

Output, Outcome, Impact:

Focusing the Analytical Lens for Evaluating
the Success of Corporate Contributions to
Peace-Building and Conflict Prevention

Klaus Dieter Wolf

July 2010

PRIF

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Introduction

This contribution to the analytical challenges of evaluating corporate engagement in conflict zones will focus on the selection of appropriate evaluation criteria. The following considerations may not be of an immediate use for a practitioner in the sense of a tool for evaluation. What comes along are some suggestions to define more precisely the concept of corporate contributions to peace and security. But this may also be helpful for a more practically oriented policy analysis as a clarification of the analytical frame within which a toolkit for evaluation can be developed. In this sense it may ultimately be useful in both contexts – the more academic and the more practical and policy oriented.¹

There seems to be some common understanding to use the categories “do harm”, “comply”, “do no harm”, and “pro-active engagement” (Nelson 2000, Banfield et al. 2003: 5) for qualifying corporate involvement in conflict zones. According to this often used categorization, “doing harm” characterizes corporate behavior which intentionally or unintentionally fuels conflict by taking advantage of state failure in order to pursue business interests or by not considering negative externalities of business operations (Ballentine/Nitzschke 2004: 38). “Compliance” means behavior in accordance with the regulatory environment of the host state and international standards. Since legal standards in many host states are not well developed or not properly implemented and a coherent international legal framework for corporations operating in zones of conflict is not available, compliance might still include collaborating with repressive or corrupt governments. “Doing no harm” or risk minimization relates to behavioral options which aim at minimizing negative externalities and neutrality vis-à-vis a conflict. This might include risk assessments of companies’ operations, but also the withdrawal from the zone of conflict (Anderson 1999). “Pro-active engagement” comprises all corporate contributions to conflict prevention and peace-building which go beyond the legal obligations of home state, host state or international law (Banfield et al. 2003: 24).

In what follows I will argue that this intuitively plausible categorization gives rise to some misunderstanding (or even confusion), and that - before these categories can be re-adjusted and applied fruitfully - several choices have to be made with regard to the focus of their application. The first of these choices concerns the distinction between the traditional (and broader) CSR agenda and the more specific conflict relevant activities and initiatives of the CSecR agenda (section 1 of my paper). The second choice further narrows down the scope of application by subdividing the conflict environment according to the pre-, manifest and post-conflict phases in which corporations’ activities may be evaluated (section 2). The third one concerns output, outcome and impact as a set of subcategories for the evaluation of effectiveness which also imply different scales of measurement for “success” (section 3). This latter distinction deserves particular attention. It serves to reconsider and re-assign the initial categories, i.e. “do harm, comply, do no harm, pro-active engagement”, and to locate them in different dimensions of effectiveness.

My conclusion will be that the analytical framework for evaluation criteria of corporate engagement in conflict zones, instead of trying to be all-embracing, should narrow down the focus of attention (a) to corporate behavior directly addressing physical violence in zones of conflict; (b) to the post-conflict phase of peace-building (also aiming at preventing the outbreak of new violence, i.e. conflict prevention); and (c) to the outcome dimension of

¹ The following considerations and suggestions are partly derived from a broader conceptual framework for a comparative research agenda which has been developed by the research group “Business and Conflict” at PRIF (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) with the participation of Nicole Deitelhoff, Moira Fail, Susanne Fischer, Andreas Haidvogel and Melanie Zimmer. The project was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Its findings have been published in Deitelhoff/Wolf (2010a). I want to thank Melanie Zimmer for her valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

corporate engagement rather than to output or impact. In my view, this focus offers an adequate balance between the criteria of immediate conflict relevance, likelihood of empirical observations, and analytical accessibility when we evaluate the success of corporate engagement.

