

Can the UN Security Council help prevent conflicts?

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The international community must develop effective conflict prevention mechanisms to be able to sustain peace. This report reflects on the Security Council's current and potential role in conflict prevention, and offers recommendations for policy and specific responses. It also includes an analysis of the role of countries of the Global South in the Council, and expectations for a new leadership at the United Nations.

Key points

- ▶ Ensure that conflict prevention is implementable, with clear strategies, coordinated approaches and mechanisms that yield results.
- ▶ Identify the necessary mechanisms for preventing conflicts, including outside the realm of the UNSC.
- ▶ Understand, enhance, and streamline current experiences, through processes such as the UN–World Bank study.
- ▶ Encourage innovation in conflict prevention mechanisms by collaborating with other international organisations, UN organs and agencies, think tanks and civil society entities.
- ▶ Realistically assess global conflict prevention capacities, ensuring that mandates can be implemented.

Background

In his first address to the United Nations (UN) Security Council, Secretary-General António Guterres called for a ‘whole new approach’ to conflict prevention.¹ In his speech, he stated that prevention is ‘*the priority*’ for the global organisation.² Guterres also noted that the international community spends far more time and resources responding to crises rather than preventing them.³

While the message of the speech was not entirely new, it resonated with new urgency for several reasons. Firstly, the scope of the present humanitarian crisis has been unprecedented since World War II. Secondly, a proliferation of seemingly intractable conflicts has stretched existing conflict management systems to the limit. And thirdly, there is growing consensus regarding the insufficiency of reactive mechanisms in addressing the root causes of conflicts and maintaining lasting peace.

Although the number of armed conflicts around the world declined in the two decades following the Cold War, over the past five years the numbers of conflicts, victims, and displaced persons have increased.⁴ Moreover, many conflicts are increasingly intertwined with, and partly fuelled by, transnational phenomena such as drug trafficking, arms trading and violent extremism. This dire scenario is intensifying as the UN and its partner organisations face dwindling resources and new uncertainty regarding the role of major players, especially the United States.

More than ever, the international community must develop effective conflict prevention mechanisms to be able to sustain peace

Against this worrisome backdrop, debates about the role different components of the UN system play in preventing armed conflict are intensifying. Historically, the UN Security Council has focused on managing conflict rather than avoiding it altogether. While mediation and preventive diplomacy are also a core part of its mandate, the Security Council has increasingly focused on the deployment of peacekeeping operations and, to a much lesser extent (sometimes, in fact, as an afterthought), engaging in post-conflict peacebuilding.

However, the Council’s engagement in both peacekeeping and peacebuilding has delivered mixed results, as seen in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and Somalia. In addition to undermining the credibility of the UN and partner organisations like the African Union (AU) and other regional platforms, this excessive reliance on conflict management, at the expense of prevention, ultimately undermines the effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms for peace and security.

The main objective of this report is thus to reflect on the Security Council’s current and potential role in conflict prevention, offering recommendations

for policy and specific responses. More specifically, the report aims to identify existing experiences at the Council, including key challenges, to help member states, the Secretariat, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders invested in UN reform to boost the organisation's approach to preventing conflicts.

Global initiatives for increasing effectiveness of responses to conflicts

More than ever, the international community – including the UN, its member states, agencies, international financial organisations (especially the World Bank), and regional and sub-regional organisations – must develop effective conflict prevention mechanisms to be able to sustain peace. In recognition of this urgent need, the UN conducted three reviews in 2015: on peace operations;⁵ peacebuilding;⁶ and women, peace and security.⁷

All three reports acknowledge that the UN Security Council should play a bigger role in the prevention of wars, instead of only responding to them. And, while these reviews were able to identify where many of the problems are situated, the subsequent processes developed show the need for further thinking and practice.

