The New Secretary-General's Report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: Prevention Back on the Agenda

About the Authors

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Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly released secretary-general's report (A/74/976–S/2020/773) on peacebuilding and sustaining peace contains, as usual, a wealth of examples of the steps that the United Nations (UN) system is taking to implement the sustaining peace resolutions. But it also suggests a welcome and surprising finding: the prevention agenda—once thought to be on life-support at the UN due to member-state sensitivities in New York—has new vigor.

The report is the culmination of a process that took place over the past year to review the UN peacebuilding architecture and, crucially, the progress of implementing the 2016 sustaining peace resolutions. Member states, UN entities, and civil society organizations held 15 regional and thematic consultations to identify areas of progress and remaining challenges, including by focusing on less traditional topics, such as links to mental health and psychosocial support or climate change. Approximately 400 documents were produced and used as inputs for this report, in which examples from more than 35 countries were highlighted.

This report is similar in many ways to the two previous progress reports from the secretary-general (2018 and 2019), especially in its organization around thematic issues (like financing) and the dizzying number of examples marshalled as evidence of forward movement. Each of the reports link the effective implementation of the sustaining peace resolutions to the secretary-general's reform initiatives, which began on January 1, 2019. This is compelling, as sustaining peace fundamentally requires a more coherent approach across pillars and entities at the UN.

Although the reports are similar, and build on one another, we detected in this one a greater comfort with signaling the need for preventive approaches—focusing on nationally led prevention that addresses the root causes of conflict. The secretary-general does not shy away from making prevention a cornerstone of his report, reiterating, "We must place the prevention of crisis and human suffering at the heart of our work." Going further, the report highlights that

preventive action is not wishful thinking, but rather is already happening. Concrete examples are highlighted, particularly in a case study on the UN's support to preventive efforts in Burkina Faso, which is not a "post-conflict" country—which, until the sustaining peace resolutions—had been the traditional terrain of peacebuilding at the UN.

In this brief, we identify five key ways in which the new report shows the prevention agenda moving forward:

1. Reaffirming the centrality of national ownership to the prevention agenda and links to the universal Agenda 2030
2. Highlighting strong buy-in from member states and international organizations for prevention, including the World Bank's new strategy on Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV)
3. Highlighting conflict-sensitive approaches, particularly in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its seismic secondary impacts
4. Showcasing momentum toward integrated, cross-pillar approaches
5. Pushing the agenda forward into new frontiers (climate, mental health).

We also identify key opportunities for the prevention agenda to take root in the UN's practice, including continued strengthening of expertise on prevention; deepening partnerships with the IFIs; leveraging links with violence reduction initiatives, especially relating to SDG16; focusing on area-based approaches to address multiple risks; and more action on humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus approaches. Supporting and cutting across these five opportunities is SDG16 and the decade of action in support of the 2030 Agenda; the themes of peace, justice, and inclusion—and the signal role of inequality and exclusion in driving conflict—are justly omnipresent in the report.

Finally, we observe that there remains a sense in this report that the wealth of examples could be woven more completely into a story about more integrated, cross-pillar approaches. In short, it can be hard to see the forest for the trees. This is most notable on the issue of financing—a critical issue for attention, especially as funding for peacebuilding and prevention looks bleak with the global economy contracting at the moment that needs may be rising. It will be essential to expand the financing discussion beyond the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), even as support to the PBF is still much needed, and develop concrete, actionable ideas to support good peacebuilding donorship.

Advancing the agenda

We note five key advances. ***National ownership*** is one of the strongest features of the prevention agenda. The report foresees a role for the UN predominantly focused on capacity building, with prevention efforts anchored at the national level. The secretary-general particularly calls for rallying around

the 2030 Agenda and for member states to step up financing of the agenda to address drivers of insecurity, such as inequality and exclusion. Resident coordinators (RCs) play a prominent role in the implementation of the prevention agenda. Throughout the text, much emphasis is placed on how resources, capacity, and expertise have been increased for UN country teams to address risks for violence and conflict and strengthen resilience, in partnership with national governments.

The report points to strong ***political buy-in for violence prevention*** from member states and regional organizations across all regions of the world. The adoption of the new World Bank's FCV Strategy, which has a strong focus on prevention, further underscores the momentum and normalization of this agenda. This is an important achievement, which has benefited from the adoption of the sustaining peace resolutions.

