

## **Challenges of Operational Conflict Prevention: From Proactive to Reactive Prevention**

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In my presentation this morning I would like to familiarize you with the concept of conflict prevention. I will talk about what we can do as an international community to prevent violence before it erupts, the difficulties we face in doing so, and the opportunities that exist for conflict prevention in societies that have recently emerged from a war.

### **The Advantage of Conflict Prevention**

First, I would like to emphasize that not all conflict has to be destructive, and that therefore not all conflict must be prevented. Conflict is part of our daily lives – progress is not possible without a healthy exchange and competition of ideas. As long as those ideas are channelled peacefully, we can only benefit from such competition and diversity. However, if competing ideas and approaches cannot be channelled peacefully, if they clash in violent competition, then we face a problem. In that case a dispute is either resolved with the help of a well-meaning third party, or it might eventually escalate into violent confrontations.

Although we often cannot tell when a potentially violent conflict was resolved peacefully (because, if we are successful in conflict prevention, nothing happens!), we know that the management of emerging conflicts, with clearly identifiable entry points for outside intervention (in the form of mediation, negotiation, facilitation, sanctions or even military deployment) is clearly possible.

There have been efforts to quantify the benefits of conflict prevention. Some research, for example, has shown that the costs of conflict prevention in Bosnia were about \$US 33.3 billion, compared with an estimated \$53.7 billion spent on dealing with the violent phase of the conflict and its aftermath. In the case of Haiti, cost estimates for conflict prevention were established at \$2.3 billion, compared to the \$5 billion that it cost to respond to the outbreak of violence. In Somalia it cost \$7.3 billion to respond to the conflict, while it would have only cost \$1.5 billion for prevention. In Macedonia, successful prevention – UNPREDEP, at about US \$300 million – was much cheaper than the outbreak of a war would have cost – around \$15 billion. Of course it is hard to attach numbers to these issues, and these calculations do not even include the immense human suffering that can be avoided when violent conflict

can be prevented. But it shows that the international community faces much higher costs in responding to violence than by ensuring that a conflict does not escalate into war.

However, prevention still does cost money, requires political will and commitment at times when resources are scarce and most nonstate and interstate organizations are hard pressed to meet all of their obligations in emergency situations where violence and disasters have already struck.

The challenges of 'reaction' leave little room for effective 'proaction.' Creativity and political skill are required to mainstream preventive action into the work of national, international and nongovernmental organizations, so that preventive actions can be pursued in the context of already existing and ongoing activities.

### **Defining “Conflict Prevention”**

But what is 'conflict prevention'? What distinguishes this concept from, say, development assistance or crisis diplomacy? The concept has little utility for policy formulation if it does not have unique explanatory or prescriptive power above and beyond what we already know. Unfortunately, the concept, as debated and applied, is too broad to evade its critics. Numerous definitions have emerged, some more and some less helpful for attempts to describe and prescribe conflict prevention activities of state and non-state actors.

The former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali described conflict prevention as preventive diplomacy, an “action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur.”<sup>1</sup> He further argued that “the most desirable and efficient employment of diplomacy is to ease tensions before they result in conflict - or, if conflict breaks out, to act swiftly to contain it and resolve its underlying causes (...) Preventive diplomacy requires measures to create confidence; it needs early warning based on information gathering and informal or formal fact-finding; it may also involve preventive deployment and, in some situations, demilitarized zones.”<sup>2</sup> Boutros-Ghali's understanding of conflict prevention was that of crisis prevention – when problems appear, they can be detected through early warning tools that, in turn, should ideally trigger appropriate response mechanisms. This is an understanding that describes direct, operational prevention.

Structural prevention describes much earlier recognition of degeneration, and early application of preventive measures, resembling a “longer-term approach, aimed at addressing the structural causes of conflict and fostering institutions which will promote the kinds of distributive and procedural justice that have been shown to make violent conflict less likely.”<sup>3</sup> This reflects an agenda for prevention that incorporates development, democracy, human rights and peace, and one that is based on the key principles of the recent debate on human security.

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<sup>1</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*, New York: United Nations, 1992, paragraph 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 23.

<sup>3</sup> Connie Peck, Discussion Paper, *Seminar on Strengthening Co-operative Approaches to Conflict Prevention: The Role of Regional Organizations and the United Nations*, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, 11-13 Mar. 1998, p.3.

Addressing structural causes of conflict and strengthening institutions that can foster democracy, development, human rights and peaceful relations between groups and states, are fundamental components of a long-term, early approach to conflict prevention. This also holds true for successful post-conflict peacebuilding strategies: actual conflict *resolution*, beyond mere settlements, is key to the prevention of renewed violence.