Each of the review processes led to their own follow-up mechanisms, which monitor progress and provide recommendations, reinforcing the call to bring conflict prevention to the forefront of all UN initiatives. These processes stress that the fragmentation and 'silos' that typify current responses to conflict are not only costly but also reduce the overall impact of peace and security efforts.⁸

The table below provides some examples of processes that aim to increase the UN system's effectiveness and relevance in conflict prevention:

Initiatives relevant to conflict prevention	Relevance to the conflict prevention field
Parallel resolutions on sustaining peace adopted by consensus on 27 April 2016, UNSC/2282 (2016) and A/70/262 (2016), by UN Security Council and UN General Assembly ⁹	The resolutions, adopted by all 193 member states of the UN, show the importance of bringing conflict prevention and sustaining peace into the context of wider engagements of the UN, reinforcing the importance of investing in prevention and creating conditions for peace to be sustained.
The Secretary-General has started a review of the UN's peace and security architecture ¹⁰	In 2017, the Secretary-General appointed an internal review team to review the UN's peace and security architecture. The review is expected to ensure the UN develops a more effective approach to peace and security, improving coordination between different organs and mechanisms. It will also provide some important reflections on how to address operational challenges to prevention within the UN structures, silos and political strategies.
Request by the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) that the UN Development System carry out its own review, ongoing in 2017 ¹¹	This initiative could provide a more direct and effective way to achieve greater coherence between the peacebuilding, development and humanitarian agendas. It could also help increase the coordination of conflict prevention efforts, especially those targeting the structural aspects of conflicts.
UN management reform, ongoing in 2017 ¹²	Such reform, requested by the current Secretary-General, aims to develop more nimble, decentralised and simpler procedures. This can help strengthen coordination between different conflict prevention actors.
UN and World Bank Global Study on Conflict Prevention and Development, ongoing in 2017	This study aims to assist the UN (especially the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Development Programme and the Peacebuilding Support Office) and the World Bank to develop policies and programmes that contribute to the prevention of conflicts, especially by linking prevention to development. ¹³ It provides the opportunity to bring together the UN and the World Bank in designing practical approaches to prevention. During the 2017 Spring Meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, a cooperation framework between the World Bank and the UN was established, enabling the improved channelling of funds for conflict prevention.

An important aspect acknowledged by the different reviews regards the role of Africa in conflict prevention. Considering that Africa hosts the largest number of countries in a state of fragility, the region is highly significant to efforts aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of conflict prevention.

In its efforts to achieve its vision for Africa in 2063, the African Union (AU) has declared its intention to ‘silence the guns’ by 2020, placing a renewed emphasis on the idea of prevention. The AU has noted that the ‘culture of firefighting’ – an approach that focuses largely on reacting when a crisis has already broken out – has a high impact on human, financial and material levels of prevention.¹⁴

As a result, the organisation has also taken steps to enhance its conflict prevention capacity. For instance, in 2016 it created a Mediation Support Unit and, in 2014, launched the Programme on Women, Gender, Peace and Security as a means to strengthen its capacity to further support its conflict prevention initiatives. Although the AU and regional economic communities have produced a number of innovations in this area, many of these efforts are still incipient.

UN responses to potential or emerging conflicts have been increasingly reactive, with a heavy focus on the deployment of peacekeeping operations

Whether in the UN, the AU or other partner organisations, the concept of conflict prevention remains appealing, yet its effective implementation still faces substantial hurdles. One critical challenge relates to the excessively broad concept of conflict prevention, with inadequate thought given to concrete mechanisms, specific strategies, and coordination between them. As a result, although prevention becomes an important concept in the political rhetoric surrounding conflicts, the idea remains largely underanalysed, underfunded, and underutilised within the UN and its partner organisations.

Although the UN Security Council’s role in conflict prevention has delivered mixed results, the entity’s position at the heart of the main global mechanism for dealing with armed conflict makes it a strategic site for rethinking current approaches to prevention. The Council has shown more successes in traditional approaches to prevention (e.g., mediation and good offices), but it nevertheless struggles in dealing with structural approaches and linking prevention to peacebuilding processes (as in the cases of South Sudan and the Central African Republic).

