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Why Should National Prevention Strategies Be in the Pact for the Future?

Making progress on prevention has been a priority of the United Nations secretary-general (SG). But difficulties have emerged in implementing the agenda from member states pushbacks due to fear of intervention and stigma¹ as well as a general sense of confusion as to what prevention means in practice. In his New Agenda for Peace, the SG addressed these concerns by recommending all countries to develop national prevention strategies and for the United Nations to provide relevant support. But ill-designed strategies can also be ineffective and do harm. This policy brief unpacks how member states can use the prime opportunity afforded by the Summit of the Future to significantly advance the prevention agenda by embracing this call for national prevention strategies and adopting an evidence-based approach for more effective prevention efforts.

About the Authors

Céline Monnier is Senior Program Officer at the New York University Center on International Cooperation

What is a national prevention strategy?

Violence prevention can be conceptualized as a **political and social commitment and efforts to address the causes of violence** (i.e., risk factors) **and strengthen the conditions for peace** (i.e., protective factors). Violence² is multicausal. Prevention efforts therefore need to be set up as a system of efforts to address the multiple causes.

Strategies are more effective than isolated projects

Human beings have a natural aversion to killing, but circumstances may arise that outweigh this aversion. Those circumstances are called **risk factors** for violence. No one risk factor predicts violence but their accumulation increases its likelihood. Violence might break out for instance as an accumulation of post-

¹ “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.” See Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “The Prevention Agenda: Mapping Out Member States’ Concerns,” *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, July 2, 2019, <https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/The-Prevention-Agenda-Mapping-Out-Member-States-Concerns>.

² This policy brief adopts the World Health Organization definition of violence, which describes it as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” Depending on the perpetrators and victims, violence can be characterized as collective, interpersonal, or self-directed. Collective violence is perpetrated by a state or organized group to other states, organized groups, or individuals. Its most common manifestations are in conflict settings and warzones. Interpersonal violence and self-directed violence are both inflicted by an individual, but while the former is directed upon another individual, the latter is directed by an individual on themselves. The approaches described in this policy brief applies to all forms of violence, but this research focuses mostly on violent crime, violent extremism, and armed conflict.

traumatic stress disorders (individual level), violence against children³ leading to a normalization of violence (interpersonal level), anomie (community level), loss of trust in the state, increase in the size of an excluded group (societal level), and sudden increase in food prices (international level). Risk factors are also often interrelated: addressing them in isolation often does not work.⁴ This is why **it is critical to move from individual prevention projects to broader prevention strategies.**

Such strategies already exist in many countries,⁵ including in the forms of strategies for crime prevention, prevention of violent extremism, social cohesion, and infrastructures for peace. Some countries do not have a formal prevention strategy but all countries possess at least some pieces of it. A prevention strategy is like a puzzle. Any activity that addresses risk or strengthen protective factors for violence should be considered a prevention effort—whether or not it is called prevention—and can be a piece of the strategy. While the different pieces need to talk to each other to facilitate multi stakeholder multi-level interventions, the degree of formalization of a strategy and the type of coordination mechanism will depend on what makes the most sense in a specific context and can be strengthened over time.

In the context of national prevention strategies, what does “addressing all forms of violence” mean?

Referring to the need to address all forms of violence allows countries to acknowledge that none of them are immune to violence, to **tackle the risk factors that are the most harmful and pervasive domestically**, and to acknowledge the linkages between different types of violence. This is a more effective approach than focusing solely on one type of violence for the following reasons:

- **It avoids duplication of efforts.** By looking at “all forms of violence,” prevention actors can identify common and different risk and protective factors across categories, coordinate their efforts more effectively, and save resources. For instance, a strategy to prevent violent extremism (PVE) might already cover risk and protective factors for other forms of violence. As such, rather than creating a whole new strategy for other types of violence, the existing strategy can be built upon and complemented.

³ R. Douglas Fields, *Why We Snap: Understanding the Rage Circuit in Your Brain* (Dutton, 2016); Sylvie Mrug, Anjana Madan, and Michael Windle, “Emotional Desensitization to Violence Contributes to Adolescents’ Violent Behavior,” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 44, no. 1 (January 2016): 75–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-015-9986-x>.

⁴ More information in the forthcoming policy brief on risk and protective factors from NYU Center on International Cooperation.

