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Is it a "private" sector? The impact of business actors on social conflict and cohesion

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Biography of author

Brian Ganson is Professor at the Stellenbosch Business School. There he heads the Centre on Conflict and Collaboration, which works with business, government, international actors, labour and communities to reduce the costs of conflict and increase collaborative opportunities. Prof Ganson's research focuses on private sector development in conflict-affected contexts, including questions of management and leadership; risk assessment and risk management; international policy; and the role of neutrals. Concurrently a Professor in the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking, he co-leads the Business & Conflict Research Initiative, an international consortium applying the tools of data science to increase understanding of conflict dynamics and conflict risk mitigation. Prof Ganson was previously a Senior Researcher with the Fletcher School Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution. He was also a Director of Conflict Management Group, a not-for-profit consultancy addressing protracted conflicts of public importance. He received his Juris Doctor with honours from the Harvard Law School, his Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and his Bachelor of Arts with high distinction from the University of Michigan.

IS IT A "PRIVATE" SECTOR? THE IMPACT OF BUSINESS ACTORS ON SOCIAL CONFLICT AND COHESION

Prof Brian Ganson

ABSTRACT

Private sector actors play an inordinate role in peacebuilding and other conflict-affected environments. Their organisation, financing and limited focus on business objectives, particularly when they operate at scale, allow them to profoundly shape economies emerging from conflict. Macro-level studies demonstrate that the trajectory of private sector development also shapes societal relations. Poorly managed, it can further concentrate power in elites, undermine state-citizen relationships, and exacerbate intergroup tensions. These dynamics make already pressing social and political issues all the harder to address. Yet it has traditionally been hard to assess whether and how the actions of an individual business enterprise affect the broader society's ability to address its past and build a more positive future. Recent and emerging scholarship in network and systems theory and analysis allows us to model how the relationships that business actors build and break, as well as the dynamics of conflict and cohesion they interrupt or amplify, reverberate profoundly beyond their "private" relations. This underlines that the primary impact of a business on conflict or peace is not economic, but rather relational. There are important implications for business ethics and leadership in the African context, as well as for social and policy perspectives on the very nature of the private sector we choose to develop.

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPERATIVE FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Peter Maurer, speaking as president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, warned in 2015 that 'we have entered a new era, and it is not a peaceful one'.[1] Globally, the number of countries facing armed violence is at a 30-year high;[2] armed conflicts are ongoing in more than one in four African Union member states.[3] Meanwhile, gang fighting in Cape Town and mining conflicts in the Platinum Belt are so severe that they register as battles in global databases of conflict;[4] interpersonal violence results in violent death rates higher in South Africa than they are in many countries at war. In our backyards, as around the world, increasing polarisation,[5] driven by exclusion, marginalisation and inequality,[6] drive often-violent protests that are growing in frequency and intensity.[7] This and other data suggest that, without fundamental course corrections, these trends will deteriorate even further.

This violence—whether physical violence; the violence of land being taken or fair wages being withheld; the violence of voices being silenced when they dare to organise or to speak out against injustice—is an insidious disease that infects our society and makes healthy individual and social development impossible. For every 100 learners who start school in South Africa, fewer than half will achieve matric[8] and only eight will complete a tertiary degree within two years beyond the normal timeframe for completion.[9] Those who get lost along the way are victims of physical and structural violence that destroys families, undermines communities, inhibits political organising, and overwhelms institutions. Analogous crises manifest in housing, healthcare and nutrition—for example, research by Professor Mark Tomlinson in the Department of Global Health concludes that 10 million adults and 3 million children experience hunger each week. Progress against any of these crises requires us first of all to confront the violence underpinning it;[10] and yet we fail to do so.

At the heart of our collective unwillingness or inability to interrupt and reverse this downward cycle of social crisis and violence is our lack of social cohesion. Divisions in society—between black and white, urban and rural, labour and management, haves and have nots, beneficiaries and victims of globalisation, the list goes on—allow us to compartmentalise and discount inequalities that we do not perceive as central to "us" and thus rather leave to some amorphous "them" to resolve. For example, among all racial and ethnic groups in our country, White South Africans are least likely by far to experience poverty. They are, perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore the least likely group to perceive any enduring legacies from Apartheid, and the least likely to believe that land reform is important to addressing inequality.[11] Lingering injustice—and the sense that the rich and powerful are fundamentally indifferent to it—empowers 'ethnopopulist political entrepreneurship', as well as the increase in party politics infused by racial division.[12] These intentionally divisive tactics make dealing even with issues of broad concern—such as public and private corruption that undermines service delivery—nearly impossible across identity groups.[13] Thus, we see how distinguishing "them" from "us" inhibits effective collective action and explains outcomes such as state capture, which in turn make a host of pressing issues harder to address.