The UN Security Council and conflict prevention

Far from being a new or fringe idea, conflict prevention has long been central to the advent of major multilateral organisations—not only the UN but also its predecessor, the League of Nations. For example, the concept of conflict prevention constitutes a key element of the UN Charter, embedded within the

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2014

UN's principal goal of saving 'succeeding generations from the scourge of war'.¹⁵

The UN Charter also includes specific measures for the settlement of disputes and threats to international peace, and a range of mechanisms that can be used as preventive tools. These provisions have inspired the organisation's efforts to develop peacemaking and peacekeeping responses, particularly under chapters VI and VII of the Charter.¹⁶

Chapter VI, *Pacific Settlement of Disputes*, describes the range of initiatives the UN can launch in preventing conflicts. It states, in Article 33, that in order to avoid disputes that may endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, the parties should seek a solution through a range of tools, including negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, and other peaceful means.¹⁷

Chapter VII of the Charter, *Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression*, provides more robust approaches to threats to international peace. It allows for military intervention as a means of restoring international peace and security. While not directly specified, contemporary robust approaches, including peacekeeping operations that are authorised to use force, are mandated under Chapter VII.

The principle of conflict prevention not only represents the fulcrum around which most UN actions revolve, but its centrality in the Charter grants the Security Council a critical role in helping to avoid the outbreak of conflicts in the first place. However, since the founding of the organisation, UN responses to potential or emerging conflicts have been increasingly reactive, with a heavy focus on the deployment of peacekeeping operations and far less investment in mediation, related political processes or structural causes of conflicts.

Budgetary discrepancy is an indication of how the Security Council prioritises its responses and activities. The 2016 approved budget for UN peacekeeping operations totalled \$7.87 billion,¹⁸ while the rest of the UN regular budget was \$5.4 billion (excluding voluntary and extrabudgetary contributions).¹⁹ Most UN conflict prevention initiatives, including those conducted under the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), were funded

by ad hoc, voluntary or extrabudgetary contributions. The UN regular budget provides significant support to Special Political Missions (a fraction of the UN regular budget), which leads to gaps in the funding of other conflict prevention initiatives. For example, the DPA's mediation capacity is entirely dependent on voluntary contributions, which means it could be abandoned if there is a drop in member states' political commitment to UN mediation.

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This considerable focus on peacekeeping is also reflected in recent debates in think tanks as well as the UN itself. In 2011, the International Peace Institute (IPI) released a report questioning what appeared to be a 'resurgent interest in conflict prevention'.²⁰ The report stated that the Security Council has been too reactive to crises, focusing on responses like peacekeeping rather than taking preventive measures.²¹ However, it also notes an increase in the number of activities related to the Council's role in prevention, including a renewed engagement with peacebuilding processes and in dealing with conflict root causes. In 2017, the Security Council Report published research on the preventive functions of the Council.²² The report argues that the Council should reduce its discussions of conflict prevention and invest in country-specific prevention.

This ongoing work by think tanks builds on ongoing debate and resolutions at the UN and other major multilateral organisations. UNSC Resolution 2171 (2014), which recognised that some of the existing prevention tools were being underutilised and thus pledged better use of a system-wide approach to conflict prevention, was unanimously adopted by the 15 member states (permanent and non-permanent).²³ More importantly, those 'sustaining peace' resolutions, S/2282 and A/70/262, also provide strong links between processes of preventing conflict and sustaining peace, and call for stronger action in ensuring a more coherent and effective approach by the UN. The different resolutions also draw direct links between conflict prevention and human rights, underscoring the role of human rights accountability mechanisms as well as the importance

of women and civil society to preventing conflicts. This attitude dovetails with ideas presented in the 2011 World Development Report, which argues that addressing socio-economic challenges is critical in reducing the probability of armed conflict.²⁴

Despite these calls for more concrete prevention measures from the Council itself and from other parts of the global governance system, implementation has been slow and uneven. In the next section of this report, we explain some of the main hurdles and offer a background on how the UNSC has participated in conflict prevention.

The challenges of defining and operationalising conflict prevention

Ironically, the closer conflict prevention comes to addressing the structural causes of conflict, the harder it becomes to implement. Traditional approaches to prevention are often identified with activities such as ‘good offices’ or sending envoys, while upstream or systemic prevention approaches – those that seek to address the root causes of conflicts – include initiatives related to peacebuilding, access to justice, and development.

