

# Creating stability in conflict-affected countries: what role for employment practices?

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The image of a war profiteer - an individual or private company benefitting from a period of violent instability - is well recognized. Less well-established in the public imagination are the business women and men who see violent conflict as a threat to their livelihoods, by disrupting their links to suppliers and markets. While some private companies undoubtedly profit from instability, violent conflict has significant negative effects on a country's economy and therefore most private businesses suffer during periods of violence and can take a long time to recover. In conflict-affected countries there are thus many business people with a strong business incentive to support peacebuilding, in addition to their personal interest in safety and security, and concern for society at large. **Businesses can play a variety of roles supporting peacebuilding efforts, some of which are more obvious than others.**

International Alert has been working for many years with business people and associations to encourage their interest in supporting peacebuilding. Alert's programs in this area can be organized into two broad categories, with either businesses collaborating with civil society and government to implement peacebuilding activities, or companies adopting ways of conducting their business activities that are sensitive to conflict dynamics and avoid contributing to drivers of instability. In Sri Lanka, for example, Alert helped private sector actors build reconciliation across ethnic lines through a ['business for peace' alliance](#). Alert has also played a leading role in promoting [conflict sensitive business practices](#), or 'CSBP'.

For at least a decade, the concept of CSBP has received a lot of attention from outside the private sector as well as within it. On the whole it is well known what businesses, both local and multinational, need to do to through their operations to avoid contributing to instability, yet **gaps exist in the evidence base**. One such gap is a detailed understanding of how companies' *employment practices* can contribute to stability in conflict-affected countries. Conflict insensitive employment practices can certainly contribute to *instability*; in countries with fragmented social groups, for example, perceived favoritism in employment opportunities towards one group can create grievances that fuel violence. **It is less obvious what the principles of stability-promoting**

employment practice look like, what regulatory frameworks are needed to enable these principles to take effect, and, importantly, how the risks of adopting these practices can be managed.

At the recent [Third Annual Conference of the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law](#), participants grappled with this concept. A key question is what is understood by stability; in conflict-affected countries where an elite monopolizes political power and economic resources, stability could mean maintaining the exclusive status quo and laying the foundations for future violence. Therefore stability should perhaps be regarded as a dynamic process, encompassing (non-violent) political and economic change that includes constructive challenges to the existing order. Another important question is about the type of employment needed for stability. Should this employment be in the regulated formal sector, or the informal sector, which accounts for roughly half of all jobs in countries in Africa and Asia? Does employment in one of these sectors have a greater effect on stability (acknowledging that the line between them is blurry)? Moreover, what is it about employment that helps create stability; is it the income, the dignity it gives, or some other factor?



There are also more practical considerations. Unless carefully implemented, attempts to make employment practices contribute to stability could have the opposite effect. Careful implementation has to start with careful assessment and management of the risk that changed practices might have negative results. For example, a business trying to promote reconciliation between the Rohingya and Rakhine in Myanmar by hiring from both groups could find itself under attack by militant Buddhist groups as a result and have to close. Simple recommendations to businesses when trying to maximize the positive impact of their employment practices, such as adopting non-discriminatory hiring, are clearly not sufficient. The complexity of conflict dynamics demands that ‘good enough’ approaches to employment, that aim for peacebuilding impact but also minimize risks, are found.

Greater clarity of concept and praxis is needed if the apparent potential for private sector employment to contribute to stability and peace is to be capitalized on. Over the next three years a better understanding will emerge, thanks to the [research projects on employment for stability](#) under the Call supported by the Platform that are underway, including that led by the Bonn International Center for Conversion, [of which Alert is a part](#).