## **Promoting Conflict Prevention**

During the past few years, conflict prevention has been receiving increasing attention from political leaders (most notably Canada's former foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy), regional organizations and the UN. The current Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, is a strong promoter and champion of promoting conflict prevention as one of the most important tools of peace and stability in domestic and international politics. He has also invested heavily in enhancing the UN's preventive capacity.

Many studies and reports have in recent years highlighted the key challenges that need to be resolved before the roots of violent conflict can be effectively addressed and violence can be prevented. Some of the more well-known and read reports are the *Carnegie Commission's Report on Preventing Deadly Conflict*, a variety of policy papers that were produced by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Conflict Prevention Network of the European Union, the Swedish, Dutch, Canadian and British Foreign Ministries, the UN's own *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (also known as the *Brahimi Report*, and the Secretary-General's Report on *Prevention of Armed Conflict*.<sup>4</sup>

It takes a great deal of political will, or – something that is much more effective – sheer fear of conflict spill-over to convince the UN and other actors to invest in the prevention of violent conflict. In cases where disputes have already produced low-level violence and it appears to be only a matter of time until the situation explodes into open warfare, or when there is a good possibility that a conflict will spill over to threatened one's own, the region's or the international community's security and interests, preventive measures will be taken at very short notice. This is done through preventive diplomacy at the highest levels, threats and actual application of economic sanctions, or even preventive military deployment. Those are direct preventive measures – applied to stop the escalation of violence when it is already almost too late.

Measures that kick in much earlier, are meant to alleviate structural violence (violence that is caused by structures and institutions that govern economic, political and cultural life in a society) that will in all likelihood cause further erosion of social, economic and political order. Therefore, what is called “structural prevention” is meant to address these root causes of future violence, and therefore prevent the disintegration of society in the very first place. Now, if direct (or in other words, “last minute”) prevention is difficult to accomplish, early, structural prevention is an even greater challenge.

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<sup>4</sup> See, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, A/55/305-S/2000/809, New York: General Assembly/Security Council, 21 August 2000; *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/55/985-S/2001/574, New York: General Assembly/Security Council, 7 June 2001.

Nevertheless, structural prevention is the most effective (but the least visible!) way to prevent future conflict, war and the accompanying destruction and human suffering.

## **Key Challenges**

Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to generate the resources, the political will and the instruments to prevent a violent conflict, than it is to intervene and stop violence once it has broken out. What are the reasons for this unfortunate fact?

First, attention to pending or emerging problems is usually side-tracked by highly visible emergencies – actual violence and war always attracts much greater attention and a much greater share of the available resources. Domestic support for measures that address pending or emerging problems at home or abroad take a backseat to measures that address highly visible emergencies.

Second, the principle of state sovereignty limits external involvement in the prevention or resolution of internal problems, especially at pre-conflict stages. Although we may already know about the impending outbreak of war in a society, and what would need to be done to reverse disintegration and correct the problems that may sooner or later lead to violence, states are protected from external intervention by the principle of sovereignty.

Third, no commonly accepted legal definition of intervention in pre-conflict situations has so far emerged. There is simply no agreement on when, how, why and who should intervene. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty has recently completed a very comprehensive and impressive study on what they call “The Responsibility to Protect.”<sup>5</sup> Still, short of a massacre similar to the Rwandan genocide of 1994 there is little room for the international community to intervene and act to protect innocent civilians – who are the vast majority of victims of today’s civil wars. Of course, a universal agreement on early intervention must also produce the tools to do so in a justified and proper manner, and it must produce mechanisms that prevent the abuse of early intervention.

Third, there is relatively limited access to intelligence and fact-finding, and therefore inadequate early warning and analysis of risk assessment. There may be lots of early warning, but such warning is often not matched with proposals for feasible and promising preventive measures or presented to (and received by) to the most appropriate audience.

Fourth, there is a definite lack of coherence and co-ordination between and within relevant nonstate, state and interstate actors who could implement preventive measures. Even if limited co-operation takes place, it does so in the context of poor understanding of, and poor co-ordination based on, the comparative advantage of co-operating actors. There are also difficulties in co-operating with and assisting local civil society.

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<sup>5</sup> International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Commission*, Ottawa: IDRC for the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001.

## **Rhetoric and Practice**

Unfortunately, rhetoric, policy and commitment are often three different notions when it comes to conflict prevention. There is much talk by many governments, international organizations and scholars about the utility of and necessity for conflict prevention. However, little is in fact done to give this concept a leading role in foreign policy and to generate the commitment necessary to actual implementation.

International organizations are limited in their influence on member states by their very own nature: They have to respond to, and are held accountable by, the needs of their members. The United Nations and regional organizations can only do as much as their member states allow them to do. International organizations have mostly been created to protect and defend, not to challenge and undermine, state sovereignty.