1. The distinction between CSR and CSecR: indirect and direct conflict relevance

The corporate activities and initiatives under consideration here range from unilateral company codes of conduct to collectively agreed upon sectoral initiatives, certification systems, multi-stakeholder initiatives, conflict and human rights impact assessments and many more. On the micro level these different initiatives may aim at changing the local and immediate corporate environment, on the macro level, they may address the national as well as the transnational societal and political environment. In addition to these different scopes, such activities and initiatives may involve the private sector in different actor constellations and coalition patterns, i.e. their engagement might be unilateral, multilateral (with other corporations) or in cooperation with civil society organizations, state actors and international organizations. We have to include all these different scopes and patterns of corporate activities in the realm of our evaluation of their success (Wolf et al. 2007). But where should our focus lie? In order to focus the analytical lens for evaluating corporate contributions to conflict prevention and peace-building it may be preferable to draw a distinction between “traditional research” on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the emerging corporate security responsibility (CSecR)-agenda. This suggestion is intuitively appealing and seems to be self-evident at the first glance, but turns out to be quite tricky at the second: CSR deals with corporations operating in a peaceful environment, while CSecR is concerned with corporations in a violent environment, i.e. operating in a zone of violent conflict. This distinction, useful as it may be, is of course an ideal-typical which can only serve as a rough guideline in the real world with the only criterion being the proximity to (past or future) and the level of violence. In the real world, such a line of distinction between a peaceful and a violent environment is of course difficult to draw. From what stage of development can a post conflict zone be called “peaceful”, or a pre-conflict zone “violent” enough to move from the CSR to the CSecR agenda or vice versa?

Even when we concentrate on corporate operations in weakly governed and conflict-ridden states where the level of violence is high, corporate activities in such an environment may be more directly or more indirectly relevant to the conflict. To state my point more clearly: Even if we agree that we concentrate on corporate behavior in conflict zones in order to limit the scope of our investigation, we have still not moved completely beyond the CSR agenda. The traditional CSR agenda encompasses a broad range of policies and activities of corporations to regulate their own affairs in areas beyond technical standard setting, i.e. environment, human rights, corruption, and labor (Haufler 2003: 226). But there may be good reasons to assume that economic growth, the promotion of human rights, the introduction of anti-corruption measures, or the adoption of environmental and labor-friendly standards may be of high conflict relevance in that they reduce the structural causes of physical violence (Carnegie Commission 1997, Lund 2002, Miall et al. 1999: 108). Furthermore, companies might have important capacities to influence these structural causes of conflict in their sphere of influence.

How do we handle the inclusion/exclusion of activities that address structural violence, i.e. potential root causes of civil wars and other armed conflicts, such as poverty, lack of distributional justice, or exclusion from the political process? Is there a measure for the extent to which such activities are influencing conflict and the level of physical violence?

In order not to blur the boundary between the broader CSR- and the more focused CSecR agenda, the first conclusion is to focus on intentional corporate contributions which are (1) directly addressed at regulating or (2) indirectly influencing the level of violence in an environment characterized by imminent or only very recently terminated interactions of physical violence.

These activities may therefore include corporate contributions to strengthening the effective use of a legitimate monopoly of force, thereby reducing the level of physical violence directly and contributing to the provision of the public good security. They may also include commitments and activities which are intended to contribute to the provision of other public goods for which an indirect, but meaningful relation to security problems (in the narrower sense of influencing the level of physical violence) can be plausibly claimed (on structural prevention and root causes of conflict, see Carnegie Commission 1997, Hamburg/Holl 1999, Lund 2002). Such “correlates of

peace” should only be included very restrictively, but the line should nevertheless be drawn with some flexibility because areas of indirect relevance may vary among conflict zones according to the respective causes of a conflict, e.g. environmental degradation or ethnic tensions might be a cause of a conflict in one conflict zone but not in another conflict setting (Feil et al. 2008, Deitelhoff/Wolf 2010a).

The trade-off implied in this choice is of course one between saving “conflict relevance” of corporate activities from becoming an all-inclusive – and therefore analytically useless – category, on the one hand, and missing or losing sight of activities which tackle the root causes of impending or latent structural violence, on the other.