The closer conflict prevention comes to addressing the structural causes of conflict, the harder it becomes to implement

For many, conflict prevention that seeks to address the root causes of conflict becomes a very broad concept, because it is easy to attribute stabilising effects to any policy related to security, development or human rights. Thus, while easy to endorse at a rhetorical level, conflict prevention with a long-term view comes with no clear implementation strategy. In addition, the fuzzier conflict prevention becomes conceptually, the harder it is to rally political will, muster financial resources and assess outcomes.

However, it is increasingly apparent that there is a need for both normative and operational approaches that ensure more effective prevention, including through the Security Council. Although some changes in this direction have been made over the past 10 years,²⁵ there is still much work to be done.

An initial challenge, which could explain the limited scope of Security Council approaches to conflict prevention, relates specifically to the definitions and nature of prevention. Since preventive approaches are hardly unique to the conflict field, some lessons can be drawn from other areas of knowledge and levels of analysis, including national examples, regional organisations and civil society.

In the health sector, for instance, prevention is central to the process of reducing the risks of developing diseases. The health sector provides a specific and well-accepted typology on the different stages of disease prevention.²⁶ Within this field, prevention varies, for example, from health-promotion measures



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(aiming to remove the structural possibility that would enable a disease to even occur) to the responses that occur when a disease process has advanced beyond its early stages (by promoting patients' adjustment to irremediable conditions).²⁷

While many of the approaches found in other sectors could present lessons that assist on how to deal with the prevention of armed conflicts, conflict prevention as a field on its own still falls behind, for the following five reasons.

1. Different approaches and stages are not clearly defined within the conflict prevention field

Different stakeholders define and understand prevention in distinctive terms, ranging from more specific and short-term responses, to deeper, structural and long-term approaches.

As an example of the challenges faced in defining conflict prevention, even the UN, a strong advocate for wider approaches to conflict prevention, seems to provide clarity on only one of the aspects of conflict prevention: the issue of preventive diplomacy. It defines preventive diplomacy as those diplomatic actions taken to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts.²⁸ However, the UN has not been able to present a clear, unified definition that clarifies other types of approaches, levels and aspects in a way that concretely contributes to the prevention of conflicts. An important step in this direction, as requested by the sustaining peace resolutions presented on the table above, will be the High-Level Event on Sustaining Peace in April 2018, which will aim to move forward on structural prevention and linkages to Agenda 2030.

The UN has not been able to present a clear, unified definition for conflict prevention

It is crucial that UN components, along with member states and civil society organisations, categorise existing prevention initiatives and mechanisms to better understand how they contribute to building a collective and broader definition of conflict prevention. This will enable policymakers, including those at the UN Security Council, to provide more effective responses to conflict,

making conflict prevention a more implementable and realistic tool.

2. The idea of conflict prevention is related not only to the idea of avoiding armed conflicts but also to preventing violence, genocides, violent extremism and humanitarian disasters, including those in which natural phenomena play an important role.

Some initiatives acknowledge the importance of drawing links between different fields. For instance, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015–2030 recognises the overlap between disaster risk reduction and conflict prevention.²⁹ A number of reports from the Secretary-General, including documents on humanitarian financing³⁰ and preventing violent extremism,³¹ place conflict prevention at centre stage. Nonetheless, each of these fields has its own set of approaches and perceptions, often with limited interaction with other subfields of practice and inquiry.

3. Conflict prevention approaches are often seen through short-term and immediate operational lenses, and include activities that have the immediate goal of stopping existing or imminent violence.

These responses are generally associated with peacemaking activities, including mediation, good offices and political dialogue.

However, as in other fields, preventive measures should be far broader than simply addressing the imminence of conflicts; they should also tackle the structural or root causes of conflict. The above mentioned reviews and processes designed to reform the UN put greater emphasis on structural preventive approaches, which should deal with long-term root causes of conflicts.

While the focus on structural prevention is important, there is still a need to better define how it is actually applicable, especially when linked to longer-term development issues. As a response to this, the UN and the World Bank have commissioned a study that aims to provide further evidence on the links between prevention and development.

The study, which is expected to be presented at the UN General Assembly in 2017, should provide an important understanding of best practices and how they may help to enhance the effectiveness of conflict prevention responses.