Most states believe that intervention must be an exception to the rule of non-intervention, only to be applied if there is a clear international consensus on the necessity for external involvement in the solution of domestic crises of a member state.

So far, no commonly accepted legal definition of humanitarian intervention has emerged and could serve as a guideline to allow intervention in cases where harsh measures are called for, and to prohibit intervention where it is inappropriate and counterproductive to international peace and human security.

Why would states be any more willing now than in the past to support preventive measures, particularly if they require international agreements on the permission to intervene in weak or failing states? Are we condemned to conclude every study of preventive action with a hollow call for more 'political will' that may or may not be forthcoming? In essence, the answer is unfortunately 'yes'. In an international system without shared sovereignty or supranational institutions, actions by international organizations depend on the good will and co-operation of member states. Such co-operation is only forthcoming if national interests are directly affected, thus motivate joint approaches to shared problems, and if enlightened, responsible and charismatic leaders manage to secure the support of their citizens and their political friends and enemies at home and abroad.

## **Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: A Second Chance for Preventive Action**

In peaceful societies basic security needs are met by the state, a responsible government and non-state actors. Societies at risk are unstable societies, divided societies, war-torn societies, with weak political and economic stability and deep-rooted inter-group or class frictions. Societies at risk are marked by the traumatic impoverishment of economic, political and social relations between groups and individual citizens.

During times of conflict, already existing divisions within society are compounded during war, and new divisions are added. Societies who have experienced war and internal conflict, but have not resolved the root causes of their disputes, are prone to erupt in more armed violence in the future.

Rebuilding political, economic, social and security systems in the aftermath of civil war is an extremely daunting task. It presents us with a dilemma: Without legitimate and trusted institutions, rebuilding in other areas will be impossible. On the other hand, without a clear sense of community, hope for economic recovery and internal security, political institutions will be highly unstable. The key factors are endurance and commitment; the willingness of all actors to prepare for long-term rebuilding and reconciliation efforts, along with sustained investment in the prevention of renewed outbreak of violence.

Let us look at two recent post-conflict peacebuilding missions that highlight the rehabilitative as well as preventive characteristics of those missions: UNMIK was established in June 1999 to assist the people of Kosovo in their transition to progressively expanded autonomy and possibly eventual self-rule. The mission's main tasks are to perform basic civilian administrative functions; to promote the establishment of substantial autonomy and self-government in Kosovo; to facilitate a political process to determine Kosovo's future status; to co-ordinate humanitarian and disaster relief of all international agencies involved on the ground; support the reconstruction of key infrastructure; to maintain civil law and order; promote human rights; and to assure the safe and unimpeded return of all refugees and displaced persons to their homes in Kosovo.

UNTAET was established in October of the same year to administer East Timor during its transition to independence, which it gained in May of 2002. It was empowered to exercise all legislative, executive and judicial authority. Its main tasks were to provide security and maintain law and order throughout the territory of East Timor; to establish an effective administration; to assist in the development of civil and social services; to ensure the co-ordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and development assistance; to support capacity-building for self-government; and to assist in the establishment of conditions for sustainable development. Both mission mandates combine immediate, operational, reconstruction with longer-term, structural, prevention.

Long-term, structural, prevention of threats to individuals and communities is the main ingredient of stability and peace at national, regional and international levels. Preventing violence, through efforts from inside or outside a society at risk, must focus on the stabilization, maintenance and enhancement of peace, stability and justice – through the promotion and protection of human security.

### **What Will Work at the Post-Conflict Stage that Did not Work Before?**

Many of the obstacles to preventive action do not exist, or are less significant, in the post-conflict environment:

First, Post-conflict operations *are* highly visible emergencies. They receive particularly close attention if international presence has helped in ending violence, mediating settlements, and safeguarding cease-fires. This attention is a crucial asset in mobilizing government and public support for ongoing peacebuilding and preventive efforts.

Second, humanitarian military intervention at pre-war stages remains illegal under international law. But in post-conflict situations, particularly when external presence came about at the invitation of the conflicting parties, the UN Security Council has mandated participating organizations in peace

operations with wide-ranging political, economic, legal and military authority. Especially in the case of international protectorates, peacebuilders have strong influence over present and future structural and policy arrangements that resolve existing conflicts and prevent potential future ones.

Third, while financial means for post-conflict rebuilding tasks are never optimal, particularly as sustainable support is so crucial to the long-term prevention of conflict recurrence, international actors do commit significant resources to preventive action once a conflict has broken out, has been settled and peacebuilding efforts are underway.

Fourth, in post-conflict societies local problems and needs are abundantly transparent.

