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Operationalizing the Prevention Agenda: Three Recommendations for the Peacebuilding Architecture Review

About the Author –

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Over the past 18 months, CIC has facilitated a series of discussions on the secretary-general’s prevention agenda—focusing on the prevention of violent conflict—with a diverse group of 20+ member states in New York. These conversations revealed a wide support for nationally led, upstream prevention approaches that support countries to address root causes in a way that strengthens their sovereignty. This note consolidates key recommendations for operationalizing the prevention agenda in light of the 2020 peacebuilding architecture review.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: this truism is one that everyone acknowledges, but that has been difficult to operationalize at the United Nations (UN) for a variety of reasons.¹ As a contribution to the peacebuilding architecture review (PBAR), this paper presents three recommendations emerging from consultations CIC has held across the UN system, as well as with national actors, to support the operationalization of the 2016 sustaining peace resolutions, with a specific focus on upstream prevention that is nationally led and sovereignty supporting.² First, we look at options to **increase national demand for prevention approaches**. Second, we highlight opportunities to **build and draw together the UN system’s expertise on prevention**. Finally, we discuss options to **increase cross-pillar approaches**, which are critical to the success of prevention initiatives.

Increasing national demand for prevention

Fundamentally, upstream prevention aims to strengthen the social contract and, as a practical matter, national actors are best placed to do that. The 2016 twin resolutions remind us that responsibility for sustaining peace falls on

¹ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “The Prevention Agenda: Mapping Out Member States’ Concerns” (Center on International Cooperation, July 2, 2019).

² Consultations were conducted by CIC with member states in New York, as well as UN staff, regional organization representatives, and national actors. The consultations included interviewees in Tunisia, Timor-Leste, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Colombia, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean region, Ethiopia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Gambia, Malawi, and Guatemala. These discussions helped to identify good practices and opportunities to strengthen a preventive approach.

Country examples of upstream prevention

In practice, most countries have adopted upstream prevention approaches. These mechanisms can take different forms. In Malawi, the Government developed a **National Peace Policy**, whose objective is to promote sustainable peace in a coordinated manner. In Tunisia, the Ministry of Interior has set up **local safety committees**, which bring together the police, local authorities, and civil society organizations to co-create local prevention plans. These committees provide a space for different actors to develop a common understanding of risk and resilience factors for violence, and to discuss how to address them holistically. Most countries do not have such an integrated strategy but still address risk factors for violence and build resilience, for instance by tackling hate speech, local mediation mechanisms, strengthening the justice system, and so on.

national actors and reaffirm the importance of national ownership and leadership. The UN's main role is to provide support to this endeavor.

Political will and resources are the cornerstones of upstream violence prevention. In cases where national actors may be unaware of the benefits that prevention can bring them, an important support that the UN can provide is to help increase demand for prevention approaches.

OPTION 1: Approach prevention as a universal issue

Governments may be understandably reluctant to acknowledge the importance a preventive approach out of concerns about their image.³ Creating a stronger narrative on the universality of prevention—including in high-income countries in the Global North—can help to reduce some of this stigma. All societies have fault lines; none of them is immune to violence. Prevention is about addressing risk factors for violence, and building resilience early on, so risks do not escalate into violence. Upstream prevention takes place in times of peace.

Member states therefore have an important role to play in **changing the narrative around prevention, by highlighting that it is a universal agenda**. Agenda 2030, which can be leveraged to address some of the root causes of violent conflicts, supports this argument, as it applies to all member states.

Another way to support universality is to **shift the focus from conflict prevention to violence prevention**. Research shows that many of the risk and resilience factors for armed conflict, violent extremism, and crime are the same. Addressing these risk factors—e.g. marginalization—often decreases the risks for all forms of violence. Undeniably, all countries benefit from violence prevention strategies, including high-income countries. For instance, most major cities around the world have urban crime prevention strategies and many countries from the North have integrated strategies to prevent violent extremism. SDG16.1 also supports this approach through its universal focus on reducing all forms of violence. High-income countries can play an important role in destigmatizing violence prevention initiatives when they showcase their own undertakings. In addition, countries could benefit from sharing inspiring practices that have the potential to strengthen their prevention approaches.

OPTION 2: Advocating for more investment in prevention

National and international actors often do not invest significantly in prevention because they do not fully grasp its positive impact. The UN should play an important role in **socializing the benefits of preventive approaches at field level**, with a clear advocacy approach. The UN-World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report developed good evidence showing that investing in prevention is

³ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, "Unpacking Prevention: Member State Perspectives" (New York: Center on International Cooperation, April 2019).