Structural approaches should also highlight the most direct links between conflict prevention and peacebuilding, since they entail long-term strategies designed to tackle the root causes of conflict. Also, by focusing on structural aspects of prevention, stakeholders could improve their ability to create responsive and dynamic mechanisms. Those would lead to more effective early warning systems that would allow the international community to adapt its approaches to changing and emerging trends and challenges.

4. The high number of stakeholders makes it difficult to define and design preventive strategies.

This wide range of actors includes not only those involved in imminent or recurrent conflict but also those involved in development, political dialogue, and the promotion of peace and security. This complexity is compounded by the multiple levels at which prevention must be addressed, depending on the situation, from local to regional. Thus, identifying key entry points, main actors, and strategic levels of action is fundamental to developing effective conflict prevention strategies. As others have already recommended, platforms like the Peacebuilding Commission, which can bring together a variety of stakeholders – including national, subnational and local actors – should be further explored and utilised.

5. There is a dearth of clear-cut, easily accessible evidence on conflict prevention experiences that can assist policymakers and stakeholders in developing strategies.

Because of insufficient policy-oriented research in this area, stakeholders are at a loss as to which conflict prevention responses work in a given context, leading to ineffective plans and strategies. The gaps in research and policy thinking in this area also make it harder to make a case for more consistent financing for conflict prevention activities.³²

How Global South countries approach conflict prevention in the Security Council

Within the UN Security Council, member states have been widely divided in their understanding of the role of conflict prevention. The Permanent Five (P5), for instance, have sometimes diverged on how to approach prevention as a way of responding to threats to international peace and security. Among other sensitive points, individual P5 members have raised concerns about how prevention may be used as an opportunity for intervention in fragile states without the consent of local parties.³³

China, the largest Global South country and P5 member, has pushed for the development of a culture of prevention at the UN,³⁴ particularly with regard to improving the organisation's conflict prevention capacity through improved mediation, early warning, and fact-finding missions. On the one hand, China stresses the need for the Security Council to play a greater role in enhancing conflict prevention measures; on the other, it underscores the imperative of fully respecting local will and choices. Chinese representatives have argued



IDENTIFYING KEY ENTRY POINTS, MAIN ACTORS, AND STRATEGIC LEVELS OF ACTION IS FUNDAMENTAL TO DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CONFLICT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

that countries facing conflicts, especially those in Africa, are ‘no one’s private plot’, insisting on the importance of upholding principles of objectivity and impartiality in supporting African people in addressing their problems.³⁵

UN Security Council members have been divided in their understanding of the role of conflict prevention

Non-permanent members, especially those from the Global South, have also been vocal within this debate. Some states, including Brazil, have expressed reservations about how to link conflict prevention with broader structural and developmental approaches. While Latin American countries agree with the principle of addressing structural prevention issues, they show specific reservations regarding motivations that could lead to investing more heavily in militaristic means. A statement made by Bolivia in the Security Council highlights some of the fears the Council should be cautious of, in particular, biased responses that could lead to authorising military action in some countries while remaining silent in others, undermining the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.³⁶ Part of the rationale behind this position seems to be that Latin American countries are often reluctant to link conflict prevention to their own, internal armed-violence problems, even when transnational phenomena such as the cross-border trade of illicit drugs are a major contributing factor.

African countries have consistently identified the issue of prevention as an opportunity to increase strategic partnerships with regional and subregional organisations, especially the AU.³⁷ For African countries, a stronger partnership with the AU is not only an opportunity to increase coordination between different international organisations, including through partnerships for deploying peacekeepers. It is also a potential enabler of stronger ownership of processes and long-term approach support, as shared by Egypt, Senegal and Rwanda at the UN Security Council.³⁸

Countries like Ethiopia, for instance, have stressed the risks of not dealing with prevention, as this would undermine the credibility of the UN itself.³⁹ However, it is

important to note that some African states – especially those facing challenges related to violent extremism – have at times proven reluctant to incorporate certain human rights issues with prevention approaches.