Table 1: CSR and CSecR according to immediate conflict relevance

	Relevance for the level of physical violence	
	Direct relevance	Indirect relevance
CSR	None	Low / Medium
CSecR	High	High

2. The distinction between different phases of conflict: likelihood of empirical observations

A further analytically useful distinction concerns the phase of a conflict in which corporations operate: can measures for the success of corporate efforts be equally applied to pre-, manifest and post-conflict environments? The term conflict prevention is often used to refer to corporate activities in all three phases of a conflict (for many others see Wenger/Möckli 2003). In this broad sense conflict prevention refers to three analytically different phases: “prevent the emergence of violent conflict”, “prevent ongoing conflicts from spreading” and “prevent the re-emergence of violent conflict” (Carnegie Commission 1997: xviii).

But following a more narrow definition, conflict prevention only addresses the first of these phases. It is not applicable any more to corporate engagement during conflict, and it does not cover efforts at post-conflict peace-building. However, I would still see a certain plausibility in using this term for a more inclusive description of the temporal focus of attention, since “peacebuilding is the same process as long-term conflict prevention to stop the recurrence of conflict, and is effectively the same as structural prevention in conflict-prone areas, whether pre- or post-conflict” (Stewart 2003: 15f).

If academic research and policy analysis were to put the focus on conflict prevention in the narrower sense of pre-conflict involvement, it would be targeting a class of highly unlikely cases or might not even find any. What incentives should individual companies have to invest in a public good (peace or security) when the necessity to do so is highly speculative, the provider would only be one among many other potential beneficiaries, and therefore free riding would presumably be a more rationalist option (see Krahmman 2005).

Furthermore, the focus of attention should not be on the phase of manifest conflict either. To evaluate corporate contributions to reducing the level of physical violence during a manifest conflict would be an unfair yardstick and overburden the expectations towards the private sector (Rieth/Zimmer 2004: 30). In addition to this unfair burden argument, the likelihood to find corporations which continue to do their business and have not yet packed their bags is not particularly high and there would not be much left to evaluate anyway. It would probably limit the evaluation to certain sectors, such as oil, gas and mining, which are highly dependent on deposits of natural resources in conflict regions and where investments are characterized by high sunk costs.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the post-conflict phase offers the highest likelihood of business engagement and therefore also of empirical evidence to evaluate. In addition, the latent possibility of a new outbreak of only recently terminated physical violence in a fragile social and political environment in practice tears down the analytical distinction between pre- and post-conflict phases. Post conflict peace-building always

implies the prevention of future violent conflict. The post-conflict phase can therefore also be regarded as the only pre-conflict constellation in which corporate engagement is likely to be observed and where its success can be evaluated (Wolf et al. 2007).

Table 2: Choice of phases according to likelihood of empirical observations to be evaluated

	Likelihood of empirical evidence
Pre-conflict	Low
Manifest violent conflict	Zero
“Post/pre”-conflict	High

3. The distinction between output, outcome, impact as different dimensions for evaluating effectiveness (“success”): analytical accessibility and political relevance

The third distinction to be suggested in this paper concerns the “output”-side of corporate contributions to peace-building and conflict prevention. Deviant from the often used terminology, I follow the more restrictive use of the term introduced by modern policy analysis: I will not understand “output” in the “big” or macro sense in which it is used for example as one of the three input-throughput-output-dimensions of the political process or simply as a synonym for any kind of results. Rather, I want to follow the practice of policy analysis in Political Science and use “output” in a narrow or micro sense as one of three categories for measuring success. This more precise usage, which takes up the three dimensions of effectiveness well-known from regime analysis, enables us to distinguish between output, outcome and impact (cf. Easton 1965, Young 2004, Underdal 2004).