Mary Anderson is a leading scholar of, and activist for, effective intervention in conflict-affected places. She reminds us that, if we are not working to change the most important drivers of a system, then we are working on nothing at all. And the defining dynamic of contemporary Africa is that conflict and violence are winning out over social cohesion and peaceful development. A new study by Miklian, Cechvala, Ganson, Garcia, Hoelscher, Joseph, and Katsos in the *Harvard Business Review* illustrates this dangerous dynamic unfolding in Cape Town. Here, 'the youngest generation are the most likely age cohort to believe that violence is sometimes justified—62% of 18-25 year olds think so, compared with only 36% of their elders 46-55. They are the most likely age cohort to cope with social crisis by building relationships with violent actors, and the most likely to experience gangs as positive forces in their communities. These attitudes appear driven by their experience of violence. More than half of youth 18-25 personally experienced violence in the past four years; and they live in a context where this is expected to get worse. Furthermore, they have little faith in formal institutions: 18-25s are the age cohort most likely to experience government actors as the primary instigators of both violence and extortion'.[14]

Unless we find ways of bringing people together to counteract these dynamics—demonstrating through concerted action that more can be achieved through social solidarity than through social conflict—then very little else we do will matter; our good works and incremental progress across all domains will be undermined and reversed by the macro-dynamics of incohesion, conflict, and violence.

And the defining question is why it is so difficult to unite around solutions. After all, none of us started today hoping that children in South African would be sexually assaulted on their way to school. And yet, that is the reality we face. In the time it took for the average person to read this far, another six women and girls across the country have been raped.[15] Why can we not rally the interpersonal, community, social, and political resources to reach and re-direct potential offenders, protect women, prosecute perpetrators, and hold politicians and government officers to account? Even on such a basic issue of human rights and human dignity? Touching our own mothers and sisters and daughters and nieces and colleagues and students? Certain that the failure to do so will more or less directly come back to haunt us? In this address, I draw from a range of work, together with outstanding and inspiring colleagues around the globe, to make sense in particular of the role of private sector actors in this crisis of incohesion and collective inaction.

Pathways of private sector development and incohesion

The business-oriented literature has long held 'that businesses have a role to play in maintaining and promoting peace and societal development in conflict-affected parts of the world'.[16] Indeed, management scholars have traditionally held an exuberantly high opinion of the private sector in this regard. The inaugural issue of the *Journal of World Business* proclaimed that business is an unmatched force for peace.[17] Howard V. Perlmutter named 'the senior executives engaged in building the geocentric enterprise ... the most important social architects of the last third of the twentieth century', as they offered new frameworks that could 'control of the explosive centrifugal tendencies of our evolving world community'.[18] The logic was linear: direct investment would bring economic development to conflict-affected contexts,[19] with ethical leadership ensuring that its benefits would be distributed fairly.[20] This would address deprivation, the presumptive root cause of conflict,[21] and make any ethical business in a conflict-affected area inherently peace-positive.[22]

Yet empirical evidence was at best weak for any proposition that the private sector positively influences post-conflict reconstruction[23] or peacebuilding.[24] In response, neo-classical economics and, to a lesser extent, management theory took into account the need for greater social cohesion, nuancing arguments to posit that that private sector development provides room for political consensus-building on a foundation of 'security, justice and jobs' delivered by a private sector that 'cuts across ethnic and religious lines'.[25] Still, this is anti-empirical, at least in the aggregate. Corporate operations in volatile environments are found to be more likely to increase grievances and marginalisation in ways that have prolonged and exacerbated conflict than to promote peaceful development[26]—even when there are intentions to deliver a "development dividend".[27] Perverse effects result[28] as new resources entrench winning and losing groups engaged in economic and political competition, rather than enhancing broad-based development.[29]

The explanation for these dynamics of private sector development and incohesion is most visible when business begets evil. For example, the civil war in Sierra Leone had, on one side, De Beers buying diamonds sourced from Charles Taylor in Liberia, whose forces were deployed across the border; on the other side, DiamondWorks deployed Executive Outcomes mercenaries—the companies shared a major shareholder and offices in London—to contest control of the diamond fields under an agreement with President Kabbah. 'This was a violent conflict among multinational corporations in which one company would win handsomely, but the country itself would lose'.[30] On a smaller but no less brutal scale, New Forests Company in Uganda promotes itself as a sustainable and socially responsible business. Yet its plantation in Uganda was cleared of local residents by government forces that 'started shooting and tear gassing .... They were burning houses'. Children chased by soldiers drowned or died in the flames.[31] It is hard to imagine sufficient consensus for positive social change emerging from such business-generated conflict and violence.