While Asian countries have generally taken a less active approach to conflict prevention and political solutions to conflicts, in recent years they have increasingly moved towards endorsing conflict prevention and peacebuilding approaches. This shift is associated with the emergence of conflict prevention and peacebuilding as one of the pillars of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) cooperation with the UN.⁴⁰

Organisational structure and politics of the UN

Aside from different perspectives and levels of commitment by member states, conflict prevention also faces challenges related to the organisational structure and politics of the United Nations. As the NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) has argued in a recently published report, the UN system’s fragmentation, and competition among its different components – even those directly involved in conflict prevention, such as the DPA and the DPKO – tend to undermine the organisation’s capacity to implement prevention initiatives and promote a culture of prevention.⁴¹

African countries have consistently identified prevention as an opportunity to increase strategic partnerships

Regarding the Security Council, more specifically, the failure to conduct its reform, also constitutes a hurdle to the UN participating more effectively in conflict prevention. The representativeness of the Council is sorely lacking and may sometimes privilege the interests of major geopolitical players. In fact, during discussions of Council reform from 2000 and 2010, advocates for change and enlargement of the organ have frequently referred to the urgent need for the UN to better incorporate the preventive views of other member states into its peace and security mechanisms.

Beyond these organisational challenges and the difficulties inherent in reaching consensus on the nature of conflict prevention, there is also the challenge of

resource scarcity. Specialists often promote the idea of focusing on prevention as a way to improve UN effectiveness and to have a more rational allocation of resources. Thus, prevention is frequently presented as being cheaper than reactive approaches such as peacekeeping. However, to date, very few studies have been conducted providing solid evidence on the cost-effective nature of conflict prevention.⁴²

This association between conflict prevention and its cost-effectiveness is especially important at a time when member states increasingly pressure the UN to produce better outcomes with fewer resources. This is bound to become even more urgent if there is a substantial retraction of US-assessed and voluntary contributions to the UN, as indicated by the Trump administration.

The cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention is important as member states pressure the UN to produce better outcomes with fewer resources

Another critical challenge to enhancing the Security Council's role in conflict prevention is that this is discussed thematically at the Council, rather than incorporated into debates as a transversal set of challenges and opportunities. This 'niche' approach to prevention means that it is easy to cast it aside in favour of reactive stances. It also means that conflict prevention faces competition within the Council's ever-broadening agenda. The growing complexity of many global conflicts has also vastly extended the number of issues and countries dealt with by the UN Security Council over the past two decades. For instance, in 1997, Council meetings covered 34 different topics and issues.⁴³ By 2016, the Council engaged with 71 different issues.⁴⁴ The Council's expanding agenda means that its attention is stretched to the limit, and that prevention and peacebuilding more generally are often relegated to the sidelines. This suggests that stronger collaboration and outsourcing of this function to other organs created specifically to deal with broader aspects related to prevention, in particular the UN Peacebuilding Commission, are necessary steps.⁴⁵



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Ongoing discussions about further empowering and strengthening the role of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture, and particularly the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), can provide particular opportunities for engagement. When the PBC becomes further engaged on structural issues and risk factors, it can offer important avenues of ensuring better coordination between the Security Council and the PBC. In addition, it is important to strengthen the role of the DPA; to boost the profile, capacity, and agility of special political missions (SPMs); increase mediation capacities; and ensure their role in providing analysis and early feeds into long-term strategies, and better coordination with the PBC and the Security Council.

SPMs have not been effectively used to their full capacity, partly because, as Morocco and other Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) member states have

noted, they remain underfunded even though there has been an ‘exponential increase’ in the financial requirements and complexity of those missions.⁴⁶ In addition to inadequate financing, SPMs are often understaffed and don’t get the required political attention to succeed.⁴⁷ For instance, while SPMs are funded through the UN’s regular assessed contribution, their limited funding limits the capacity and flexibility of missions.

A large majority of member states, as well as the UN Secretary-General, have called for greater flexibility on SPM budgets, even requesting the creation of a dedicated fund, as well as for enhanced capacity to respond to emerging or recurring conflict. However, the DPA remains largely focused on the operational requirements of dealing with SPMs, at the expense of broader approaches to conflict prevention.

