Andrew J. Williams and
Alasdair Gordon-Gibson

Conflict and Development

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Conflict and Development, authored by Andrew J. Williams and Alasdair Gordon-Gibson, and published in its third edition in 2025 by Routledge, remains one of the most up-to-date contributions in the Perspectives on Development series. Initiated alongside the UN's Millennium Development Goals in 2000, this series has produced development-focused texts across multiple social science disciplines, including anthropology, economics, geography, and sociology. The book continues to garner attention from students and scholars interested in the intersections between conflict and global development processes. The third edition of this work benefits significantly from the collaboration between the two authors. Williams offers a strong theoretical framework, while Gordon-Gibson contributes nearly two decades of extensive field experience in

humanitarian and development sectors. Together, they aim to provide a more robust understanding of contemporary conflicts and development challenges. As they explain in the preface, the new edition offers a "deeper dive into the history of conflict and the emergence of new theories and policy guidance about present and future options" (p.1).

Initially published in 2009, the book was notable for being one of the first to engage directly and comprehensively with the relationship between conflict and development. Over time, the evolving dynamics between security, conflict, and development have been more thoroughly integrated, making the current edition more nuanced and analytically layered. Structurally, the book consists of six core chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter includes boxed case studies, thematic highlights, summary points, discussion questions, and curated reading lists, giving the book an accessible, pedagogical format well-suited for classroom use.

The introduction offers a comprehensive overview of theoretical approaches, ranging from modernization theory to postcolonial and critical perspectives. The authors stress that conflict and development are not discrete phenomena but are deeply interwoven. Their theoretical framing emphasizes the "triple nexus" between human security, development, and peace, asserting that conflicts often stem from internal structural weaknesses within states (pp.1–3). In this view, global power structures and institutions play critical roles in sustaining or exacerbating underdevelopment and instability.

Chapter One explores the root causes of conflict, focusing particularly on poverty and competition over natural resources. The authors assess a variety of theoretical models and give special attention to the limitations of economic determinism in explaining conflict. For instance, while Collier's "greed and grievance" model is acknowledged, it is deemed insufficient in isolation. Williams and Gordon-Gibson argue that political, historical, and identity-based factors are equally significant in understanding how and why conflicts erupt. They highlight how resource-based grievances, development inequalities, and identity politics feed into violent unrest. The authors also demonstrate how local conflicts are entangled with global systems, stating: "combatants and civilians in the midst of civil wars are often closely connected with the globalized international economy" (p.50).

Chapter Two investigates the roles of key institutions in shaping development and conflict outcomes. Here, the authors divide institutions into two categories—

hardware (e.g., states, the UN, IMF) and software (e.g., ideological frameworks such as neoliberalism, globalization, and liberal peace). This framework allows for a dual-layered analysis of the ways institutional structures and their ideological underpinnings influence conflict zones. A central claim in this chapter is that "international organizations are not neutral" (p.76). They often act in their own strategic interest, and this tendency can significantly shape reconstruction and development agendas (p.80)

In critiquing the liberal peace model, the authors argue that, although it purports to offer a universalist vision of peace and development, it often leads to illiberal outcomes—such as the suppression of local governance models or the marginalization of non-Western actors. Despite exploring alternatives, the authors stop short of proposing a concrete alternative paradigm, instead presenting a pluralistic but still predominantly system-internal critique. The rise of China is also discussed in this chapter as a counterpoint to Western dominance, but the treatment is brief. Similarly, regional organizations such as NATO, the African Union, and ASEAN are mentioned, though the analysis remains focused on their structural form and geopolitical positioning rather than their specific roles in development or conflict mitigation.

This lack of depth weakens the connection to the book's central conflict–development axis. Considering the brevity of this section, the omission of deeper analysis regarding how these institutions operate within specific conflict environments constitutes a notable analytical gap. A more focused, grounded analysis could have strengthened the book's coherence.

Chapter Three turns the spotlight to the human dimensions of conflict and development, highlighting issues of civic participation, representation, civil society, and gender. The authors argue that participation and representation have become rhetorical tropes in development discourse, often lacking substantive engagement with affected populations (p.122). Civil society, when defined through Western liberal standards, tends to be disconnected from the socio-political realities of local contexts (p.117). Gender equality is discussed with sensitivity to local resistance; efforts to integrate gender frameworks into peace negotiations and development programs may face backlash when they challenge prevailing cultural norms (p.131).

Chapter Four shifts from "conflict resolution" to "conflict transformation," a concept the authors favor for its emphasis on grassroots peace initiatives.

The authors assess hybrid peace models that have emerged in the post–Cold War era, many of which blend top-down institutional efforts with bottom-up community-based practices. While the chapter offers valuable insights into alternative conflict strategies, it largely omits the development dimension central to the book's overarching thesis. This thematic deviation results in a slight misalignment with the book's structural integrity.

Chapter Five critically examines post-conflict reconstruction, focusing on the limitations of technocratic and externally driven development strategies. The authors analyze how concepts like nation-building, democratization, and institutional reform have been deployed not only as tools for recovery but also as instruments of geopolitical influence. Drawing from case studies in Iraq and Sierra Leone, they show how externally imposed models often fail to yield sustainable or inclusive outcomes. These cases reinforce the authors' broader argument that development must be context-specific and informed by local realities.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, deals with development aid and its complex entanglement with conflict. The authors argue that traditional development paradigms fall short in volatile environments. Humanitarian aid, while ostensibly neutral, is often politicized and may inadvertently reinforce inequalities or prolong conflict (p.245). They present the "triple nexus" model—combining humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding—as a more integrated and potentially effective intervention strategy. This chapter is particularly informed by Gordon-Gibson's fieldwork and challenges the assumption that foreign aid is inherently constructive. On the contrary, local reactions are frequently ambivalent or even hostile, reflecting the contradictions of externally driven recovery.

Across all chapters, the book is structured to facilitate learning and critical engagement, employing discussion prompts, practical case studies, and further readings. The writing style is accessible without sacrificing analytical rigor, making it suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate audiences alike. The interdisciplinary methodology, combining security studies, development theory, and peacebuilding literature, contributes to a holistic understanding of complex global issues.

Nevertheless, the book is not without limitations. Its broad scope sometimes compromises the depth of analysis. Given the scale and diversity of contemporary

conflicts—over 70 active conflict zones globally—the authors' attempt to address such vast terrain in a single volume leads to uneven coverage. While introductory and intermediate readers will find the book valuable, advanced scholars may require more granular, region-specific analysis.

A further critique involves the book's partial reliance on Western frameworks. While the authors provide critical perspectives on liberal peace and Western development ideology, their exploration of alternative approaches—such as those emerging from China or Russia—remains superficial. A deeper engagement with post-Western paradigms, or a more pronounced inclusion of decolonial theory, would have expanded the scope and critical power of the book. One example illustrating this limitation is the statement on page 231: "it is now designated as a terrorist organization, especially after the attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023." This phrasing reflects a Western-centric interpretation, omitting the fact that several states had designated the group as such before this date, while others view it as a resistance movement. The lack of pluralistic perspective here reveals the constraints of the book's analytical framing.

A more detailed discussion of recent conflicts—particularly the ongoing crisis in Gaza and the (in)action of global institutions—could have enhanced the book's contemporary relevance and critical strength. Despite these critiques, Conflict and Development remains a valuable text, especially for students and practitioners seeking an accessible yet critical entry point into the field.

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