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Unpacking Prevention: Member State Perspectives

Member states support the idea of a more preventive approach to conflict, but they have different understandings of what it means in practice. Many equate it with crisis management and political solutions to escalating conflicts, whereas others see it in light of long-term approaches to address conflict risks and strengthen natural resilience at national level. This briefing, which is the first in a series on prevention at the UN, unpacks the most common visions for prevention among member states, highlighting how each has implications for UN practice.

The United Nations (UN) has recognized the need for a more preventive approach in the face of protracted crises and conflicts that take years and even decades to resolve. Increasingly internal in character over recent years, these conflicts have resulted in an unconscionable human toll—with 131.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2019—in addition to massive economic losses.[1]

Such conflicts are challenging for the UN. Their root causes typically include deep-seated grievances; hence, tackling them often requires long-term efforts to mend the social fabric. The tools that were created at the UN to prevent international armed conflicts in 1945, however, are not easily adaptable to such needs. Additionally, responding to these crises has become extremely costly for the UN, with $21.9 billion USD requested to cover humanitarian needs in 2019, and $6.7 billion USD budgeted in 2018–19 for peacekeeping operations.

In response, many member states have called for a fundamental shift of the UN's political capital and resources toward preventing violent conflicts before they arise. The General Assembly and the Security Council have adopted twin

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[1] OCHA, "Global Humanitarian Overview 2019" (OCHA, n.d.), https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf. Conflict is the main driver of humanitarian needs.

resolutions to encourage integrated, cross-pillar efforts to sustain peace, including through prevention. The current secretary-general, António Guterres, has made prevention a top priority. Evidence supports the contention that in addition to averting massive human suffering, prevention is also cost-effective.[2]

This policy brief unpacks the different understandings of prevention operative among member states, based on discussions with a regionally diverse group of 19 countries. It explores how member states understand the prevention agenda at the UN and highlights some areas of overlapping consensus that would support operationalization of the prevention agenda. A key finding is that member states are more accepting of prevention if it is seen to apply to all countries, not just conflict-affected ones.

The challenge of definition

Member states agree in principle on the need for a more preventive approach to conflict, some even noting that this is a matter of national interest, but significant differences surface when discussing what it means in practice.

While member states broadly support prevention, the implementation of a "prevention agenda" as a practical matter at the UN is difficult. Conflict prevention does not have a formal definition. Terms such as "prevention agenda," "sustaining peace," "peacekeeping," "peacebuilding," and "Agenda 2030," have overlapping meanings, which adds to the conceptual difficulties. The lack of shared understanding among member states impedes a clear strategic vision of prevention and its implementation. Moreover, the lack of definition sparks fear that the agenda may be used as a cover for stronger states to interfere in the internal affairs of weaker states, or that it will divert resources from development efforts (see the next briefing on member states concerns on prevention).

Prevention has been little discussed by member states outside of resolution negotiations. Groups such as the g77, the Non-aligned Movement, or the Western European and Others Group have not adopted a common position on prevention, and there are marked differences within those groups on the prevention agenda. Support for prevention in the different General Assembly committees also differs a great deal. These dynamics underscore the fact that there has not yet been substantive progress in building a common vision.

While some member state representatives described the concept as "nebulous" or "difficult," others had clear and concise approaches to it, particularly those

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that have experienced conflicts. Member states perspectives can be understood through the lens of two overlapping categories: 1) approaches to prevention, which are divided into political and capacity-building measures; and 2) moments to implement prevention measures, which span a spectrum from "upstream" structural prevention to "downstream" crisis management (or operational) prevention. Often, member states focus on one approach over the other.

Approaches to prevention

Political and deterrence approaches related to threats to international peace and security

The UN was created to deal with inter-state tensions—specifically, managing conflict among the great powers and, generally, among all member states. It is therefore unsurprising that the most common area of agreement among member states on preventive action is that **political approaches** are at the center of it, particularly preventive diplomacy, mediation, and good offices. Mediation is perceived as an essential tool and is frequently equated with prevention.

The Security Council also plays a key role in political approaches as the forum for managing great power conflicts—which is what it was originally intended to. In some cases, peacekeeping missions are also considered vehicles to implement prevention activities, for instance, through creating the space for political dialogue and confidence building measures. In addition, the council is the key actor when prevention is understood as **deterrence**—through the use of sanctions or use of force.

Member states nevertheless acknowledge that most conflicts today are internal or have an internal component. This means that the nature of the conflict is different, and that issues of building trust and strengthening the social contract are central. While member states agree that political dialogue tools are transferable to the prevention of internal conflicts, some of them also highlight that preventive diplomacy will not be sufficient to address structural issues.