Conflict-sensitive approaches are also becoming more central to guiding UN efforts at field level, linked closely to Agenda 2030, as reflected in the development of a UN Sustainable Development Group guidance. The relevance of this approach has been laid bare by the COVID-19 crisis currently unfolding, which leads to an increase of risk factors for violence and conflict worldwide. Acknowledging this situation, the report calls for "conflict-sensitive and coherent, preventative approaches that help address the present health and humanitarian crisis," which "will contribute to sustainable peace." Given the overwhelming attention paid to the public health dimensions of COVID-19, often at the expense of its peacebuilding dimensions, this call is particularly significant and acknowledges that the pandemic and the way we address it can represent a threat to peace, or an opportunity for peacebuilding.

In addition to a strong emphasis on national priorities and capacity building, the report also puts the ***cross-pillar approach*** at the forefront of the prevention agenda. The cross-pillar approach was prominent in the 2018 report, but less so in the 2019 report. In 2020, the secretary-general clearly refers to it as a core element in the implementation of the sustaining peace resolutions, alongside leadership, accountability, and capacity to build peace; financing; and partnership. The report consistently underscores the necessity of multidimensional and integrated responses—particularly in the context of the COVID-19 crisis—and provides concrete examples of where they have occurred. For instance, in Central African Republic, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) convened critical actors to discuss how to address peacebuilding challenges and advised the Security Council on this issue. In Mali, the secretary-general undertook a review to make sure that the mission adopted a cross-pillar approach to its peacebuilding efforts. The secretary-general also reminds us that Agenda 2030 illustrates member states' acknowledgement of these interlinkages.

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The report also pushes the mainstream of the prevention agenda into important *new frontiers*. First, the report introduces the concepts of climate risk—which was completely absent in the 2018 and 2019 reports—as well as of mental health and psychosocial support. These underscore the multidimensionality of risks that may lead to violence and conflict. Second, the report refers several times to the secretary-general's Call to Action for Human Rights, which stresses, "There is no better guarantee of prevention than for Member States to meet their human rights responsibilities." Hence, in spite of traditional sensitivities, the report underscores how human rights tools are being used and human rights expertise is being expanded to play a critical role in fostering peace and security. However, the report does not provide details on how to further leverage human rights tools to advance the prevention agenda.

Opportunities ahead for the prevention agenda

The report is a stepping-stone for the prevention agenda. It illustrates buy-in, provides concrete examples of its implementation, and reduces sensitivities around prevention by adopting a sovereignty-supporting and capacity-building focus. Moving forward, five steps can be undertaken to further strengthen the implementation of this agenda.

Continue strengthening the expertise in prevention in the UN system
Both this report and the 2018 and 2019 ones underscore the importance of increasing UN expertise in prevention. Since the last peacebuilding architecture review, more support has been made available to RCs, frameworks have become more risk-informed, and experts in prevention have been deployed. These efforts to strengthen prevention should be recognized and encouraged. Prevention is not an easy area of expertise, as it draws tools from multiple fields—like human rights, development, politics, peace and security, and others—but with its own specific objectives.

Indeed, prevention requires integrated and cross-pillar approaches. At the same time, no UN entity is dedicated solely to prevention; agencies, funds, and programs have to learn how to prevent conflict and adopt a conflict-sensitive approach on top of their other mandates. Often, the terms "sustaining peace" and "sustainable development" are still used interchangeably, oversimplifying the linkages between the two. The report mentions that "the new Common Country Analysis (CCA) and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) facilitate support to national partners based on joint multi-dimensional risk analysis." However, risk analysis does not always refer to the risk of violence or conflict specifically, but rather to broader risks of not reaching development goals. To ensure the implementation of the prevention agenda, it would thus be important to ensure that CCAs systematically identify risk and resilience factors for violence, and that the

UNSDCF then addresses them. Dedicated expertise can help with this. The UN reforms—particularly the development of RC offices—and the sustaining peace resolutions create opportunities to build expertise in prevention at country level.

Although we note that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16—and particularly 16.1's violence reduction mandate—is not mentioned in the secretary-general's report, the themes of peace, justice, and inclusion are nonetheless threaded throughout the narrative. Indeed, SDG16 represents a real opportunity to adopt a framework at field level to address risks for violence, and it was referred to in the report of the Advisory Group of Expert as a framework to assess progress towards sustaining peace.

