide two clarifications. The first is the crucial distinction made in the discipline of peace studies between conflict and violence. Conflict refers to differences in needs or interests between two or more parties, which can be individuals, groups or nations. Conflicts are inevitable and occur incessantly and are dealt with by three main approaches. First, the more

powerful party—and power can be physical, psychological, political, economic or military—can force the weaker party to concede. Second, the party with the strongest rights—typically enshrined in law—can win over the party with lesser rights. Third, the parties can engage in "collaborative conflict resolution" via dialogue to try to find a mutually-satisfying solution to the conflict. The key point here is that the parties involved in a conflict have choices concerning the approach they will use, although there may well be conflicts over this choice. The use of force or violence, whether real or threatened, is not inevitable.

Second, there is an overwhelming emphasis on preparing for—and being willing to use—force as the main tool of violence containment. The IEP (2025) estimates that in 2023–2024, the direct costs of military expenditure as a way of violence containment were US$4517 billion compared with only US$15- and US$8 billion for peacebuilding and peacekeeping, respectively. In addition, less is being spent on peacebuilding and peacekeeping than in the past; the US$23 billion in 2023–2024 represents a decline in real terms of 26 per cent from the US$64 billion spent in 2008.

The first question is why focus is continually placed on military approaches to meet security objectives? One explanation is a widespread and persistent belief that military approaches are effective, despite the overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. The evidence on African wars since 2000 presented above, can be supplemented by the meticulous and pathbreaking research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) (see also Stephan and Chenoweth 2008) who investigated the relative effectiveness of 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns between 1900 and 2006. The campaigns concerned big issues—bringing about regime change, expelling foreign occupiers or secession. They found that 53 per cent of nonviolent campaigns were successful compared with 26 per cent of violent campaigns. For sub-Saharan Africa, the respective proportions were 57- and 33 per cent. In addition, even where violent campaigns were successful, the human costs were high and the subsequent conditions were far more oppressive than occurred in contexts where the change had come about via nonviolent means.

Of course, even if such knowledge became widely known and accepted, it is by no means certain that a significant shift towards nonviolent ways of dealing with conflicts would come about. Vested interests within the military and from those who profit from the arms trade could be expected to strongly resist any reduction in their power and influence.

The second question is whether there are non-military approaches which meet security needs more cost effectively? If there are, it would be rational to reallocate resources away from the military and towards these alternatives. In fact, peacebuilding provides such an approach. Peacebuilding is an umbrella term and has been variously defined. The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (2025) speaks of the long-term process of building the foundations of sustainable peace:

> *Peacebuilding aims to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. It is a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace. Peacebuilding measures address core issues that affect the functioning of society and the State and seek to enhance the capacity of the State to effectively and legitimately carry out its core functions.*

The definition used by the Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies (2025) focusses on transforming relationships:

> *Peacebuilding is the creation and nurturing of constructive relationships across ethnic, religious, class, and racial boundaries. Peacebuilders seek to resolve social inequities and transform structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. This work spans the entire conflict cycle and includes conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation.*

Despite the breadth of peacebuilding activities, these are without question far less costly than budget allocations to the military, let alone the costs of armed conflicts. Dietrich Fischer (2006, 6) referred to 'The negligible costs of war-prevention' [by mediation and the like]. Assessing their effectiveness is both under-researched and highly complex and means that governments lack the objective evidence to guide their allocations towards peacebuilding as opposed to other expenditure categories. The same applies to the decision-making by foreign donors as to where their aid can be best applied. One of the few studies on the returns to investments in peacebuilding (IEP 2016) drew on the experience of peacebuilding in Rwanda between 1995 and 2014 to produce a global model. The study found that an expenditure of US$1 on peacebuilding would bring returns of US$16 to the global economy, mostly in terms of reduced costs in terms of battle deaths and population displacement—and these are only two of the costs of armed conflict presented earlier. This very high cost-effectiveness ratio of peacebuilding of 16:1 indicates that far greater expenditure on peacebuilding is worthwhile, both in the budgetary expenditure allocations by governments and in the priorities of foreign donors.

The experience of Costa Rica, which abolished its military in 1948 and has broadly followed a peacebuilding approach thereafter, provides a valuable case study. Table 3 compares its rankings with five of its central American neighbours on three well-known indicators

of well-being—the Human Development Index (HDI), the Global Peace Index and the World Happiness Index. Costa Rica has far higher rankings than its neighbours, the only exception being its HDI ranking when compared with Panama (which also abolished its army in 1990, following the invasion by US forces). Harris (2004) has discussed the interplay between military expenditure and well-being in Central America and its possible relevance to African countries, while Abarca and Ramirez-Varas (2025) have estimated the size of the peace dividend which followed from Costa Rica's decision to abolish its military. Following careful statistical analysis of fifteen Latin American countries, the latter found that:

> *Prior to 1950, Costa Rica [had] the fourth lowest GDP per capita growth [out of 15 Latin American; after the abolition of the army and subsequent economic reforms, the country became the second-best country in this indicator. The country's GDP per capita ... grew from 1.42% from 1920 to 1949 [and] increased to 2.28% during 1950-2010 ... the second largest positive increase in this indicator in Latin American (Abarca and Ramirez-Varas 2025: 835).*

Table 3: Rankings of six Central American countries on indicators of well being

	Military expenditure (% of central government expenditure) 2023	HDI rank, 2023	GPI rank, 2023	WHI rank, 2023
Costa Rica	0	62	54	6
El Salvador	3.8	132	104	37
Guatemala	2.7	137	108	44
Honduras	5.8	139	=124	63
Nicaragua	1.9	123	111	47
Panama	0	59	84	41

Sources: SIPRI 2025; UNDP 2025; IEP 2025; Helliwell et al 2025.

6. Conclusion

This article has presented evidence which suggests that the costs of trying to achieve security by military means are far greater, and its likely effectiveness far lower, than by using various peacebuilding measures. In other words, if you want peace, concentrate on peacebuilding. Logically, this would involve a reallocation of resources away from militaries and towards peacebuilding activities. An essential pre-requisite for such a reallocation would be a mandate from a clear majority of the population.

Assuming such a mandate was achieved, another issue is an appropriate support structure to oversee and promote peacebuilding. One possibility is to establish a government ministry with specific responsibility for the various tasks of peacebuilding (Harris 2011). These tasks would likely include educating citizens for peace in various education settings, training them in the ethos and skills of conflict resolution, promoting dialogue, building respectful and just relationships between ethnic groups and promoting the healing of those traumatised by past violence. Five countries—the Solomon Islands, Nepal, Costa Rica, Timor-Leste and Ethiopia—have such ministries which were set up with varying aims according to the context and needs of the country (Irene 2024).

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