The use of Chapter VII by the Security Council to address internal armed conflicts is the most contentious aspect of the prevention discussion. Some member states argue that the threat of use of force can prevent a human catastrophe, and it represents a sine qua non condition to constrain the parties and provide the space to resolve their issues peacefully. Others see the use of force by the Council as destabilizing, with sanctions as potentially inflaming a situation. Some even argue that using the word "prevention" in connection with the use of force will only serve to delegitimize the term altogether. (Discussions on Security Council intervention will be further discussed in our next policy brief on member states' concerns.)

Capacity- and institution-building approaches

In response to the reality that most conflicts now are internal or have an internal component, some member states stress the need for an approach to prevention that builds the capacity of a country to enhance its natural resilience to violence. This structural vision for prevention implies that—as highlighted in the twin resolutions—the primary responsibility for prevention efforts falls on the government, with the UN in some cases providing support and capacity building. This approach therefore foregrounds the idea of **accompaniment**, since, in the absence of governmental willingness, prevention efforts pushed from the outside may be fruitless.

Many member states view prevention through the lens of **building resilience** to violence, very much in line with the approach in the UN-World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report. These longer-term approaches to prevention look at a diverse set of root causes of conflict, which include factors such as political exclusion and a lack of development, or lack of equitable development, including among regions or demographic categories such as youth; inequalities, including gender inequality; and human rights abuses, including violations of socioeconomic rights.

In concrete terms, according to member states, accompaniment requires that the country set the priorities and that it ask for or welcome assistance. As one example, many member states favorably remarked on the role of the Peacebuilding Fund in supporting country-level priorities in reforming the security sector or implementing reconciliation initiatives. Others noted how the UN has provided technical support to strengthen national early warning systems or has provided capacity building for institutions important to peaceful coexistence, such as the police, the electoral system, the justice sector, and human rights.

Member states that have experienced conflict (or serious risks for conflict) tend to have a concrete understanding of the factors that need to be addressed at country level, particularly when referring to their own national experiences. They recognize the need to have a dedicated analysis of risk factors and for prevention measures to address specifically these risk factors (endogenous and exogenous).

Member states distinguish between **internally driven (endogenous) and external (exogenous) risk factors**. For internal risks, the government assesses the fault lines in its country; prevention efforts are nationally led and international actors can provide support upon request—financially or in terms of capacity building. For conflicts in which exogenous factors such as climate change, transhumance, or trafficking are key drivers, collective, multilateral actions are required to address them.

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Timing of prevention

Research on conflict prevention underscores the fact that prevention strategies may be implemented at different moments of a pathway for peace. Downstream or operational prevention concerns preventing the escalation of conflict when violence is imminent or has already broken out—although in this instance, the line between crisis management and prevention can become blurred. By contrast, upstream or structural prevention can be understood as a continuum of two phases: Targeted prevention can be used when tensions are rising and when there is a need to focus on specific groups; risk factors are mapped out and targeted measures are implemented. "Universal" prevention consists of undertaking conscious efforts to build resilience and peaceful coexistence at all times. Upstream, structural prevention is also useful in the post-conflict period in which preventing the recurrence of violence is key.

When discussing with member states, it becomes clear that the main focus of discussion is on the last (downstream) approach, closer to **crisis management**. The current Venezuela crisis, for instance, was mentioned in this light. For some, external pressure is perceived as the best way to prevent the crisis from escalating. For others, such pressure—or interference—risks further destabilizing the country; in particular, the use of sanctions makes it harder for the government to address critical socioeconomic issues. The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic have also been repeatedly analyzed through the lens of conflict prevention.

These country examples, however, as well as the overall narrative on mediation and the role of peacekeeping missions in prevention, seems at odds with the logic underlying support for the prevention agenda: that is to say, the need to focus on more attention on upstream prevention of a conflict before it erupts.

A smaller set of member states lay the accent on upstream preventive approaches, such as **targeted prevention,** in which risk factors for violence would be addressed further upstream than is usual at the UN. In this discussion, member states refer to missed opportunities for Venezuela, Syria, Yemen, and the Rohingya crisis.

But even here there are differences in approach. In the first one, a few member states argue that early signs of conflict should be identified through an early warning system run by or with the UN, which could trigger targeted preventive measures—even though there is a lack of clarity about what these measures should be. In this vision, the UN has an important role to play by improving its early warning and early response systems. This approach is controversial among many member states, since it raises questions of the legitimacy of actors creating the system's indicators, interpreting the signals, and making decisions on actions.

A second—and less controversial—targeted prevention approach is understood as a national undertaking where a government identifies rising tensions and risk factors and addresses them through targeted measures, including developmental, political, security or human rights efforts. Member states that have experienced high levels of violence or conflicts have a particularly sophisticated understanding of the fault lines in their own societies. Interestingly, many other member states that have not experienced conflict in the recent past, also acknowledge that their societies do have fault lines, that no country is immune to conflict, and that every county should be assessing risks and resilience to a certain extent.