Yet, business need not be intentionally violent in order to undermine social cohesion. For example, it seems unlikely that Total wanted the war in Mozambique that led it to suspend its US $20 billion natural gas project. Still, the way it developed the project—marginalising community voices; militarising responses to social risk; exacerbating regional and political fault lines; and relying on elite bargains to gain and maintain control—directly contributed to the escalation of conflict.[32] Rio Tinto probably did not want escalating violence in communities around Richards Bay Minerals to halt its production. But it built 'few meaningful linkages' between major industry and the development of local businesses, and had 'limited, if any, community consultation and participation' in the planning of initiatives.[33] This results in a youth unemployment rate higher than the SA average, while human development indicators such as domestic water provision and internet access lag, and criminality and corruption increase.[34] Companies such as Total and Rio Tinto either ignorantly, or arrogantly, fail to address the predictable outcomes of the dynamics that unfold when some—whether defined by ethnicity or political affiliation, or simply as an elite set of "winners"—benefit while others see no prospect for their children's futures.

The pervasiveness of exclusion, marginalisation, and inequality within the development of the African private sector is underlined by the fact that it rarely comes to our attention unless it happens to explode dramatically—or until it affects major business interests. We heard about the shutdown of Richards Bay Minerals in the light of rising unrest. We did not hear that Rio Tinto was in violation of the contractually binding International Finance Corporation Performance Standards that make issues such as migration to mining areas and the development of sufficient local capacity to address heightened social and political problems a responsibility of the company, and that insist on the full participation of local communities in company planning and decision-making. Similarly, new work by Ganson and Hoelscher[35] gives voice to small businesses in Langa, which were found to be crucial actors in systems of community resilience and cohesion. Yet they reported their experience of 'the predatory state: criminal and violent police; government agencies that seek to suppress and control rather than to develop and support; and provincial and national policies that people experience as sacrificing the needs and aspiration of the community to feed the greed of those more powerful',[36] in particular large businesses aligned with politicians. These dimensions of private sector development and its undermining of social cohesion rarely enter headlines—or management scholarship.

The negative effects of private sector development on incohesion go well beyond a particular business case or local community. As developed by Ganson, He, and Henisz, 'the implications for society's growing inability to build sufficient consensus to address its grand challenges are profound'.[37] Indeed, 'one of the most powerful hypotheses in political economy'[38] is that social divisions and the conflicts they engender undermine economic progress[39] and negatively affect democracy, the provision of public goods, and the quality of governance.[40] To address society's most complex and pressing issues, we must leverage the resources and capabilities of all relevant actors.[41] Yet the negative dynamics of "us" and "them"—exacerbated by the way in which we as African societies do business—diminish prospects for coming together to achieve peaceful and sustainable development.

The effect of individual business actors on incohesion in the broader societal network

As scholars we have made progress in modelling these pathways of incohesion. Ganson and M'cleod did so at the country level in Sierra Leone, documenting how 'the trajectory of private sector development', supported by the World Bank, development finance institutions, and bilateral donors, replicated 'dynamics of grievance and exclusion that were root causes of the country's endemic instability and then civil war' in the post-war period.[42] Luiz, Ganson, and Wennmann developed more general principles from this and other African experiences. They modelled how, in the absence of consensus-based reforms that take into account power contestation (for example, between formal and traditional authorities or the centre and the periphery) and inter-group inequalities (for example, inter-ethnic or rural-urban), business environment reforms tend to undermine rather than support human development.[43] And, as illustrated in the Total case in Mozambique, we can document how a company can be such a major force that it shapes fundamental conflict dynamics as it becomes a focal point of the broader system.

We can also, with increasing confidence, state that firms, shaping as they do economic dependence between groups, also shape their conflict-collaboration calculus at the micro-level.[44] Work by Ganson and Wennmann[45] and Miller, Ganson, Cechvala, and Miklian[46] concludes that '[g]roup members' interactions with firms … influence working relationships in ways that improve or inhibit the communication capabilities, shared understanding of the context, sufficient consensus on the fairness of decisions made, and working trust in their implementation necessary to intergroup agreement'.[47] This occurs across stakeholders' experiences of a firm's full gamut of strategy, finance, marketing, organisational development, human resources, product development, operations, or corporate social responsibility,[48] making managerial decisions moderators of conflict or cooperation within their primary stakeholder networks.

However, linkages between the micro- and the macro-levels have remained unclear. In brief, do the daily decisions of business leaders matter to our social cohesion and ability to take effective collective action on pressing issues at the broader societal level?

New work by Ganson, He, and Henisz in the *Academy of Management Review* and *Global Strategy Journal* answers in the affirmative. They conclude that, particularly in contexts in which inter-group inequality looms large, 'the choices that a manager makes about the structure of their relations with their stakeholders impact the broader network of relationships among identity groups to which stakeholders are primarily affiliated'.[49] Using the tools of network theory, they model how managerial decisions to form or break primary stakeholder ties are evaluated, and acted on, 'not only by a firm's primary stakeholders, but also by others attentive to their group's access to, and control over, economic, political, and social assets'.[50] Without claiming to be exhaustive, they identify four relationship strategies that managers pursue that have negative implications for conflict and collaboration in the broader society. Furthermore, 'processes of resource allocation and patterns of inclusion or exclusion can catalyze or inhibit the formation of other relationships between members of identity groups to which the firm's stakeholders belong', 'whether or not there is awareness of, or intention to effect, such outcomes'.[51]