Key prevention issues to be addressed by the UN Security Council

The main Council modalities of prevention include regional agenda items, informal briefings, ‘horizon scanning’, and ‘Arria-formula’ meetings. Among the tools it has made available are fact-finding missions, subsidiary organs like the Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa, Groups of Friends, investigative mandates, and sanctions that are used preventively, such as arms embargoes.⁴⁸

The Council already plays an important role in conflict prevention and stands to take on even more vital tasks in light of ongoing changes at the UN, including through its roles in political processes, sanctions, and even the deployment of mediators and special envoys. Boosting these functions, and improving their coordination with other UN mechanisms, can only add to the UN’s overall capacity to prevent armed conflict. Thus, while enhancing the focus on conflict prevention is relevant, it is also important to strengthen the following four areas.

The Security Council and the international community at large should work to ensure that conflict prevention is not just a well-liked concept, but in fact an effective and implementable set of concrete strategies and plans.

It is particularly important that there is more clarity on the intentionality of actions towards prevention, as well as adequate management of expectations.

Conflict prevention is often tailored to timelines and deadlines, and seen through a short-term lens, particularly by elements of preventive diplomacy and mediation. For instance, in mediation processes, tight timelines often create challenges to ensuring the overall sustainability of the decisions taken. The urgency of bringing an end to violence often relegates the need to understand how peace can be sustained in the long-term. To make such approaches more effective, it is vital to have longer time horizons for developing responses and to improve mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating results, based on high-quality evidence.

Most of the prevention discussion so far stresses its potential cost-saving nature.⁴⁹ However, it is still very difficult to assess exactly what types of activities and responses would fall under conflict prevention, and how to translate different approaches and views into specific strategies. There are entire areas of activity that have not been properly taken into account in devising preventive strategies. For instance, while arms trafficking and organised transnational crime have received increasing attention within the UN and partner organisations, they remain largely outside of key debates on conflict prevention. Policies and regimes are therefore developed without broader preventive thinking.

Conflict prevention must be an effective and implementable set of concrete strategies and plans

Dealing proactively with conflict situations also requires identifying the mechanisms that can assist in their timely and effective prevention.

In this process, the UN Security Council can play a far more active role in requesting the UN Secretariat to provide further evidence of what works effectively with regard to both conflict prevention and the types of responses that can be developed to meet the goals of prevention. The UN–World Bank Global Study on Conflict Prevention is a positive step in this direction, and can provide considerable assistance in identifying relevant lessons and experiences. Continued reflection would make it easier for the Council to produce resolutions that come across as realistic, implementable plans rather than wish lists.

The expansion of the concept of conflict prevention means that a greater variety of actors will engage with the causes and transformation of conflicts. Thus, there is a critical question regarding how the UN Security Council tools interact with these actors, both within and outside the UN. Likewise, it is important that both the UN Security Council and the UN Secretariat question whether the existing tools are fit for purpose, in light of their intended results. Key questions include: Are peacekeepers and political mission staffers well positioned to engage with conflict prevention? If so, how can they best be trained and deployed in preventive tasks? How can the UN Peacebuilding Architecture become more active in the conflict prevention discussion? What are the linkages between the UN Security Council and different UN entities and agencies, including the UNDP and World Bank, and how can these be made more effective?

There should be a greater effort to understand, enhance and streamline current experiences.

There is a wealth of experience within the broader conflict prevention field that could be used in the Council's approaches towards conflict prevention. For instance, many useful lessons can be gleaned from the field of protection of civilians. Until 2009, there was little understanding of which specific tasks would comprise the protection of civilians. That same year, the Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) commissioned the publication of 'Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations', which provided the UN with further guidance both conceptually and operationally.⁵⁰

Peacekeeping missions should not be thought of as 'war machines', and the urge to tailor them into counter-terrorist mechanisms should be resisted

There are ongoing discussions about the need to overhaul peacekeeping operations and encourage greater creativity in the formulation of mandates. In doing so, missions should not be thought of as 'war machines', and the urge to tailor them into counter-terrorist mechanisms should be resisted. This does not mean casting aside the real concerns over rising violent extremism in parts of the world. Instead, mediation and facilitation should be built into such missions' mandates, and enhanced in coordination with other parts of the UN system.

A realistic assessment of conflict prevention capacities is needed to develop a well-functioning division of labour among the UN, the AU, member states and other stakeholders in conflict-prone or affected areas.