Increasing demand for prevention approaches is the most important component in violence prevention

cost-effective both for national and international actors. Additionally, UN staff, through their collective expertise, have a vast repository of experiences and lessons learned about how countries have undertaken preventive approaches, which can be highlighted with national actors. This is an important role for the resident coordinator (RC), who can engage strategically on these issues with the government.⁴

In parallel, the UN should invest in **strengthening its evidence base** on the effectiveness of nationally led preventative approaches, particularly through evaluations and research. Some of these efforts are already underway. Over the past few years, the Peacebuilding Fund has started evaluating more systematically the impacts of its support.⁵ Some agencies, funds, and programs (AFPs) are also looking at how to better assess how their work can contribute to peacebuilding. For instance, the World Health Organization, which has developed an approach to foster peace through a health response, is collaborating with two academic centers⁶ to document how health programs can affect the triggers of conflict or be leveraged to build peace. They will also help develop a guidance document on conflict-sensitive analysis for health programs.

A more systematic advocacy strategy should be implemented both with national actors but also with donors. When countries have developed sustaining peace strategies, donors can develop a country-level compact—linking the UN and international financial institutions (IFIs), with the governments to support these efforts.⁷ Prevention, peacebuilding, and sustaining peace remain overall substantially underfunded.

OPTION 3: Ensure that prevention is a system-wide effort rather than seen as the purview of the peace and security pillar and/or the Security Council

Some governments are particularly resistant to having prevention discussed in the Security Council or in internal UN processes (like Regional Monthly Reviews) out of concern that the UN will meddle in their internal affairs. Ensuring a more holistic understanding of prevention that includes a system-wide effort will increase buy-in.

Anchoring the prevention agenda at field level

Given that national ownership is key to implementing upstream prevention approaches, the UN approach to prevention should be systematically and universally anchored at the national level, rather than in New York. Particularly,

⁴ “Consultation on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review, Stockholm, Sweden” (SIPRI and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sweden, February 20, 2019).

⁵ The new PBF Strategy 2020–2024 places a stronger emphasis on learning from best practices and challenges to better inform programming. Additionally, it has also recently finalized an evaluation synthesis report from 2017–2019, and will undertake thematic reviews.

⁶ Institut de Recherche pour le Développement in Paris, France, and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute in Manchester, United Kingdom.

⁷ “Consultation on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review, Stockholm, Sweden.”

2018 secretary-general's report (excerpts)

“There was a need to strengthen capacities to conduct conflict and context analysis and to translate analysis into more conflict-sensitive programming.”

“I will take steps to ensure that resident coordinators can draw more easily on advice from centres of expertise at Headquarters and at the regional level.”

“I will build upon these existing good practices in the provision of appropriate expertise and surge capacities to resident coordinators, United Nations country teams and peace operations to support national needs, including by encouraging all entities to work in effective cross-pillar partnerships.”

violence risk and resilience analysis should be undertaken at more local levels to understand the different dynamics taking place across the country, rather than by focusing only on high-level politics. The twin resolutions emphasized the important role of UN country teams in implementing the sustaining peace approach. Additionally, through the UN reforms, critical actors in this process—RCs and peace and development advisers (PDAs)—are more strongly positioned to play this role.

Member states can further anchor the prevention agenda at field level by emphasizing the role of the UN country team to support nationally led prevention efforts and making sure they are adequately resourced to do so. Common Country Analyses (CCAs) and Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (SDCFs) should more systematically include a coherent analysis and strategy around sustaining peace to encourage and support nationally led efforts in prevention. Violence prevention and conflict sensitivity should also become a systematic approach of AFPs at field level. AFPs should strengthen their policy approach at HQ level, advocate for internal buy-in, and invest in training their staff. Member states can raise these issues during AFPs' board meetings. Donors can help support this approach by supporting and monitoring conflict sensitivity of programs.

Using the Peacebuilding Commission as a voluntary mechanism

Increasing demand also relates to the demand for Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) consultations and advice. The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and the PBC chairs can encourage a more systematic use of the PBC for prevention purposes. Moving away from country configurations, the PBC has recently held more thematic discussions, as well as provided a space for member states to present voluntarily their peacebuilding needs. The PBC has several advantages as a prevention platform. **It is sovereignty supporting and can help mobilize support around countries' peacebuilding priorities**—across the UN system, financially, and with outside actors such as IFIs. In addition, thematic discussions can help socialize good practices on the implementation of prevention initiatives at field level (e.g., designing a national peacebuilding architecture, prevention around elections, use of national dialogues, institution building for prevention, etc.).

Strengthening expertise in upstream prevention

Designing effective prevention strategies requires specific expertise. Prevention should not be a rebranding of development and other activities, but a conscious effort to understand and tackle risks for violence and strengthen resilience.⁸

⁸ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “Development and Prevention: National Examples of Linkages” (Center on International Cooperation, August 2019).