The first managerial decision they explore is whether to bring groups together or to keep them apart. In contexts of conflict, people may be less likely to interact socially or economically across group boundaries. Managers may 'manipulate or exploit' the disconnected parties, intentionally keeping them disconnected or in conflict with each other to maintain control over information and access to unique rent-seeking opportunities.[52] 'For example, in a context of interethnic conflict, a mining firm may gather knowledge from local elders and officials dominated by one ethnic group to develop its own proposal for a social and environmental plan negotiated in the capital with national officials of another ethnic group, which is only then delivered back to the local elders and officials. The firm thus maintains much greater control over the plan's terms and conditions, such as resource commitments for social investments.'[53] While potentially beneficial to the firm, the resulting disconnects feed perceptions of unfairness that reinforce the boundaries between identity groups and increase the risk of conflict.[54]

The second managerial decision they analyse is whether to include or exclude groups from the firm's stakeholder network. In the context of the corruption, weak rule of law, and high inter-group conflict that characterises the African business landscape, managers may prioritise stakeholders with greater economic, political or social resources[55] to solidify the support of more powerful parties in ways that maximise firm profits.[56] However, this intensifies inter-group polarisation, as people lose the capacity and willingness to collaborate or problem-solve across group boundaries.[57] Furthermore, institutional arrangements are put into question,[58] drawing the entire economic system into conflict between groups. This was explored in the Langa case (above) where, from the perspective of small business owners, 'the very characterisation of their activities as illegal, illicit, informal, unregulated, or violent is seen as an expression of the predatory state and structural violence',[59] as private sector policies were hostile to previously disadvantaged groups and those without strong political connections. We also see this dynamic in growing calls to amend the Constitution to facilitate land redistribution.

The third managerial decision they investigate is the extent to which the firm will actively work to erode the boundaries between identity groups. Typically, social conflict replicates within the firm as stakeholders sort themselves into groups—for example, men and women, or black and white employees—that mirror conflict in the broader society. For example, when only people of colour advocate for greater fairness towards administrative staff, or only women advocate for more family-friendly policies, it may become less possible for people to believe that they can or should collaborate on other issues across group boundaries.[60] As explored by Ganson in the context of Atlas Copco South Africa, decisive leadership is required.[61] Senior managers had to examine their own roles in the company's under-performance with respect to equity with 'brutal honesty'; they needed to openly discuss the politics of affirmative action and even their fears for the future of their own (mostly white) children. In addition, as explored by Ganson in the context of the return of Scania to Iraq,[62] operations may be greatly complicated when the company intentionally builds bridges across groups. In order to nurture the inter-ethnic cooperation necessary to the establishment of a training facility for repair technicians, Scania leadership needed to add new issues, partners and benefits to the mix within a regime that the general manager said felt more like corporate philanthropy than a profit-seeking enterprise. Many managers will not assume this mandate, leaving social conflicts to fester and grow.