- a) *Outputs* can be defined as (self-)commitments of actors,
- b) *outcomes* are behavioral changes based on such commitments, and
- c) *impacts* can be understood as a contribution to problem solving or goal attainment resulting from behavioral change.²

Whereas a) and b) define two different sub-categories of corporate engagement,³ c) allows us to distinguish between commitments and actions on the one hand and their effects on the other. While it is possible to distinguish these three dimensions of effectiveness, it should nevertheless be clear that they are closely connected and may even be regarded as parts of a causal chain.

According to this terminological reconceptualization – output, outcome and impact – it becomes obvious that the initial do harm, comply, do no harm, and pro-active engagement categories for evaluating the success of corporate engagement relate to different dimensions of effectiveness: obviously two of them – do harm and do no harm – are impact-related (referring to negative and more neutral impact, omitting, however, the positive “do good” category), whereas comply and pro active engagement are related to the output and outcome dimensions of effectiveness.

This does not mean that the initial categories are useless in substance, but they might lead to confusion since they relate to different dimensions effectiveness. Therefore, my suggestion is to re-organize their application according to the output, outcome, impact distinction – which also makes it necessary to fill some holes. The value of this distinction is that it sheds light on different aspects of corporate behavior in conflict zones and what follows from it as potential objects for measuring success. But are they equally interesting? One could argue that impact, i.e. problem solving and goal attainment, is the most relevant because this is, after all, what it is all about when we ask if it makes sense to bring in the private sector into conflict prevention and peace building (Underdal 2004: 34; Witte/Reinicke 2005: 74, 84). So why waste time with evaluating the weight of “words” (output) or “action” (outcome) which may or may not contribute to the reduction of physical violence? Why not address their “effect”

² Note that problem solving and goal attainment are not always identical. The attainment of stated and unstated goals may not always lead or even intend to lead to the solution of a problem (Young 1994: 143f).

³ A general weakness of the output, outcome, impact-typology should, however, not be overlooked: because of its origins in the analysis of the effectiveness of institutions and not of individual actors, outcome and impact can be clearly distinguished in the case of collective corporate activities which are based on an agreement, but it may be more difficult to separate them analytically if we deal with individual actors. This means that the application of the two needs case-specific categorizing.

(impact) right away? There are good reasons to take a closer look at all three dimensions of effectiveness because the choice for either of them combines certain advantages with disadvantages.

3.1. Making (self)-commitments: “words” or the output dimension of engagement

Among the three dimensions of effectiveness, output (in the “micro” sense described above) is the one which is the best manageable in scholarly terms, but perhaps also the least interesting in practical terms in that it offers a measure of success conditions rather than of success itself.

However, the output dimension sheds light on whether corporations have clearly articulated policies towards security in a conflict zone and goals with regard to more structural causes of violence. Therefore the intentionality of security related corporate engagement and goals can be investigated more explicitly here than elsewhere. The output dimension is also the place where the “design evaluation” of a corporate or collective code of conduct can take place, e.g. by addressing the question of how strong monitoring mechanisms are. Furthermore, the overall scope of commitments (global, national or local) and different actors’ constellations (unilateral, multilateral corporate commitment or multi-actor/sectoral commitment) can be examined here. The output dimension is also the context in which issues concerning the input legitimacy of corporate activities can be addressed (Wolf 2006: 211f): What kind of accountability mechanisms do self-commitments imply? What is their participatory quality? Are they transparent? How did initiatives come into existence? Are relevant problems addressed (responsiveness)? How reliable/mandatory vs. voluntary is a certain corporate initiative?

Output is relatively easy to handle in analytical terms, for example by looking at statements of individual companies or agreements on collective or multi-sectoral/actor self-commitments that can be found for example in codes of conduct or sustainability reports. As far as the initial categories are concerned, strictly speaking, the output dimension only relates with pro-active engagement and with none of the other three (while do harm and do no harm are related to impact, comply is a form of corporate behaviour, see below). Empirical findings of different outputs could be measured and judged along the axis from pro-active self-commitments to no self-commitments at all. In more detail: can we observe pro-active self-commitments which fill gaps of host state regulations for the provision of public security and/or related public goods? Can we observe self-commitments to provide security and/or related public goods in accordance with the laws of the host state? Or are there no self-commitments to the provision of security and/or related public goods? On a more concrete level we can investigate whether corporations adopt new policies on security and other conflict-related issues in their company codes of conduct or other company statements. Do they join collective initiatives such as the Kimberley Process Certification System and declare to abstain from trading or purchasing conflict goods? Do they (formally) adopt good governance principles such as the Equator Principles, the US-UK Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative to avoid human rights violations or to fight corruption?