Given that the prevention agenda is meant to be implemented across the whole system, the UN should invest in increasing staff expertise and the resources available in prevention to provide technical support.⁹

OPTION 1: Increase the RC office's leadership in prevention

With the UN development system reform, very often the RC is expected to coordinate prevention efforts at field level by finding both the entry points in the government, as well as with the UN country team.¹⁰ However, RCs have competing priorities, and do not necessarily have a background in prevention. In many cases, the PDA—who typically sits in the RC office (RCO)—may become by default the primary driver behind implementing sustaining peace and prevention approaches. In many countries, PDAs have played a critical role in prevention, helping governments develop diagnostics of risk and resilience factors (e.g., the **Gambia**), national peace plans (e.g., **Malawi**), prevention mechanisms around elections (e.g., **Guatemala**), and so on.

Since prevention is not, however, a single field but rather the coordination of many types of expertise, the task is especially difficult for a single person to take on. To be able to efficiently support national actors, practitioners need in-depth knowledge in different areas: for example, how to regulate land disputes, factors driving violence extremism among youth, the psychosocial conditions leading to violence, how the organization of urban space influences violence, farmer and herder conflicts, and so forth.

The government and the UN would thus benefit from access to a pool of experts, which could be modeled after the mediation stand-by team and be deployed quickly for short missions to support specific aspects of prevention (e.g., advice on land conflict). In line with the 2015 report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, light teams could be deployed to support the government, as well as the country team.¹¹ These experts could also be a resource for PBC meetings.

Interviews suggest that there is also an appetite for **resources on prevention**. These can be helpful for government themselves, as well as for country teams to guide their approaches. PBSO is currently developing guidance on operationalizing a preventive approach, which will be welcome. This could be supplemented by a stronger compendium of good practice examples, drawing together insights from PBSO, the PBF, DCO, and the Joint Program,¹² as well as gathering good practices from AFPs in the field, which will

⁹ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “Nationally Led Prevention: Practical Examples of Approaches to Risk and Resilience” (New York: Center on International Cooperation, June 2019).

¹⁰ “Consultation on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review, Stockholm, Sweden.”

¹¹ Arthur and Monnier, “Nationally Led Prevention: Practical Examples of Approaches to Risk and Resilience.”

¹² The Joint Program has already a platform to share some documents on prevention—the Peace Infrastructures Portal.

have developed an understanding of how their work can contribute to preventing violent conflicts. Systematically collecting these good practices and centralizing them could help national actors and other UN country teams.

OPTION 2: Build capacity for AFPs

The Stockholm consultations highlighted that many components of the prevention agenda lay in AFPs' mandates, capacities, and responsibilities—including technical and surge capacity—and that they need programs and offices to support these efforts.¹³ Several AFPs have developed, or started to develop, a conflict-sensitive approach to their programming. CIC's interviews suggest that the implementation of these approaches at field level is still uneven. Most AFP staff understandably do not have a background in violence prevention. Whether they are doctors, education specialists, or agriculture experts, understanding how their work can contribute to prevention is a new expertise they have to acquire.

Increasing expertise on prevention in AFPs is an important step towards a more systematic prevention approach. AFPs can also recruit a pool of experts with specific expertise in prevention to advise the field. Some agencies already have similar pools, for instance, the UN Women regional advisers on women, peace, and security or the UN Development Programme (UNDP) ExpRes Roster profiles on conflict prevention. When they do not have the expertise at field level to carry out conflict-sensitive analysis or design conflict-sensitive programming, AFPs should be able to rely more systematically on outside expertise through partnerships.¹⁴

Opportunities to strengthen integrated approaches

UN efforts to prevent violent conflict should flow through all three pillars, as acknowledged in the 2016 twin resolutions. CIC's research suggests that moving from projects on prevention addressing one risk factor or resilience factor, to multidimensional strategies that are locally grounded, will be most effective.¹⁵ This idea is in line with the 2018 secretary-general's report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, which highlighted the importance of more joint analysis and joint programming. Since then, the reforms have given more space to the RCO to encourage collaboration, and the CCA and the SDCF are seen as anchoring points for prevention strategies. Interviews suggest, however, that more opportunities should be seized to further strengthen this cross-pillar approach.

Prevention should not be a rebranding of development and other activities, but a conscious effort to understand and tackle risks for violence, and strengthen resilience

¹³ "Consultation on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review, Stockholm, Sweden."

¹⁴ Search for Common Ground, Interpeace, and Crisis Group were mentioned repeatedly during the interviews as potential resources.

¹⁵ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, "Breaking the Silos: Pragmatic National Approaches to Prevention" (New York: Center on International Cooperation, August 2019).

One of the clearest ways for the UN to coordinate its own efforts is to support integrated governmental approaches to upstream prevention

OPTION 1: Support national actors in adopting coordination mechanisms

One of the clearest ways for the UN to coordinate its own efforts is to **support integrated governmental approaches to upstream prevention**. Where these do not exist, the UN can support the government in developing them. This approach has multiple benefits. First, it ensures that prevention efforts are sovereignty supporting by aligning UN efforts with national actors' priorities. Second, it enables a longer-term approach to prevention by institutionalizing prevention efforts, since UN projects on their own can often be short-term. Third, it increases effectiveness of prevention by shifting from projects to strategies, in which different components reinforce each other.