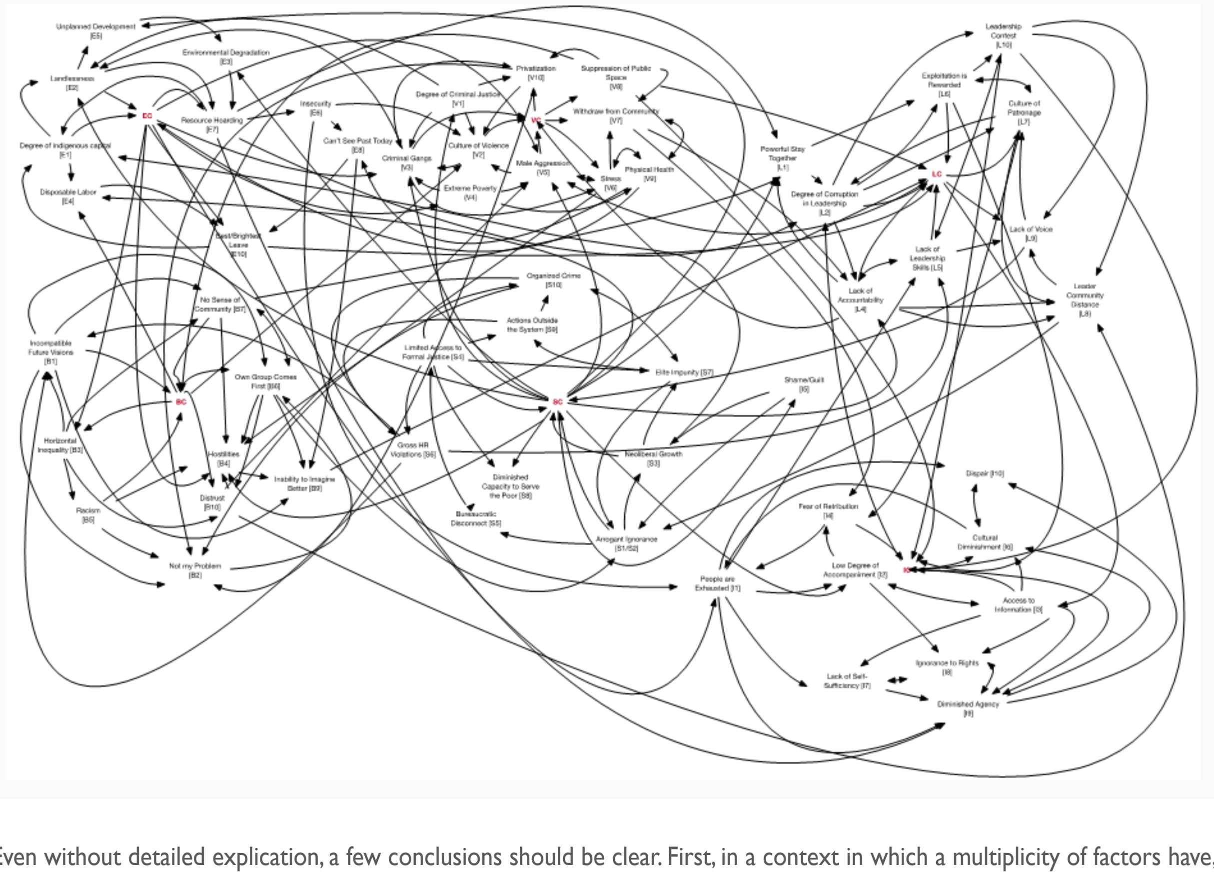
The final managerial decision that Ganson, He, and Henisz consider is the extent to which the firm will work with and through existing leaders, organisations, and institutions, rather than pursuing its own processes and initiatives. Managers may want to privilege internal procedures designed by legal, public and government affairs, or community relations departments: keeping the firm in the centre 'builds the firm's own social capital; can keep the agenda more focused on the business issues of greatest immediate relevance to the firm (and possibly, to other immediate stakeholders); and maintains greater firm control over processes and outcomes'.[63] It also allows managers to align themselves with—and to hide behind—industry and other purported "best practices". However, this choice will almost inevitably undermine local "helpful brokers" who are 'connected to, and trusted by, important local constituencies' on both sides of conflict divides, and who lead 'informal but well developed structures that help to sustain an acceptable level of cooperative relations despite the stresses of the conflict environment'.[64] A company working between parties on its own diverts 'attention, status, and social capital' away from locally helpful people and institutions. This undermines their effectiveness in mitigating intergroup conflict and maintaining social stability.[65]

This analysis makes clear that managerial decisions that may appear rational from the perspective of the profit-seeking firm have—at least in conflict-affected contexts such as our own—sorely suboptimal outcomes from the perspective of social cohesion and the ability of people to solve problems across group boundaries. Emerging work[66] suggests that the cumulative effect of such decisions is particularly corrosive. In 2018/2019, a group of community facilitators were trying to help the citizens living in and around the industrial port city of Barcarena in Para State, Brazil to organise and to engage with local companies and government authorities. They hoped to address chronic issues of violence, unemployment, lack of clean water and sanitation, and claims to land taken to build the port and the industry around it. A process engaged community members and local activists to explore why, over decades, community efforts at engagement, legal action, and even protest that had shut down major industrial facilities had not had the desired effect.

Collaborative analysis and reflection identified six key dynamics inhibiting effective collective action. These were (1) the high degree of economic injustice, experienced as an economic system that allocates most of the benefits to the few and most of the costs and risks to the many; (2) the high degree of structural exclusion, experienced as systems and institutions that primarily address the priorities of the already powerful and ignore the needs of the already vulnerable; (3) an acute degree of physical insecurity, experienced as personal insecurity, fear, and violence in public spaces and in the home; (4) the high degree of between-group conflict, experienced as divisions that make it hard to confront and address challenges together between traditional peoples, the poor from the territory, in-migrant poor, in-migrant "winners", and elites; (5) the high degree of intra-group conflict, experienced as divisions between individuals or factions, between people and leaders, and between leaders within identity groups that undermine group cohesion and capacity to act; and (6) leader exploitation, experienced as people using positions of informal and formal power and authority to serve their own interests rather than acting on behalf of the greater good.

