



Operationalizing Conflict Prevention: From UN Headquarters to the Field

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“Prevention, prevention, prevention.” This was the response incoming United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres gave to journalists when asked what his top priorities would be during his tenure. During his first month in office, SG Guterres announced his intention to launch a “conflict prevention platform” which would map the prevention capacities of the UN system and bring them together into an integrated toolbox for early detection and action. But having the tools is one thing – using them is another. This brief provides an overview of some of the prevention tools available and activities taking place at UN Headquarters and in the field and discusses the challenges practitioners face when operationalizing conflict prevention in peace operations.

The scope of conflict prevention

Strategies for prevention can be grouped into three broad categories according to the scope of their focus, namely operational, structural or systemic. Operational prevention aims at giving an immediate answer to an imminent crisis, thus in a rather short-term perspective. Structural prevention involves a wider perspective which does not only aim at reducing violence but also addresses its root causes and the environment that gave birth to it. Finally the term “systemic prevention,” coined by Kofi Annan, refers to measures to address global risks of conflict. It concerns issues that can be dealt with best through global partnerships and frameworks, such as the fight against illicit arms trade, drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation. The prevention activities most directly relevant to peace operations fall mainly under the first two categories.

Conflict Prevention at UN Headquarters and in the Security Council

SG Guterres has indicated that he is keen to engage more frequently and informally with Member States and Security Council Members to discuss emerging situations and use his good offices function when required, focusing on the “diplomacy of conflict prevention.” Internally, the SG has initiated several reforms aimed to increase the effectiveness of core peace and security functions, including establishing and appointing a Senior Advisor on Policy who is supposed to lead system-wide coherence on conflict prevention policies, tools and operations. Previous efforts have been made by the UN Secretariat to professionalize prevention work. For example: the Mediation Support Unit, established in 2006 in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), deploys personnel and/or provides remote analytical and subject-matter

support; DPA and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have deployed “light teams” to assist in times of crises, mission transition or when a UN representative or presence on the ground requires enhanced support; the Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect has developed an early warning tool in the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, which is an analysis and risk assessment tool that can help identify those countries that are most at risk. More regional offices and presences have also been established as “forward platforms” for preventive diplomacy.

Noteworthy is also the Human Rights Up Front Initiative (HRuF), which has pushed for a cultural change at the UN so that prevention of serious human rights violations is seen as a system-wide responsibility. The initiative has aimed to strengthen the capacity of the UN system to identify earlier signs of serious human rights abuses and potential conflict and enable more effective responses.

The Security Council, too, has a number of prevention tools at its disposal, including situational awareness briefings, Arria-formula meetings¹, informal interactive dialogues, SC visits to missions, sanctions and the use of the International Court of Justice to refer disputes.² Obviously, prevention tools work best when the Security Council is united in its efforts.

Conflict Prevention in the Field

While the Security Council and those on the top floor of the UN building are key actors in the realm of conflict prevention, the UN can and is also very active in preventing conflict through its peace operations and country presences. Through its deployment on the ground, the UN can provide a forward platform for preventive diplomacy and prevention activities. Also, given that problems outside the capital have been a key driver of several conflicts, missions can play a pivotal role in tracking warning signs in this area. Which kind of presence, if any, the mission has outside the capital may of course limit the type and

amount of conflict prevention activities one can initiate in the periphery.

1. Tools and activities | In the field, operational and structural conflict prevention activities occur both in and outside of the capital. Outlined in the box below is a non-exhaustive list of measures deemed effective by practitioners.

Conflict Prevention Activities in the Field

Examples:

- Using “good offices” to engage with political and civil society leaders.
- Providing general mediation support.
- Supporting capacity-building of civil society.
- Supporting the development of national and local early warning and response systems.
- Building conflict management capacity of national and local institutions.
- Establishing and convening formal and informal opportunities for dialogue to address specific conflicts.
- Helping to establish local peace committees.
- Ensuring civic participation of women and marginalized groups.
- Establishing local conflict resolution mechanisms between different ethnic groups.
- Supporting innovative solutions such as the use of new technologies to improve participation and rapid information sharing to help where violence is more likely to occur.
- Establishing protection missions or deterrent postures in anticipation of hot spots.
- Organizing broad consultations prior to elections or political transitions.
- Mediating during an election-phase to decrease political violence.
- Engaging with the opposition and armed groups, also before elections.
- Using quick impact projects to help restore state authority.
- Establishing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes.
- Monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses.

¹ Arria-formula meetings are informal, confidential gatherings which enable SC members to have a frank exchange of views with other persons such as representatives of governments, international organizations, NGOs, etc.

² See “Can the Security Council Prevent Conflict?” Research report, Security Council Report, February 2017.

2. Key elements | Key elements cited by practitioners for effective conflict prevention in the field include: engaging with international partners and regional organizations/offices; instilling national/local ownership or supporting nationally/locally owned processes; having a cohesive UN approach; maintaining good relations for dialogue with the government; producing good analysis about emerging threats, ensuring ongoing dialogue and engagement with a wider population; having the right human resources and skill-sets in the mission (including leadership); and having access to funding. The 2015 Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture also argued that without the engagement of women and other marginalized groups from the earlier moments of attempting to end violence to the latter stages of consolidating peace, the dangers of relapse are greatly heightened.

