The potential of conflict prevention

Early action

Governments and institutes devote immense resources to learning how to avoid a relapse into war in post-conflict situations. But they pay only limited attention to preventing conflict in seemingly stable regions that are actually susceptible to violence.

The post-electoral violence in Kenya earlier this year left over 1000 people dead and almost 500,000 others displaced. 🖱 This tragic event raised many questions about the causes of the violence and whether it could have been prevented. The latter question is relevant to any country where some sort of peaceful equilibrium, albeit perhaps sub-optimal, has prevailed for years, but where new controversies, tensions and disputes are now surfacing.

This article focuses on the potential applications of conflict prevention in cases of relatively 'new' or 'latent' disputes. It discusses existing obstacles to conflict prevention and describes lessons governments could learn from past attempts to preclude violence.

Blind spots
Social tensions and political disputes are more easily diffused before they spiral into violence. This theory has led many international agencies to adopt as formal policy the prevention of 'new' intra-state wars. Conflict prevention is now included in the policy statements of the US and other major governments, as well as the UN, the EU and many regional bodies. Since 9/11, the notion that failed states breed extremism and conflict has added to this impetus toward conflict prevention under the rubric of preventing state failures. The UN has sought to promote more proactive attention to conflict and other global threats.

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A More Secure World, the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, is an example of this effort.

A wide range of 'prevention activities' are actually being conducted by both state actors and NGOs, but often out of public view. Some of these activities, such as preventive development programmes and conflict management mechanisms, are explicitly labelled 'conflict prevention'. Other efforts are in fact conducted in plain view, but are

Lessons learned from preventive diplomacy
- Act at an early stage, i.e. before a triggering event occurs or soon thereafter.
- Be swift and decisive, not equivocal and vacillating.
- Use talented, influential international diplomats who command local respect.
- Convince the conflicting groups that the third parties are committed to a peaceful and fair solution, and oppose the use of force by any side.
- Use a combination of responses, such as carrots and sticks, implemented more or less coherently.
- Provide support and reinforcement to moderate leaders and groups that display non-violent and cooperative behaviour.
- Work through legitimate local institutions to build them up.
- Build local networks that address the various drivers of the conflict, but avoid obvious favouritism and imbalances.
- Use credible threat of the use of force or other penalties, such as sanctions, if necessary to deter actors from using violence.
- Neutralize potential external supporters of one side or the other, such as neighbouring countries with kin groups in a conflict.
- Involve regional organizations or regional powers, but don't necessarily act entirely through them.
- Involve major powers that can provide credible guarantees, but use UN or other multilateral channels to ensure legitimacy.

David Matsanga of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda (left), and Riek Machar, vice-president of Southern Sudan (right), after Joseph Kony, head of the LRA, failed to attend the peace talks. Southern Sudan, April 2008

occurs, operated under other rubrics, such as nuclear arms control, third-party mediations, democratization, human rights promotion, non-violent regime change, power-sharing, conditional aid and counter-terrorism. Although such activities can help prevent conflict, they are not categorized as conflict prevention. Journalists rarely report successes in preventing conflicts, preferring to focus on areas where violence does erupt – 'if it bleeds, it leads' is a phrase commonly used by journalists. The lack of awareness of advances and achievements in conflict prevention outside the professional circles of diplomats and development workers deflates the preventive efforts, and perpetuates unwarranted pessimism regarding its value. If one does not believe an activity exists, then one does not consider it an option or devote resources to it.

The conventional explanation for why major international organizations do not respond proactively to potential conflict situations is a 'lack of political will'. But this vague excuse does not explain why preventive actions are taken in some cases. The problem may be that there often is an excess of political will. The international community is present in most developing countries, including those susceptible to conflict. This presence takes many forms, including diplomatic missions, cultural activities, monetary and fiscal oversight, health and education and infrastructure development, trade and commerce, military assistance and efforts to promote democracy, human rights and civil society. But this multitude of activities – building schools, training nurses, assisting with elections, digging wells, teaching good business practices, you name it – leads to a variety of differing policy goals that are not necessarily supportive of conflict prevention. Some of these activities may be inadvertently worsening social divides, thus increasing the risk of conflict.

If the international community is already engaged in areas prone to conflict, sometimes in sizeable numbers, the challenge is not in receiving an early warning from some remote country and then pressuring international agencies to rush to it before a crisis erupts. International agencies are already in these areas. But each mission is expending energy and resources in many dispersed directions, while not taking into account how these activities might provoke or worsen conflicts. Promoting elections, for example, has in many cases led to violence and civil war, as it did in Burundi in 1993–94. There are no consistent and effective prevention systems in potential conflict areas because everyone is busily pursuing their own, different mandates. This insufficient, non-proactive response in situations of potential conflict is not so much because of a lack of resources and funds, but rather the ways in which they are used.