Such coordination mechanisms can take different forms. In **Tunisia**, for instance, the government has adopted a strategy and set up the National Commission on the Fight Against Terrorism, which includes a work stream on the prevention of violent extremism. This multidisciplinary body is a coordination mechanism that works across ministries and in collaboration with civil society to counter violent extremism, and it has a specific pillar on prevention. In **Colombia**, to implement the peace agreement, the government has adopted Territorially Focused Development Plans to transform 170 municipalities that were most affected by conflict. When such mechanisms exist, the RCO can highlight them—as the RCO in **Tunisia** did for instance—and encourage the country team to support them from their different areas of expertise. These strategies and mechanisms should—as far as possible—be referred to in national development plans, SDCFs, and other overarching frameworks to ensure that they will receive funding. Beyond this, donors (including IFIs) should be encouraged to coordinate their efforts in relation to these prevention mechanisms—including through funding compacts.

When these coordinated approaches do not exist, the UN can encourage and advise governments in creating them. Particularly, the UN can engage governments in a policy dialogue to encourage them to carry out a violence risks and resilience analysis. In **the Gambia**, the PDA has helped the government in developing a conflict and development assessment. When such a diagnosis exists, it is then easier for different members of the country team to address risk factors that are relevant in their field, in line with government's priorities.

OPTION 2: Enable the country team to adopt area-based approaches to prevention

Short of an already integrated governmental mechanism to support, the UN can also develop its own integrated approaches to prevention. CIC's research suggest that area-based prevention is the most effective approach. Area-based prevention is an integrated strategy developed at local level that addresses different local and national (and sometimes international) risks and supports resilience factors, building on existing endogenous resources, by coordinating

local, national, and international efforts. It stresses the importance of moving from projects on prevention addressing one risk factor or resilience factor to multidimensional targeted strategies.

An area-based approach to prevention should be developed in collaboration with local actors, such as municipalities and civil society organizations.¹⁶ Ideally, the UN should map out sustaining peace efforts already undertaken by local actors and identify where to complement these efforts or to create an enabling environment for them.

Country teams should invest more in area-based analysis, particularly when different AFPs are already working in the same regions, to understand how they can jointly address risks and resilience factors. For instance, if the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) works on the promotion of human rights with young people together with UNDP to increase the respect of their economic rights, the results might be stronger, especially if these interventions focus on the same communities. In areas where several AFPs operate, the RCO could also carry out a *gap analysis* to understand what risk factors are not being addressed and what resilience factors can be better supported, and share this analysis with the UN country team, encouraging AFPs to address them through their programs when possible, or addressing them at the political level when necessary.

Funding for joint analysis and programming is one of the most important prerequisites to increasing collaboration. Donors may often continue in a path-dependent method of funding single agencies and may not always see the benefits of joint initiatives (in spite of the rhetoric). PBF projects are the exception, but as catalytic endeavors, they often represent small funds and are short-term. Prevention strategies often need decades of investment to be effective. Incentives can fall more in line with integrated, preventive approaches where RCs are in charge of pooled funds. Coordination with IFIs can be crucial here, especially to unlock funds for longer-term, more structural prevention needs—and using the newly established HDP Partnership facility can be a good way of scoping such coordination. In the absence of pooled funds, systematic support from donors for joint analysis and joint programming would go a long way in enabling the UN system to adopt a cross-pillar approach.

Conclusion

The twin resolutions provide a comprehensive framework to support nationally led efforts to prevent violent conflict. Important progress has been made since their adoption, and interviews across the UN system and member states show

¹⁶ “Consultation on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review, Stockholm, Sweden.”

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that there is eagerness for more: the operationalization itself is triggering a change of mindset at all levels. National actors should own prevention efforts systematically, and the universality of this approach should be acknowledged. No society is immune to violence, and preventing violence will only happen when national actors constantly work together to strengthen the social contract. Prevention should also be understood better and more granularly across the UN system: it is not about rebranding existing activities under a new label, but rather understanding what drives people to adopt violent behaviors in specific contexts, how institutional arrangements and weaknesses enable such behaviors, and then to address these conditions before violence materializes. National actors should be able to rely on the UN for cutting-edge expertise on prevention. Finally, prevention will be effective when it shifts from projects to strategies, namely through a cross-pillar approach. To support the UN, donors should work to overcome their own internal silos by supporting more systematically area-based, long-term, risk-informed programming that is not siloed in one area but rather cuts across the full range of development, political, human rights, and other risk factors for conflict.

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