Applying tools of systems analysis, we explored the primary factors that enabled each of these dynamics, and the results that flowed from them. We then looked at the ways in which the dominant company in the region, Norsk Hydro, directly and indirectly influenced the dynamics of the system through its actions and inactions. These included its withdrawal of contracts from local uniform producers to buy cheaper wares from abroad (contributing to economic insecurity); its use of "disposable" labour recruited from outside the region in its construction projects (resulting in higher rates of unemployment and community violence when young men found themselves stranded and unemployed after the project ended); its collaboration with the government on projects that were vehemently opposed by indigenous communities, the rights of whom the government refused to recognise (undermining indigenous rights and community voice); and its failure to engage in any serious process to settle land claims, even though its industrial facilities sat on land taken from local communities by force by the military regime in power at the time (contributing to the hunger and homelessness of what had been subsistence communities). This analysis allowed the visualisation of a systems map that explained why effective collaborative action was so difficult to achieve:

FIGURE 1: CORPORATE CONTRIBUTIONS TO INCOHESION IN BARCARENA



Even without detailed explication, a few conclusions should be clear. First, in a context in which a multiplicity of factors have, over a long period of time, contributed to a downward, self-reinforcing cycle of conflict and incohesion, effective collective action is exceedingly difficult. At the most basic level, people rendered hungry, sick, and fearful by company actions had little energy to organise against the dynamics of private sector development that had undermined their human rights and human development; and the small, positive efforts they could muster were easily overtaken by larger, negative systems dynamics. Second, in a context in which formal and informal institutions are weak and frequently in conflict with one another, the company's influence is pervasive. It is hard to imagine a major, positive shift in the system towards peaceful development that does not involve the company making fundamental changes to a wide range of its own practices. Given this conclusion, it is perhaps not surprising that the company summarily withdrew its financial and logistical support to the facilitation team after it shared its preliminary findings. It pivoted to a more traditional "social investment" programme that would not require it to address its own role in reinforcing dynamics of incohesion and undermining attempts at collective action—or to confront an increasingly organised and aware community structure.

The potential for business actors to build social cohesion

So far, this address has focused on the negative effects of individual businesses and private sector development on incohesion, showing how they undermine our ability to take effective collective action on our most important social challenges. Is a positive role for business as simple as turning these practices on their head? To some extent, yes. If one wants to reduce violence, a good place to start is to stop punching one's neighbour in the nose. A willing firm can apply analyses developed under the rubrics of Do No Harm, conflict-sensitive business practice, and business and human rights due diligence to examine and address its direct and indirect contributions to conflict and violence. A next step would be to examine its relational strategies within its stakeholder network. Ganson, He, and Henisz find concrete, positive examples of managers who intentionally foster a denser network of ties between members of identity groups in conflict; bridge multiple groups in their stakeholder network to avoid privileging one over the others; work to erode the boundaries and increase collaboration between members of different identity groups within that network; and work with and through already-established helpful brokers engaged across conflict lines. In applying these market strategies—deciding with whom and how the firm will do business—these leaders not only helped to reduce conflict risk within their stakeholder networks, but contributed to greater collaborative capacity within the broader society.

However, market strategies are insufficient. A transition away from a system of widespread exclusion, marginalisation, and inequality that is deeply rooted in history—that is to say, our current one—is political. Indeed, a 'place experiencing entrenched conflict needs to experience profound shifts in power relationships and institutional arrangements in order to unleash peaceful development'.[67] For firms to contribute to broader systems change, managers must overcome their *qualunquismo*—an Italian word referring to an attitude of apathy or disgust toward politics—to embrace progressive non-market strategies as well. Ganson, He, and Henisz explore these opportunities for firms to use their 'disproportionate voice' in the political process in service of public policy that heals and sustains community. Some corporate leaders, for example, deploy company resources to push for infrastructure development that benefits the poor and historically marginalised; to support coalitions for fair and transparent elections and broader public participation in politics; to demand accountability on issues of social cohesion and human rights from the candidates and parties to which they contribute; and to advocate in favour of wealth taxes or higher capital gains taxes that can be directed towards people perpetually left out and left behind. Using South African examples, they note that 'firms undertake these and other efforts for a variety of reasons: for example, altruistic (e.g., to advance Ubuntu values); to address pragmatic business concerns (such as unmanageable in-migration from underdeveloped, former Black "homelands" to mining areas); to meet regulatory requirements (e.g., for Black economic empowerment); or for an explicit mixture of these motives'.[68]

Furthermore, innovative strategic processes are required to sustain progress towards social cohesion. Because status quo systems and institutions that underpin incohesion 'are functioning to achieve some purpose—protecting the power and authority of a particular elite, for example—they are highly resistant to change'.[69] This requires first of all, 'strategic analysis within a systems framework, understanding not only the dominant dynamics of social cohesion and of intergroup tension (of which the company may or may not be an integral part), but also the factors that reinforce the status quo and resist positive change'.[70] This allows for the prioritisation of the 'factors that are driving the evolution of the system, and that, if they were changed, would lead to a significant change in the system'.[71] Secondly, it requires 'a degree and nature of external engagement in strategy development with which most companies are unfamiliar'.[72] Companies need to make their strategic planning more permeable to outside influence[73] and to 'relinquish some measure of control over decision-making'[74] in order to nurture coalitions for positive social change. This, in turn, requires 'a mindset shift: from the company working with "its" stakeholders on "its" issues to perceiving itself and others all as each other's stakeholders in a common future'.[75]