Deepen the partnership with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The report makes reference to an important new instrument available as part of IDA19: additional financing provided to countries that are at risk of sliding into conflict (or backsliding into it). These funds are much larger than those that can be marshalled through the PBF or the UN system. There is thus enormous opportunity at country level for RCs convene national actors to define concrete prevention priorities to be supported at a much larger scale.

The secretary-general's remark, "I see value in more institutional collaboration between the UN and the IMF," is also significant. Neither the IMF nor the word "macroeconomic" is mentioned in the 2018 or 2019 reports. This addition opens a new space for engagement at the intersection of macroeconomic and political risks.

Strengthening the links between the violence prevention agendas

The report focuses on conflict prevention but also refers to other forms of violence such as violence against women, peacebuilders, and humanitarian workers, as well as the prevention of violent extremism. In country settings, these forms of violence, as well as violent crime, violence against children, and crimes against humanity, are often interlinked. In line with SDG 16.1, the UN can further break down its siloes by fostering a broader violence prevention approach. This step will widen the tools available, decrease duplication of efforts, and help navigate national actors' sensitivities.

Targeted, area-based prevention approaches

Risk and resilience factors for violence and conflict vary across a country. The report acknowledges the importance of understanding these dynamics by "recognizing that building peace is more sustainable when locally owned, led, and implemented." This approach is essential and can be further strengthened by adopting an integrated and area-based (sometimes called "targeted") approach to prevention. In other words, the UN can work with local actors to

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complement their efforts by ensuring integration with a broader strategy that addresses a variety of risk factors at local, national, and sometimes even international level. Shifting from a project approach to prevention towards a strategy addressing risk factors as an ecosystem will increase the effectiveness of prevention approaches.

Triple-nexus approaches

Although the report consistently stresses the importance of integrated, cross-pillar approaches, the triple nexus—which is broader, and goes beyond the UN—is featured less prominently. This is in some ways an issue of semantics. Many if not most of the examples cited reflect a triple-nexus approach, combining humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts into a comprehensive response. Moreover, the report makes clear that partnerships beyond the UN are a critical success factor on the ground. But there remains considerable confusion among policymakers and practitioners not only about what the triple nexus entails generally but also, crucially, how it interacts with, reinforces, and in some cases complicates the prevention agenda in particular. This confusion is likely to persist. Looking forward, greater attention to the interlinkages between the nexus and prevention would help move both agendas forward.

Conclusion: seeing the forest for the trees

As with past reports, the wealth of detail in this report sometimes makes it difficult to make the leap that the secretary-general wishes us to make—namely, to see how these particulars add up to a more coherent approach across the system. We see some instances—like Burkina Faso—where this has happened. Additional case studies at country level could have driven this argument home more clearly, showing how the issues of national ownership, financing, leadership, cross-pillar collaboration, capacity building, and so forth, have come together and delivered positive change in sustaining peace. Right now, we have to try to piece this together from examples hived off into different sections.

In this respect, it would have been useful to learn more about how the Peacebuilding Support Office is growing into the role—previously described as a "hinge"—of bringing the system together, beyond the role of its support to the Peacebuilding Commission. Previous discussions of a prevention "platform" also seem to have fallen silent—such a platform to draw together the system (even if very light) could usefully complement and support country-level leadership.

Perhaps the most significant element of focusing on the particular over more general problems, however, concerns financing. As in past reports, the focus here is on the PBF and the need for a quantum leap. And, indeed, the PBF

deserves more support, and perhaps there is scope for member states to consider some of the proposals made in 2018.

However, a broader coherence across the funding landscape, both inside and outside of the UN, is really required to drive a more ambitious prevention approach—especially as the COVID-19 crisis is now diverting funding to response efforts, and as the global economic contraction seems likely to reduce funding for peacebuilding and prevention. The secretary-general recognizes this need for "good peacebuilding donorship" in the report, and yet much of the focus remains on the PBF and, to some extent, on the use of programmatic funding in peace operations contexts (other issues are mentioned, such as pooled funds, but not at length).

For prevention to be effective, these efforts need to be integrated—or in other words, address multiple risk and resilience factors at the same time—and sustained for years or even decades. Ultimately, only better donorship—which includes internal and external coordination of donors, longer-term and pooled funds to address a variety of risk and resilience factors in a coordinated fashion, increased funding for the PBF, strategic collaboration with the international financial institutions, and other steps—can enable the prevention agenda to be truly operationalized.

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