3.2. Changing behavior: “action” or the outcome dimension of engagement

With regard to the initial categories the outcome dimension of corporate engagement – roughly speaking – relates with compliance and pro-active engagement, but not with the other two categories, do harm and do no harm. To focus the evaluation of success on analyzing outcomes seems to offer a good balance between being interesting (i.e. politically relevant) and manageable (in analytical terms) at the same time. It goes beyond analyzing formal commitments in statements or codes of conduct (only “words”), but addresses and evaluates companies’ actual behavior and their compliance with their own commitments in zones of conflict: do corporate self-commitments indeed also change corporate behavior? Do companies actually comply with the normative standards they committed themselves to? Empirical findings of different outcomes could be measured and judged along the following axis: Can we observe pro-active activities compensating for the failure of host states to provide public security or related public goods? Are companies just doing business and are they only contributing to public good provision in compliance with host state law? Can we even observe non-compliance with host state law or evidence of taking advantage of host state failure?

Again, in more concrete terms: do companies create or initiate pro-active measures to positively influence the level of conflict? Do they not only join, but also implement collective initiatives, such as the Global Compact, the Voluntary Principles, or the Kimberley Process, in their daily business operations? Are management procedures

in place to implement these commitments and are they followed in critical situations? Do companies employ or refrain from unethical practices? Do they withdraw instead of becoming accomplices of violent regimes or warlords? Collecting data for analyzing corporate behavior is already more demanding and, if possible, should not only rely on corporate self-reporting but include other sources, such as interviews, direct observation, or reports from stakeholders.

3.3. *Attaining one's (or whose?) goals: the impact dimension of effectiveness*

Among the three categories for evaluating corporate engagement in zones of conflict, the impact dimension clearly is the most demanding in an analytical sense, but at the same time the most interesting in terms of political relevance (Underdal 2004). Doubtlessly, attributable impact would offer the strongest argument for bringing in the private sector into conflict prevention and peace-building. The impact dimension relates with the initial do harm and do no harm categories. Empirical findings of different impacts could be measured and – at least intuitively – judged relatively easily along the following axis: can we observe a reduction of physical violence as a reaction to corporate activities (“do good”)? Does the level of violence remain stable (roughly equivalent to the do no harm category)? Or is there evidence of more violence as a result of corporate activities (“do harm”)?

However, the analytical problems generated by the impact-yardstick for success are manifold. They start with a very simple question: impact on what? The question implies a problem which has already been dealt with in section 2 of this paper: what is a relevant “security related” impact in the first place? As suggested earlier on, what we would definitely have to measure are changes in the level of physical violence that can be observed in a given conflict zone. However, security related impacts might also include conflict specific “correlates of peace” which may affect the level of physical violence indirectly, such as a more stable and better governed political (e.g. rule of law, human rights and less corruption), or a more sustainable social, economic and ecological environment (Feil et al. 2008).

A second crucial question is: how would we know positive effects when we see them? Who decides on the relevant goals which have to be attained, and thereby on the criteria for a “positive” or “negative” impact of corporate engagement? In principle, the evaluation of goal attainment could be based (a) on “corporate satisfaction” according to evaluation criteria following from the goals a company (as an individual actor or as member of a collective initiative) has defined and committed itself to. Focusing on this corporate perspective would however mean that targets that companies set for themselves might only be very moderate and might not be in the interest of concerned stakeholder groups. Therefore, goal attainment could also be defined as (b) the more-encompassing concept of “stakeholder satisfaction” which may be the most difficult one to determine and investigate, but the most balanced one, too.⁴ But evaluation criteria could (c) also be “imposed” from the outside by what we as analysts may understand as being “in the public interest” or in accordance with whatever normative categories we prefer (“researchers’ satisfaction”). If we talk of collective initiatives such as PPPs, the first and the second perspective could coincide. A reasonable evaluation should, however, measure impact as goal attainment on the terms of all three perspectives.