The UN's approaches to conflict prevention are often split among the specific roles of the Security Council, Peacebuilding Commission, General Assembly,



MANY USEFUL LESSONS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION CAN BE OBTAINED FROM THE FIELD OF PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and others. As the peace operations and peacebuilding reviews have stressed, there is an urgent need to improve coordination between these organs, including for purposes of conflict prevention. The Peacebuilding Architecture, in particular, should be regarded as a strategic and constructive site for formulating new approaches to prevention, in partnership with the Security Council.

There is an urgent need to improve coordination between UN organs, especially for conflict prevention

Within the Secretariat itself, the interaction between different structures also needs refinement. The Department of Political Affairs, Department for Peacekeeping Operations and Peacebuilding Support Office all have specific mandates that relate to conflict prevention. Beyond the UN Secretariat, agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also work specifically on related issues. The UNDP has directly supported conflict prevention initiatives by working with national and local institutions. The idea of complementarity of actions nevertheless prevails within the UN system, often producing overlaps, duplication, redundancies and contradictions that can lower the effectiveness of responses.

Beyond the UN structures, the partnership between the UN and AU is also of critical importance. In Africa, discussions about conflict prevention have been taking place at different levels, from communities to sub-regions to the AU itself. The AU, like the UN, faces challenges to becoming clearer about its approaches to conflict prevention, with a specific focus on operational approaches. The AU has paid a great degree of attention to its mediation and early warning mechanisms. Although the organisation has developed a framework for its engagements on structural prevention, it requires further clarity on its ability to implement, and on specific areas of engagements. Therefore, further discussions between the AU and the UN on conflict prevention issues must be regarded as opportunities to innovate, rather than reproducing structures and approaches that are more narrowly focused on reaction to existing conflict.

While all the existing mechanisms can be used far more effectively, it is also important to keep in mind that the UN Security Council cannot, and should not, take on every task related to peace and international security. It is vital that national leaderships maintain a sense of ownership over efforts to prevent and curb emerging and recurring conflicts. National and local stakeholders, including civil society, have been shown to play a vital role in preventing conflict. In particular, the inclusion of women at all levels of conflict prevention is fundamental to averting the escalation of tensions, resolving emerging conflicts, and implementing lasting and inclusive peace.

Conclusion

The United Nations is experiencing turbulent times, and new pressures have emerged for enhancing the organisation's role in international security. The new Secretary-General has held up the banner of conflict prevention as his biggest priority, but the way forward remains far from clear. Part of the challenge revolves around the core of the UN's security function: the role of the Security Council, which – despite having conflict prevention as part of its mandate – has focused heavily on managing conflict.

In the spirit of contributing towards a culture of prevention, this report reflects on the role played by the UN Security Council in the prevention of armed conflict. In order to enhance the effectiveness of the Council's responses to conflicts, the UN has to seriously consider different ways in which the Council conceptualises, strategises, implements, and coordinates with other actors on preventive approaches. Of particular importance is thinking about long-term prevention, and developing appropriate, concrete measures for addressing the root causes of conflict, rather than only imminent or recurring conflict.

The Council cannot, and should not, be held responsible for all of the UN's preventive functions, but there is clearly a need to strengthen its role in avoiding armed conflict. Boosting the role of the Security Council in conflict prevention will require action, conceptual clarity and advocacy on the part of many stakeholders – not just the P5 themselves, but also non-permanent members, other member states, civil society, and partner organisations like the African Union. The input of society organisations,

including think tanks that work on conflict prevention or follow Security Council issues, or both, should also be incorporated into those debates.

Some structural reform is inescapable, not only that of the Council itself but also the way in which it interacts with other parts of the UN system involved in conflict prevention. Coordinating the preventive functions of the Council with the rest of the UN system and partner organisations like the AU is vital, especially given the cross-cutting nature of conflict prevention. This requires thinking not only about security in a narrow sense, but also about development, human rights and humanitarian action. Far more than simply constituting a 'cheaper' approach to security than reactive responses, conflict prevention should be used as the most humane and effective strategy towards achieving a rooted, lasting peace.

Notes

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