Finally, exceptionally long timeframes are required. At least since early work by Chigas and Ganson,[76] "many drops in the bucket" approaches to social change have been problematised, as individual attempts to "contribute something positive" are often undermined by dominant systems dynamics. Intentional engineering of coherence and cumulative impact across efforts is therefore a cornerstone of contemporary conflict-sensitive business practice and business and peace scholarship and policy.[77] This requires patience. Chevron's re-entry strategy into the conflict-torn Niger Delta—which has held up well in comparison to the CSR strategies of other oil majors[78]—took years of negotiations with community groups, traditional authorities, government officials, and development partners to establish the forums required to nurture company-community trust and communication, manage local social investments, and promote regional development. Similarly, the power producer ISAGEN in Colombia spent years establishing a forum that convened local residents and senior military officials to document and address human rights abuses by the army in the area in which the company wanted to build a hydropower plant[79]—attending to the priorities of the poor and marginalised before moving forward with its own commercial objectives. "Move fast and break things" is not a strategy for social cohesion or positive collaborative action.

We can thus set out with some confidence the boundary conditions that define the potential for business actors to build social cohesion. The challenge is that we can anticipate that most major corporations operating on the African continent today will be unable or unwilling to pursue the necessary strategies. As explored in greater detail by Ganson,[80] this is because many of their business models are predicated on incohesion. For example, companies tell us that they are in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) because coltan, mined for the niobium and tantalum it contains, is rare. Yet Australia, through its Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, helpfully points out that it has the world's largest reserves of tantalum, and also reserves of niobium 'large enough to supply current levels of global demand for up to 70 years'.[81] The difference is that, in Australia, a company must acquire mineral rights through competitive processes, pay fair wages, meaningfully engage with local communities, and respect environmental regulations. A study by the Multilateral Insurance Guarantee Agency of the World Bank Group confirms that companies are willing to take on the risks of conflict-prone environments like the DRC simply because the returns—driven by corrupt access to resources[82] and regulatory holes[83] that allow social and economic costs to be externalised—are higher there than anywhere else.[84]

As documented in the Norsk Hydro example explored above, it therefore often is not in a company's interest for social cohesion and effective collective action to emerge. This was also evident in a process facilitated and documented by the Centre on Conflict and Collaboration here in the Western Cape.[85] Tesco, the UK retailer, wanted to improve its reputation for social responsibility. Under the umbrella of the UN Special Representative's groundwork for the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Tesco sponsored a process that convened representatives of farmers and farmworkers within its fruit supply chain. The goal was to establish procedures for the resolution of human rights complaints against farmers relating to wages and working conditions. The two sides overcame their mistrust to examine the issues collaboratively. Together, they concluded that there was a party missing from the conversation. They asked Tesco to join them at the table, as it was evident that the prices that Tesco was paying for fruit were so low that there was insufficient money in the system for living wages to be paid and decent working conditions to be sustained. Tesco declined, and the process unravelled. Meanwhile, it promoted its participation in a prominent human rights initiative as its stock price climbed.

Implications for business leaders, business education, and our definition of business itself

The implications of this analysis are most profound for ethical business leaders themselves. For the book, *Management in Complex Environments: Questions for Leaders*,[86] we interviewed some 150 managers identified by stakeholders as leading effective organisations in conflict-affected places. They were united behind the proposition that a leader needs a strong internal compass. The dominant corporate, social, and even legal and regulatory systems around them did not support them in their efforts to craft pro-social solutions in which they went out of their way *not* to capture all of the available profits. Indeed, they were often swimming upstream, with both personal and professional consequences. Who, in the face of a CEO touting the company's support for the UN Global Compact and its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, finds it easy to point out (as did the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights) that the SDGs are 'weak by design' and, 'even if met, would leave billions facing serious deprivation'?[87] Our work found that setting the bar higher requires courage and tenacity, humility and curiosity, and willingness to walk towards an uncomfortable unknown in which one's identity as co-citizen and community member is more fundamental than that as business leader.

This means that there are implications for us, as business educators. Mary Anderson noted that, in order to support effective action towards social cohesion in conflict environments, peacebuilders must 'establish comfortable, trusting, and transparent relationships with diverse people who may not share their values; use specialized mediation skills to identify common concerns that can unite antagonists while also respecting fundamental differences and opposing positions; and have the ability to be calm and comfortable in situations of danger, threat, and emotional and physical stress.' She concluded that these 'are not common, everyday skills found among corporate managers'.[88] We must change that, making—along with these interpersonal skills—the capabilities needed to direct corporate strategy and operations towards increased social cohesion central to our models of leader development in the fit-for-purpose African organisation. These include an understanding of the political economy, systems analysis, participatory data collection and collaborative analysis the building of cross-cutting social movements that result in sufficient coalitions for positive change, and the establishment of compensatory institutions in the face of weak or illegitimate government. We are preparing business managers for the revolution so that they may lead a peaceful transition, resulting in a just and inclusive society, before the violent one comes.