This leads us to another upstream prevention approach, the **universal** one. Universal prevention is different to targeted prevention because it does not focus on specific at-risk groups, but rather on the general public by building healthy societies that promote inclusion, build processes to manage conflicts peacefully, strengthen a culture of peace, and create access to justice for all, among others. Universal prevention builds countries' resilience to shocks that may cause a slide into violence. Many member states argue that this approach should be central, and they see an important, supportive role for the 2030 Agenda, conflict-sensitive development, and international human rights frameworks.

Finally, many member states also focus on **preventing relapse of conflict**, discussing situations such as Colombia, Liberia, and Timor-Leste. For some, this approach to prevention is the only one that has been formally agreed upon. In this latter understanding, capacity building for prevention is then only relevant in the traditional "peacebuilding" or post-conflict phase—even though in the recent twin sustaining peace resolutions, peacebuilding is defined as "activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, recurrence, or continuation of conflict" (S/RES/2882 [2016], preambular para. 8).

Tools or strategy?

Across all of these issues, some member states see prevention as a set of new activities at the UN, including the creation of new fora and new tools. But others see prevention as something to be mainstreamed across all relevant existing UN activities, where the change does not stem from the creation of new resources but rather from a change of behavior and practice. This distinction has consequences for closing the "implementation gap" for the sustaining peace resolutions, which was noted by many member states.

When discussing prevention, diplomats usually focus on tools that are related to their portfolios—be it peace and security, development, or human rights—instead of an overall strategy. The risk of this approach is twofold. First, it may take existing activities and initiatives and rebrand them as "prevention," without being based on a substantive understanding of what drives violence in a

particular society. UN tools—to be effective at preventing conflict—need to be tailored to address the drivers of violence. For instance, countless studies have shown that economic development in itself does not prevent conflict, and it can even increase the risks of violence—and recent conflicts in middle-income states have born this out—but the perception still persists among some member states that development alone reduces violent conflict.

Second, most member states already understand that prevention measures are most effective when they part of an integrated approach, as described in the *Pathways for Peace* report. Risk factors are not isolated; they evolve in a web. A strategic rather than tool-based vision of prevention is therefore better suited to much-needed integrated approaches. In spite of this recognition, many member states still refer to prevention through the lens of tools rather than strategies.

Conclusion: An "identity crisis" for prevention

While member states support prevention in theory, the prevention agenda at the UN is suffering from an identity crisis that is blocking a more strategic and operational approach. Unpacking understandings of prevention at the UN will put member states on the level playing field required to have discussions about how to move forward on a practical basis.

Many member states, particularly from the Global South, wish to see a more active role from countries from the North discussing their risk and resilience factors.

On the one hand, the discourse on prevention at the UN is still dominated by a downstream, crisis management vision: countries already in full-blown conflict are often discussed under the prevention lens. This sits in tension with an approach that was created to decrease the need to invest in conflict management and response in the first place.

On the other hand, there is a strong recognition that, as a matter of fact, national approaches to prevention already focus on upstream, structural approaches, including both universal and targeted strategies. Indeed, prevention as it is actually practiced by countries themselves as they build their own resilience and address their risks supports a more multifaceted view of what prevention is—going beyond political and crisis management approaches.

Unfortunately, as member states noted, there are few opportunities at the UN for member states to exchange their views on what prevention means and how it should be implemented (outside of the Security Council). Additionally, understandings of prevention often differ within permanent missions themselves, depending on whether diplomats are covering peace and security or development portfolios, and few missions have an integrated approach to prevention—or spaces in which to discuss such an approach.

Even though further discussions are necessary to define the content of the prevention agenda, our analysis suggests that member states share several areas of agreement. First, they strongly support a vision of prevention that empowers

governments by **building their capacity and institutions** to deal with their own threats, based on their demand. Internal conflicts often emanate from a disintegration of the social fabric—something that can only be recreated from within the country. Hence, an essential role for the UN agreed by member states should be to support nationally led prevention strategies through financial and technical means.

Second, an understanding of prevention that highlights an upstream, **universal approach**, alongside the UN's more traditional crisis management and response tools, may help move countries toward a more common vision. Most member states highlight that no country is immune to violence. Hence, all societies may benefit from implementing universal prevention measures related to good governance, equitable development, justice and the respect for human rights, and strengthening healthy interpersonal relationships.

In addition, many member states, particularly from the Global South, wish to see a more active role from countries from the North discussing their risk and resilience factors, as well as championing the implementation of universal and targeted approaches to prevention. This would go a long way to destigmatize and normalize prevention. One even pointed to a recent *New York Times* article, which described how peacebuilders from the Global North are coming back to their home countries to address rising risk factors.

Third, prevention needs to be discussed in a **more strategic** way at the UN and in the foreign ministries, including recognizing the value of integrated approaches to address a range of risk factors and build resilience. Member states are eager to find spaces to have these discussions. We explore this further in our next policy brief, which analyzes the main member state concerns with prevention, and scopes out some practical areas of possible forward movement.

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