Additionally, partners on the ground play a very important role when it comes to conflict prevention. Coordinating with the UN country teams to align strategies is key, as well as with UN Regional Offices and UN Special Envoys, if applicable. Other actors such as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and its 37 member Entities are also part of the conflict prevention landscape. Furthermore, regional and subregional organizations and Member States with a vested interest can be crucial elements in effective prevention.

3. Non-mission settings | In non-mission settings, Resident Coordinators and country teams are often propelled to the forefront of efforts to facilitate crisis response and help in mediation efforts. Initiatives such as the UNDP-DPA Joint Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention have strengthened local capacities as well as the resources of Resident Coordinators and country teams. The Review by the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) noted that the deployment of Peace and Development Advisors,³ which are part of this Joint Programme, should be further reinforced. While Resident Coordinators should be able to make more use of DPA and regional

offices for political support, proper backing and support by Headquarters is needed if they find themselves in the forefront of an evolving crisis.

Challenges

While the normative and institutional frameworks for conflict prevention within the UN system have improved along with the technical tools available, below are some key challenges that need to be addressed to enhance operationalization in the field:

1 The *consent and willingness of the local actors involved* (such as the political leaders in the host country) is crucial but often difficult given concerns over sovereignty and resistance to interference in a country's internal affairs. Practitioners have highlighted that while there is a need to have a constructive relationship with the national authorities, the government is sometimes part of the problem. The mission could thus lose credibility vis-à-vis other stakeholders.

2 While the principle of *human rights* mainstreaming and the normative importance of the HRuF initiative is generally accepted, practitioners have also noted their impact on other aspects of mission implementation in the field. Reflecting arguments in the “peace versus justice” debate, some have opined that if human rights concerns are not raised at the appropriate time, the mission's leverage with certain stakeholders can be affected and hamper other aspects of mandate implementation.

3 One of the essential components in providing early warning and determining when and how to engage in effective conflict prevention activities in the field is having a *proper analysis* of the situation on the ground. Joint Mission Analysis Centres in peacekeeping and the Joint Analysis Units in some political missions are of course one of the most recognized tools of bringing together input from across mission components and UN country teams. Both the HIPPO report and the review of the peacebuilding architecture noted that conflict analysis should systematically include consider-

³ Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) support Resident Coordinators and UN country teams by providing strategic guidance based on political and conflict analysis and by implementing conflict prevention initiatives.

ations of human rights and threats to civilians, as well as the political, security, social, economic, gender and regional dimensions of a conflict. Information gathering within the UN has vastly improved, including with the use of new technologies, and most observers would comment that the challenge for the UN is not having a lack of information but translating this information into appropriate action.

4 Related to the last point is *communication* between the field and headquarters. Some mission leaders have argued that the use of “UN jargon” and watered-down language in reports and briefings does not properly reflect realities on the ground. Others have been discouraged by UN Headquarters to “ring alarm bells” unnecessarily. On the other hand, there have been instances where the field has dismissed concerns from UN Headquarters, noting that they are better able to assess the situation “on the ground.” The salient point from the “Brahimi Report” that one should “tell the Security Council what they need to know not what they need to hear,” still holds true.

5 There are instances when the UN and regional organizations cannot agree on *the division of labor* for conflict prevention or even on a shared analysis and understanding of a particular context. The role of powerful Member States and/or regional powers, cannot be discounted. They can help a mission’s operation if they add additional pressure bilaterally or through, for example, a Group of Friends. Alternatively, if they act as a spoiler, they can complicate prevention attempts. Early coordination and continuous dialogue amongst all these actors is therefore key.

6 The rise of *non-state armed groups* makes prevention and resolution more difficult because they add to the multiplicity of actors and agendas (political, economic, and/or criminal). In addition, *violent extremism* has also emerged under the cover of several conflicts, whose actors engage in tactics including regional networks, territorial

control, extreme brutality and the systemic use of conflict-related sexual violence. In a number of conflicts, it is unclear as to with whom mediators (at all levels) would or could engage or what space there is for mediation and conflict prevention efforts.

7 The HIPPO report stated that it was unacceptable that core functions in support of prevention and mediation were still chronically and severely *under-resourced* and lacked predictable funding. The Panel also noted that there was an unassailable logic in investing early and adequately in this area. While programmatic funding coming out of the peacekeeping budget is available to peace operations, some difficulties have arisen in using these funds given the short mandate cycles and the fact that structural conflict prevention activities took a longer time to bear fruit. Funding from the assessed budget could also be used to help the UN country team “get on its feet” for countries in transition so that there would be some continuity in projects related to conflict prevention.

Conclusion

It is clear that SG Guterres has given new impetus to the discussion surrounding conflict prevention. Innovative ideas to include in the conflict prevention toolbox are always welcome. However, if the UN and its Member States are committed to operationalizing conflict prevention, more focus should be placed on addressing the above challenges, including by providing the necessary political and financial support. Without this support, even the best tools will remain unused in the toolbox. In this regard, both the UN Secretariat and Member States need to work together to help translate the rhetoric into more effective action on the ground.

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