Fifth, fact-finding is far less an obstacle in post-conflict activities. Presence on the ground, freedom to collect available data, and opportunities for access to, and collaboration with, local civil society actors greatly facilitate the collection of reliable data.

Sixth, the ability to both understand and address the economic dimensions of conflict, often grossly under-estimated before the eruption of violence, is greatly enhanced. The World Bank's post-reconstruction work is but an example for multilateral financial institutions' growing awareness of their impact on peace and security in their countries of operation.

Seventh, a number of recent post-conflict missions have shown that collaboration between the UN and regional organizations can be very fruitful. In Kosovo, for example, the UN developed an integrated co-operative approach between the OSCE, the EU, UN agencies and NATO. Also, mission mandates can be written around participating organization's capacities and resources.

Finally, in the post-conflict mission theatre, collaboration with local actors, including civil society organizations, is key to eventual transition to local ownership and control. Possibilities for collaboration and partnership between external and local actors are limitless, compared to the difficulties of co-operation experienced in pre-war preventive efforts.

The opportunities that exist for more effective and targeted preventive efforts in post-conflict situations must in turn inform the pre-conflict preventive agenda. This is all the more important as the opportunities for second-generation prevention raise significant moral and ethical problems: is effective intervention and restructuring only possible in the aftermath of war? If a society has to go to war to produce the humanitarian catastrophe or threat of conflict spill-over that is required to draw international attention to a people's plight, the costs of attention and subsequent response are tremendous.

Moreover, post-conflict peace initiatives tend to apply only to post-conflict societies where external actors have facilitated or enforced an end to violence – for reasons that have so far been shown to be a combination of national or regional self-interest and security and humanitarian concerns (the former clearly being the dominating factors). In cases where the direct interests of potential external actors are not affected, or where regional groupings may be affected but do not possess the necessary human and financial resources to launch peacemaking and peacebuilding missions, little will be done to stop violence, and even less will be done to prevent its recurrence. In those situations (in particular in Africa) war will mostly continue without external intervention.

## **Conclusion: The Frustrating Nature of Prevention**

In conclusion I would like to revisit some of the main issues that I have discussed. The frustrating nature of prevention can be illustrated with the following medical analogy: Although most people know of the potential dangers of a hazardous or unhealthy life style, they rarely take preventive measures before they have for the first time experienced the negative consequences of their actions.

We are prone to fall into the same trap over and over again: first, unless and until verified by personal experience, we refuse to let lessons learned by others determine our own behaviour. And second, we are unwilling to invest resources and personal inconvenience to prevent potential disasters that may or may not happen. This we do even when all indicators point to the eventual certainty of disaster, and where naïve faith in everlasting safety and security is nothing but a coping strategy that permits ignorance in the face of unavoidable crises.

This strategy might even make sense: One cannot possibly prepare for all eventualities, crises and disasters that may strike, and thus one opts simply to address only those problems that actually emerge. The risks associated with this ‘wait-and-see’ approach is obvious: Once disaster strikes for the first time, the damage done might be irreparable, and subsequent preventive strategies might only – and at best – limit the negative consequences of that damage.

A similar scenario applies to conflict prevention: the necessary resolve to invest in preventive measures, particularly if they require additional resources and activities, only materializes once blood has been spilled, and once the consequences of violence are deemed unbearable.

The post-conflict environment is highly conducive to wide-ranging external involvement in bringing about rapid and drastic change. Once conflict breaks out, efforts toward a settlement are quick, expose the dangers of further destabilization, and create a venue for sustainable second-generation preventive action. This is, however, a risky strategy: The extent of damage and human suffering ‘required’ to draw international attention and produce settlements may be so great that the damage will be irreparable.

The case for second-generation preventive action might be pragmatically sound, but it is morally and ethically deeply flawed. Nevertheless, commitment to post-conflict prevention – more difficult, more costly, longer-term – will likely continue to be more pronounced than efforts geared at proactive conflict prevention. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the clear priority for pre-conflict preventive action, in particular because many wars will not be settled and reconstruction will not be supported by external actors.

Where do we go from here? Conditions that make effective second-generation prevention possible must be emulated at the pre-conflict phase. These include universally supported rules for early intervention and the international community’s ability to revoke a state’s right to sovereign rule when it refuses to provide basic security for its population.

They also include the availability of both effective mandates and sufficient resources; effective tools and

application of early warning and risk assessment; and co-ordination and division of responsibility among actors that possess the will and capacity to join preventive initiatives.

Finally, the gap between interest-based and needs-based responses to emerging crises must be narrowed. The United Nations must be embraced as the key facilitator in creating a legitimate framework for international campaigns to improve preventive and remedial action to avert violent conflict.