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The Prevention Agenda: Mapping out Member States' Concerns

Member states agree—in principle—with the Secretary-General that the UN should do more to prevent crises before they emerge, including through assisting countries to tackle root causes. But translating this approach into practice sometimes raises sensitivities and questions. This briefing looks at member states' concerns regarding the implementation of the prevention agenda, with a view to identifying potential areas of agreement and forward movement.

The current period would seem to provide a lot of momentum to make forward progress on the Secretary-General's call for a more preventive approach to crisis, following a series of conflicts over the past decade that have taken an enormous human and financial toll. There have been supportive developments such as the 2016 adoption of the twin resolutions on sustaining peace (including a focus on sustaining peace in the 2018 Action for Peacekeeping Declaration), the ongoing implementation of SDG16, and the 2018 production of the joint UN and World Bank report, *Pathways for Peace*. For many, these signal the enormous potential for the UN system and its partners, including international financial institutions like the World Bank, to support countries in building resilience to violent conflict.

And yet, in spite of these positive developments, there is little sign that member states are rallying around prevention. In New York, discussions on prevention remain focused on moments of crisis and must navigate deepening divisions in the Security Council. Indeed, the prevention agenda arrived at the UN just at the moment when the forces shaping multilateralism were shifting underneath it. The period of liberal internationalism ushered in by the end of the Cold War—with the United States in the lead—has receded in the wake of more statist and sovereigntist approaches to multilateralism. Initiatives such as Responsibility to Protect and Human Rights up Front have lost traction as states worry that they will lead to undue interference and even intervention, and as their supporters among member states fear that they are fighting a losing battle.

This policy brief analyzes member states' concerns around the approach to prevention at the UN, based on dialogues with a regionally diverse group of 20 member states. The objective is to provide clarity on the different types of concerns, in order to understand how they will shape the agenda moving forward, as well as to identify ways in which some of them might be addressed sufficiently in order to move on a more focused set of practical issues.

Mapping member state concerns about the prevention agenda

Member states agree that more effort should be made to prevent violent conflicts farther upstream, rather than to address them mainly when they are imminent or in progress (or on the Security Council agenda). But, as described in our [previous briefing](#), “prevention” at the UN has not had enough conceptual clarity, which has raised sensitivities over a wide range of issues. This, in turn, has hindered implementation of a more strategic approach to prevention—especially upstream prevention—at the practical level.

Prevention as intervention

The most common concern among member states is that prevention will be used as a rationale to infringe upon their sovereignty. Given that most conflicts are now internal, or have an internal component, the agenda is at times perceived as giving too much authority to the international community to shape the way a country should run its government and institutions—and at the most extreme end, it is seen in some cases to support regime change. In this light, “prevention” is seen by some as aligned with a liberal internationalist approach.

The most palpable concern for member states is that an **armed intervention** will be justified under the cover of prevention, such as the one in Libya in 2011. Prevention is often seen as a direct line to getting onto the agenda of the Security Council, which countries want to avoid. In the worst-case scenario, member states fear that prevention is a means of empowering the Security Council to take measures under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations to meddle into their internal affairs, while the Council is widely criticized for its lack of representativeness, and the public reasoning of some of the members is at times suspected of being disingenuous. In addition, once a country is on the Council's agenda, it has proven a long process to remove it. Also, member states are concerned that the Council may lack the technical expertise to deal with the broad array of topics that may be linked to prevention (e.g., the impact of natural disasters on peace and security). Many member states also referenced the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in this context, which some viewed unfavorably as interventionist. Several member states observed that foreign interventions—whether multilateral or unilateral in nature—can in some instances increase instability, rather than prevent violence.

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Several member states also expressed concerns that the prevention agenda will be used as an excuse to **interfere in their domestic affairs** and impose a vision of prevention that is not necessarily in line with their national efforts. This concern is based on the fact that the government is not always in the lead when the UN assesses risk factors in countries; some member states referred to the UN's early warning systems and the Human Rights up Front initiative as examples of this gap. They also expressed reservations about the lack of transparency or inclusiveness of these mechanisms and in particular the legitimacy of action stemming from early warning systems. Member states suggested that the UN does not always support the country's priorities and their own resilience mechanisms. In some instances, they also reported that the prevention agenda risks being intrusive, through restructuring or replacing institutions rather than strengthening them, or criticizing the relationship a government has with civil society. In one instance, a member state mentioned that their internal issues are so sensitive that they would never consider inviting external mediators to help.

The stigma of conflict

To undertake structural prevention efforts, countries must honestly assess both the risks and resilience factors in their society. The public discussion of a country's risks can be sensitive, however, as it is seen as highlighting its vulnerabilities; even more so if an external actor carries out the analysis independently, such as in the case of early warning systems mentioned above.