Even bigger challenges for measuring the impact of corporate contributions result from the problems of multi-causality and counterfactual reasoning (for an overview cf. Underdal 2004). How can we control for the universe of other factors which could explain changes in the level of violence in conflict zones? What difference would the absence of a given private engagement make, and how can we tell? Given these analytical problems and confronted with the choice between identifying and assessing corporate engagement or its impact, the former is clearly less difficult to translate into operational tools.

⁴ After all, there are no fixed criteria for inclusion or exclusion according to which an actor may claim or be denied the status of a stakeholder.

Table 3: Choice of “effect” according to analytical accessibility

Effectiveness dimensions	Analytical accessibility	Political relevance
Words: (Self)-commitment (Output dimension of engagement)	Very high	Low
Action: Change of behavior (Outcome dimension of engagement)	Moderately high	Substantial
Effect: Goal attainment / Problem solving (Impact dimension)	Low	High

4. Conclusion

In this paper I took a three step approach to focusing the analytical lens for evaluating the success of corporate engagement in conflict zones. The main objective was to re-assign the categories do harm, comply, do no harm, and pro-active engagement for the identification and evaluation of success. To this end, I introduced the output, outcome, impact-distinction known from regime theory as a more consistent alternative categorization allowing for a more nuanced evaluation of success. The re-organization of the relevant categories resulting from this suggestion is summarized in Table 4. It is worth reiterating that positive engagement does not automatically translate into positive impact, even well-meant engagement might do harm. At the same time, just doing business is not per se bad, but might have positive effects.

Table 4: Reorganizing the “do harm, comply, do no harm, and pro-active engagement“ distinction

Value	Engagement		Impact (“Effect” on level of physical violence or on „correlates of peace“)
	Output (“word”) Commitment	Outcome (“action”) Behavioral change	
+	Pro-active self-commitments filling gaps of host state regulations in security and/or related public goods provision	Pro-active measures compensating for host state failure	Reduce (‘do good’)
+/-	Self-commitments to security and/or related public goods provision in accordance with law in host state	Just doing business/no contributions to public good provision beyond compliance with host state law (‘compliance’)	Stabilize (‘do no harm’)
-	No self-commitments to security and/or related public goods provision	Non-compliance with host state law and/or taking advantage of host state failure	Raise (‘do harm’)

If the choice is between evaluating the engagement (output and outcome) or impact of private governance contributions in conflict zones, the analytical focus should be on the outcome dimension of corporate engagement. Caught in the dilemma between political relevance and analytical accessibility, measuring outcome may be politically less relevant in the sense of its proximity to “ultimate” success than the impact of corporate activities. In favour of focusing on outcome it can be argued that, among the two dimensions of engagement, outcome is closer to impact than mere output and is even a precondition for impact. Moreover, outcome is less tricky to develop into an operational tool than the identification and evaluation of impact. Different from the latter, the focus on outcome offers a yardstick for the measurement of success which avoids the complex methodological problems of counterfactuals and multi-causality which are inseparably linked with studying and evaluating impact. Admittedly, the framework for evaluation suggested here is a pragmatic one in that it values analytical accessibility higher than immediate political relevance. As far as academic research is concerned, this analytical framework has already proven to be extremely helpful for identifying the different dimensions and values of the dependent variable of corporate security governance in the context of the PRIF project “Business and Conflict” (Deitelhoff/Wolf 2010b, Feil et al. 2008). Its pragmatism may have the advantage of being equally appealing to scholarly research and practical policy oriented analysis.

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