One downside of the current expansive notion of prevention – which is that a wide range of activities are potentially relevant to preventing conflict – is that these initiatives are pursued without procedures in place for galvanizing them into coherent overall strategies. Behind the disparate wills and lack of coordination are differing value commitments and paradigms of separate academic disciplines and professions, such as conflict resolution, humanitarianism, human rights, economic development, political development and security studies. Contradictions arise over the often inescapable need to make trade-offs among desirable but competing goals. For instance, economic liberalization can spur economic growth, but it can also create new social tensions that are difficult to manage. The prevailing liberal model often assumes

French-Chinese war over the province of Tongking (North Vietnam), 1882-85. Chinese negotiators discussing the peace treaty of Tientsin. Berlin, 1885

that the achievement of democracy, human rights, rule of law, free markets and economic growth are all compatible with each other and with peace. But in many situations, such compatibility does not hold, and political or economic liberalization creates both new development opportunities and new tensions. However, there is no common understanding or procedure for prioritizing goals at different stages of a conflict.

Recent experience

Especially with regard to practices of direct prevention into overt disputes, important lessons have been learned by academics and policymakers about the roles of different actors, such as third parties, major powers, regional organizations, local institutions and external supporters. Although these lessons are useful, an examination of the utility of particular instruments at different stages of conflict is more informative. It is important to distinguish between three early phases of a conflict and the central objectives of conflict prevention in each one. There is far more scope for structural measures of prevention in these early stages, when the process of polarization has not yet started. In the later stages of escalating violence, direct measures to get the opposing parties to communicate with each other take the driver's seat. In an escalating situation, coercive measures may be needed to prevent or stop violent behaviour. ☞

One of the main challenges of conflict prevention is to 'do no harm'. It is important to do the right thing in situations of latent conflict, when it is still possible to prevent physical damage and the distortion of social relations. In this respect, it is crucial to take into account that structural measures intended to prevent violence can themselves spawn new social conflicts that will also need to be managed. Economic growth and adjustment, social programmes for the poor and other marginalized groups, decentralization of authority and popular democracy are often present in the more peaceful societies. If societies lacking these economic, political and constitutional constellations could attain them, it would undoubtedly significantly reduce their potential for conflicts. But in the short term, reforms such as structural adjustment and majoritarian elections are not always feasible. They can also be counterproductive if applied too quickly or with insufficient attention to a country's balance of power, political economy and dominant factions. Many ideal liberal-internationalist solutions simply disregard the difficulties and pitfalls of getting reforms adopted and do not calculate the risk of destabilization in view of the capacities of differing societies for peaceful change. What needs to be set more explicitly as a policy goal is to identify specific ways to assist countries to get to these endpoints without destructive conflict.

Phases of conflict and aims of conflict prevention

Phase of conflict	Description	Aim of prevention
Latent conflict	External or internal changes generate unacknowledged strains among societal groups, but they have yet to mobilize to express their interests.	Make reform processes and international interventions more conflict-sensitive.
Manifest limited conflict	The stakes increase as awareness of conflicting interests energizes affected groups, issues are out in the open and diverging positions are voiced. Accepted forms of protest may be underway as well as sporadic acts of violence.	Prevent confrontations that could escalate, avoid the hardening of positions and polarization, calm rising fears and limit mutual defensive measures that create security dilemmas.
Escalating violent conflict	Positions are hardening, relationships are breaking off, parties are disengaging. Irregular expressions of grievances grow into wider violence, foretelling possible organized conflict. Major hostilities look imminent.	Avoid irrevocable spiral through exerting robust incentives and disincentives.

The overarching and overriding policy goal perhaps should not be simply democracy or human rights or markets at any cost. Rather it should be to ensure a peaceful transition toward, ultimately, more democratic, or at least legitimate and effective governments, increasingly more productive economies and more humane societies.

Conflict prevention

Conflict prevention applies to conflict situations where substantial physical violence is possible. It is not a specific instrument, but a distinctly proactive stance that, in principle, many actors could take to respond to unstable, potentially violent situations before violence becomes the way tensions and disputes are pursued.

A distinction can be made between prevention in different stages of conflict, ranging from a peaceful equilibrium where conflicts are organized and managed, on the one hand, to sustained armed conflict or war, on the other.

It is widely accepted that different interventions are needed in different stages of a conflict:

- **'Operational' or 'light' prevention** involves direct or intercessory initiatives aimed at particular actors in manifest conflicts. The aim is to keep disruptive, divisive expressions of conflicts from escalating and thus target specific parties and the issues between them.
- **'Structural' or 'deep' prevention** involves efforts to shape underlying socio-economic conditions and socio-political institutions and processes. These include actions or policies that address deeper societal conditions that can generate conflicts between interests. They can also include the institutional, procedural and policy deficits or capacities that determine whether competing interests are channelled and reconciled peacefully.

Thus, conflict prevention is not a single technique, but a disposition toward incipient stages of conflict. A repertoire of possible direct or structural responses may help to keep tensions and disputes from escalating into significant violence and armed force.

But this is not to say that more immediate factors can be disregarded. In Kenya, structural inequalities created by policies that favoured certain tribal groups had been growing since the country's independence, but had been largely ignored, and perhaps even reinforced through donor assistance policies. Yet, slow political progress toward a competitive multi-party system were made after former president Daniel arap Moi stepped down in 2002. The 'trigger' that brought the brewing resentments suddenly to the surface was the suspect tactics of the incumbent's circle to falsify the election outcome. Fortunately, in this case, the UN and major governments acted fairly promptly and decisively to stem the spread of violence and forge a political agreement. ■

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✍ A longer version of this article, with references and notes, can be found at **www.thebrokeronline.eu.**