Looking into risk and resilience factors would be less sensitive if it was systematic and applied to all member states. But a main concern is also that the focus on prevention will be biased, targeting only the poorest and most fragile countries, while others will not be obliged to acknowledge the fault lines in their own societies.

In addition, some member states prefer to discuss their situation through a more positive lens than the one that conflict prevention provides. The stigma associated with "a risk of conflict" can be detrimental at the international level and have negative consequences for attracting investment, promoting tourism, and so on. Post-conflict countries, in particular, wish to show that they have graduated from conflict, and thus may not want to refer to it in their engagements with the UN, donors, and in their national plans and strategies.

What's in a name?

Hence, the term "conflict prevention" can be an issue in and of itself. Some member states deem the term inadequate because of its lack of agreed definition and negative connotation (referring to conflict); they often prefer the term "sustaining peace," which is more positive and is consecrated in the twin resolutions.

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Yet other member states find that prevention is a useful word, because it is a word that everyone already knows, instead of an “invented” UN concept. The preventive approach can draw on models from other fields that are not as politically sensitive: for example, the medical field, where a preventive approach puts emphasis on creating healthy environments for healthy individuals; and the disaster risk reduction approach, which focuses on understanding the risk, investing in its reduction, and building resilience.

Prevention as a complex process

Many member states highlight a gap in knowledge between the resolutions adopted at the UN and implementation on the ground. They note that technical expertise in prevention may not be strong in permanent missions, particularly related to upstream prevention (whether universal or targeted)—rather than downstream, crisis management approaches like mediation and preventive diplomacy that are more common in UN debates. Additionally, some donor country representatives confessed that some in their ranks still equate development assistance with prevention, even though evidence shows there is no direct link.

Prevention is complex in nature; in order to understand what might trigger violence, it is essential to look at drivers that cut across the whole society, including human rights violations (civil, political, social and economic, etc.), forms of political and economic exclusion, inequitable development, cultures of violence and/or peace, transboundary and regional factors, and so on. Understandably, few people have this technical overview. This is, for instance, reflected with member states representatives or UN staff members who have an excellent foundation in diplomacy but may have less technical expertise on the complex social dynamics of conflict.

Several member states report a desire for more knowledge of what is prevention in practice, and what has been proven to work. Many member states confessed that they were not well versed in the findings of the UN-World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report.

Desire for more communication about transparency

Understanding prevention in the context of multilateralism is challenging—even more so when information on prevention does not have clear channels for communication, or lack of access to documents and country discussions sparks concerns and even mistrust. When prevention is discussed in the Security Council, for example, non-members do not have access to all the documents. And other than Secretary-General reports on peacekeeping missions, few documents are available for member states to understand initiatives on prevention at the country level. The role of some mechanisms in the Secretariat may be confusing or controversial because of their lack of transparency, such as

regional monthly reviews of specific country situations, the Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Board on Mediation, and country-specific discussions in the Executive Committee. The role of peace and development advisers varies from country to country, which can generate uncertainty. Several member states mentioned that improving transparency of Secretariat initiatives would enhance confidence in the system and go far to reduce some of the most extreme concerns, such as a feeling of surveillance.

Member states note that this is a challenging issue. On the one hand, there are moments where the ability to have confidential discussions on sensitive issues is critical to getting agreement about the way forward. On the other hand, many member states expressed the desire for more communication about these processes, and more involvement from the countries under discussion than there is currently.

Additionally, it is observed that lack of transparency sometimes is not deliberate, but rather a result of lack of resources or time on the part of UN entities to communicate more about their work. As a positive example, many member states wished for more information about how the work of the Peacebuilding Fund can contribute to upstream prevention.

Questions about cross-pillar approaches

Member states have agreed to adopt a cross-pillar approach to sustaining peace—and consequently to prevention—in the twin resolutions. The relevance of the cross-pillar approach stems from the understanding that both sources of resilience and drivers of conflict are multi-sectoral, and therefore preventive strategies should reflect this reality. Nevertheless, implementation is challenging.

Conflicting views are particularly striking in terms of **forums in the UN where a cross-pillar approach should be operative**. A divide exists between those who want to foster its implementation in the Security Council on a more consistent basis and those who do not. The difference hinges on interpretations of what kinds of events or risks rise to the level of threats to international peace and security. As mentioned previously, some states argue that internal risks around human rights issues in particular may be worsened—rather than made better—by Security Council action. Others take a more optimistic view.

Outside of the Security Council, several member states underscore the lack of forums and mechanisms to facilitate exchange across the system on cross-pillar approaches to prevention. The UN in Geneva is more focused on the human rights approach, while New York focuses on peace and security, and the divide remains to be bridged. The different committees of the General Assembly focus on different pillars, and there is no coordination mechanism between them. The

Peacebuilding Commission is perceived by some as a bridge builder that can be used to address a range of root causes of conflict, while for others it is a purely post-conflict mechanism that should not necessarily focus on preventive actions outside of post-conflict contexts. Additionally, it has a country configuration that limits its capacity to have a broad approach to prevention.