There are also implications for our research on the private sector. As a society, we have seen and understood the destructive effects of pernicious businesses on social cohesion and peaceful development for a very long time. Already in the 1600s, an officer of the Dutch East India Company wrote that 'things are carried on in such a criminal and murderous way that the blood of the poor people cries to heaven for revenge'.[89] Already in the 1800s, Cecil Rhodes was described as 'the head of a gang of shady financiers' who operated 'on the principle that "godless heathens" ought to be mowed down with Maxim guns if they happen to inhabit a country where there may be gold'.[90] Yet recent work by the South African Human Rights Commission suggests that continuity with the past remains the defining feature of our contemporary mining and agriculture industries.[91] A first critical research agenda is to better understand the factors—ideological and legal, economic and political, social and psychological—that enable the persistence of destructive business enterprises.

Second, our research needs to be at the forefront of developing alternative business forms. We tend to confuse "the private sector" (and our engagement of it) with "large and visible incumbents". But, if we want to move cocoa processing and chocolate production to Liberia so that Africa captures more of the benefits from its primary goods, are Nestlé or Hershey the companies on which we can rely? We too often trap ourselves in the limitations baked into current companies' interests and worldviews. Let us rather posit that the companies that Africa needs have not yet been invented. And we should not hesitate to think at scale. The Guinea Alumina Corporation was the largest greenfield investment in Africa when it started bauxite exploitation. And yet it is a company with no mining history, created by holding companies with no particular technical expertise. So it should not be beyond our imagination—through applied research in partnership with like-minded actors—to design, implement, nurture and sustain, for example, a national mining champion that has as its core purpose stakeholder collaboration for social cohesion and peaceful development. Our focus should be on regions and sectors where injustice prevails.

The Ubuntu (Index) way forward

Here in South Africa, our history of corporatized slavery through the Dutch East India Company, corporatized imperialism through the British South Africa Company, and the symbiotic relationship of businesses small and large with the Apartheid state make us profoundly aware of the thesis of this address: that the relationships that business actors build and break, as well as the dynamics of conflict and cohesion they interrupt or amplify, reverberate profoundly beyond their "private" relations.

However, many in business have been slow learners. We were among the last to embrace the democratic transition: the first meeting of the white business community in Cape Town with mass movement leaders was so slow to materialise that it was interrupted by Mandela's release from prison.[92] We in business are also quick to forget. We saw with our own eyes the incredible return on investment in social solidarity through direct business participation in local and national peace structures that held space for constitutional negotiations and the first democratic elections. Yet, once interests in property rights and relative stability had been secured, there was a return to business as usual. In his most recent book,[93] Jay Naidoo identifies a turning point in the country's backsliding into incohesion. It is the nearly complete break with the consensus-based principles of the National Democratic Revolution for "major restructuring of the capitalist system" that occurred with the government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. That strategy reembraced neo-liberal economic principles—a move strongly supported by the business community, but one heavily implicated in rising inequality and incohesion.

What will make us quicker to learn, slower to forget, and more reliably focused on social cohesion? Concurrently with my primary appointment here at the Stellenbosch Business School, I am a Professor at our new school for Data Sciences and Computational Thinking. Wearing that hat, I (together with Professor Witold Henisz at the Wharton School, and Professor Anne Jamison at Copenhagen Business School) co-lead the Business & Conflict Research Initiative, an international consortium applying the tools of data science to better understand the inter-relationships of the private sector, conflict, and peaceful development. Combining geo-spatial data structuring with network analysis and natural language processing, we will soon be able to reliably report what we might call an Ubuntu Index: the degree of conflict or social cohesion, reported for any geographic scale from the continent as a whole to a 50-by-50 kilometre grid cell. Furthermore, we will be able to associate movement in the Ubuntu Index with actors (such as a particular company), issues (such as wages or pollution), and events (such as the expansion or closing of business operations).[94]

So let me immodestly suggest that we use our Stellenbosch Ubuntu Index—even if for now in its conceptual form—to discipline our thinking and action with respect to the values of social cohesion and human dignity as set out in the South African Constitution. We can posit, as a universal leadership goal, improvement in the Ubuntu Index. We can incorporate the measure of Ubuntu into every classroom and decision-making framework, asking whether our market and non-market strategies, our stakeholder relationships and corporate governance, and our plans and operations will cause the Index to rise or fall. We can research business dynamics that undermine improvements in Ubuntu Index scores, as well as the business forms and strategies most likely to sustain and accelerate their rise.

The Ubuntu Index won't fix all of our societal problems directly. But it will allow more people to progressively leverage the potential of the private sector to build social capital despite endemic inter-group conflict. And the overwhelming majority who wake up hoping for, believing in, and willing to work for a better South Africa will find that they indeed have the means to move from incohesion and collective inaction towards social cohesion and the achievement of peaceful development.

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