At national level (in non-mission contexts), most member states argue that the UN's cross-pillar approach should be implemented through the strengthened resident coordinator role, in collaboration with peace and development advisers, where these exist. The development of a new, more risk-aware UNDAF, agreed with the national government, can provide some guideposts for action. Some member states express strong support for these measures, while others are wary about resident coordinators playing a more "political" role, and express concern about peace and development advisers as either unnecessary or as unfairly targeting some countries as more "at risk" than others. For the UNDAF, there may also be difficulties in getting agreement on the most important risks that a country may face.

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In the missions, member states noted that they are themselves siloed, which inhibits a more integrated approach to prevention. Instead, they approach prevention through the lens of their portfolio being, for instance, political (or peace and security) or development, or whether they are based in New York or Geneva. In one instance, a mission has been restructured to break down these silos in order to take a more integrated approach to prevention and other issues.

Some member states express a somewhat different set of concerns about the cross-pillar approach, worried that it could be detrimental to the core work of each pillar. Linking peace and security to human rights might lead to the **politicization of human rights**. Some refer to it as "Responsibility to Protect in disguise," afraid that it may lead to military interventions such as the one in Libya. Hence, the particular concern is to further link the peace and security pillar with the human rights pillar in the Security Council.

The second concern is the **securitization of development assistance**. From this perspective, donors would tighten the control of the conditions of development. This fear is based on the logic that prevention will create a diversion of development aid from nationally defined development priorities to security-related objectives defined by donor countries.

Similarly, there is a strain of zero-sum reasoning around development assistance in particular, in which countries worry that by linking prevention and development objectives, funds will be shifted from "real" development, like infrastructure, to projects that are seen as peripheral to a country's economic

growth. The risk is also to let down populations in dire conditions on the sole reason that they do not represent a threat in terms of conflict.

The cost of prevention

Finally, the last issue raised by member states on the prevention agenda is its costs. The twin resolutions stress that prevention is first and foremost a responsibility of the national government and national actors; but many countries might not have the needed resources, particularly for universal prevention. Several member states expressed concern about an approach that effectively shames countries for their limited success on preventive approaches in multilateral fora, when they may not have the financial capability to support prevention, particularly long-term, upstream approaches. For this reason, many member states support an approach that builds capacity on these issues over time—including human rights issues—through a process of accompaniment.

Conclusion: areas of agreement

Member states support prevention as a general idea, but they have different views regarding its implementation. Nevertheless, there are pockets of common ground.

At the UN, **prevention strategies that are based on consent and are nationally led**, such as those discussed in the Peacebuilding Commission, will find the broadest and deepest buy-in among member state constituencies. Approaches that focus on capacity building rather than on shaming countries or direct interference similarly will attract wider support, as they will be seen as enhancing sovereignty rather than reducing it. Most member states also agreed that the Peacebuilding Commission has greater potential to rally the UN system around preventive objectives than it is currently exercising in many instances—an issue that will be explored in greater depth in a future policy briefing.

To the extent that there are opportunities to **create more inclusion and transparency around processes that can support prevention**—such as the regional monthly reviews, the UN’s early warning tools, the work of the Peacebuilding Fund, and discussions in the Security Council—these might be seized. This is partly a matter of doing more outreach and dissemination, in relation to the Peacebuilding Fund, early warning tools, and the peace and development advisers. But it may also partly be about practical changes to working methods. The recent call in the Action for Peacekeeping Declaration for the Peacebuilding Commission to feed into Security Council mandates is just such a practical step, since it would provide a way for the country to participate—indirectly at least—in discussions in the Security Council. The “prevention platform” foreseen in the Executive Office of the Secretary General

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to coordinate the system could play this role. Increasing transparency would ensure better joint efforts between governments and the UN.

Most member states also acknowledge the need for **more spaces to discuss prevention among themselves** and to **increase their technical expertise**. Member states agree they need more space for discussion to break down silos: this could happen at the Mission level or within the United Nations, for instance between the General Assembly Committees. More policy evidence-based research, trainings, and field trips on prevention should be made available to policymakers.

Finally, there is a call for the discussion on prevention to be to be **applied more universally to all member states**, acknowledging that no society is immune to conflict and that each of them should undertake conscious efforts at all times to build peaceful societies. Member states want to see prevention as a goal for every country, not just for the weak or for the recipients of donor assistance. Recent events in some of the major donor countries, from Brexit to the Yellow Vest movement, were referenced. There is thus an opening to invite wealthier countries to discuss their own vulnerabilities and the ways that they address them on a daily basis, such as addressing inequalities, improving their policing approaches, listening to and addressing grievances, and supporting young people to thrive. This would also be an effective way to decrease stigma and normalize prevention.

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