⁵ For instance: National Prevention Strategy (Canada), Ministry of Peace and Justice (Costa Rica), Security, Defense and Citizen Coexistence Policy (Colombia), National Peace Council (Ghana), Ministry of Social Cohesion (Guyana), National Peace Policy (Malawi), Serious Violence Strategy (UK).

- **Violence categories are not clear-cut.** The labels between different types of violence can be blurry: the same group of armed individuals can be called an armed group, a terrorist group, or a criminal group by different people.
- **Different types of violence can feed each other.** Domestic violence against children can lead to more aggressive adults across all categories of violence. The aftermath of armed conflicts can lead to high levels of crime. Most violent extremist attacks take place during an armed conflict.
- **The type of violence can change,** for instance new threats of violent extremism have emerged in countries that were traditionally focusing their efforts in preventing armed conflict. Having a violence prevention strategy that is too narrowly focused on one type of violence can obscure other risk factors for violence and thus miss the window of opportunity for prevention.
- **It allows for a more universal approach to prevention.** Focusing on all forms of violence allows all countries to think about their own context. While armed conflict has been a focus of the prevention agenda, other forms of violence also need to be urgently addressed. For instance, interpersonal violence accounts for four times as many violent deaths than conflict and terrorism combined.⁶

Why should national prevention strategies be in the Pact for the Future?

Having language on national prevention strategies in the Pact for the Future could strengthen United Nations (UN) efforts on prevention, for the following reasons:

1. **The UN can support member states** to make progress on national prevention strategies. The Pact for the Future is an opportunity to provide clear guidance to the UN system to more effectively organize to support the design and implementation of national prevention strategies. Particularly, the Pact is an opportunity to enhance Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—and particularly SDG16.1 to significantly reduce all forms of violence. Referring to national prevention strategies in the Pact is a coherent and practical way to support progress on SDG16 and the larger 2030 Agenda.
2. **Preventing all forms of violence is not covered by any other agenda item in the UN General Assembly.** The Pact for the Future is an opportunity for member states to discuss issues that are not covered by

⁶ “4th Edition of the [Global Study on Homicide](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html),” UNDOC, 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>. From 2019–2021, the average number of intentional homicides was equivalent to 3.8 times the number of deaths from conflict and terrorism combined.

existing agenda items. Although there are agenda items⁷ that address narrow aspects of prevention or prevention, there is no agenda item that covers national prevention strategies and violence prevention more broadly.

- 3. It could assuage member state concerns about the UN prevention agenda.** Framing prevention around nationally led strategies counters the fear that prevention is a cover for intervention and emphasizes that such strategies are sovereignty enhancing. It can help rebuild trust in the UN system. In addition, acknowledging that no country is immune to violence and that the need to adopt prevention strategies is universal will help destigmatize the agenda and increase buy-in. A Pact for the Future that reflects those messages will help normalize prevention and underscore its relevance for all countries, and therefore address potential concerns that the adoption of a national prevention strategy may be perceived as a signal that a country is at risk of conflict.
- 4. It is an opportunity for member states to clarify that prevention goes beyond preventative diplomacy and regional frameworks to reduce tensions.** All countries—whether low-, middle- or high- income—have risk factors for violence, and these risk factors can be exacerbated even in peaceful societies by external shocks. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine have led to global shocks on commodity prices,⁸ as well as increases in inequality and polarization, all risk factors for violence. To achieve sustainable peace, efforts should be undertaken to address those risk factors on an ongoing basis.

Recommendations for the Pact for the Future to ensure effective violence prevention strategies

The Pact for the Future should embrace the SG’s call for countries to develop national prevention strategies. To help strengthen prevention efforts where they are the most needed—at country level—and improve UN support, the Pact can also help set the groundwork for providing greater clarity on how to design and implement effective national prevention strategies. In the absence of a definition, anything could be called a national violence prevention strategy, including approaches that can be ineffective and even do harm.

Research and evaluation of past efforts show that certain conditions are critical for the success of prevention strategies. National prevention strategies should, thus, not be a rebranding of “business as usual,” but an evidence-based approach that reduce the risk of violence. Currently, there is no shared guidance

⁷ The current agenda items are: (31) prevention of armed conflict, (129) The responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, (97) prevention of an arms race in outer space, (99s), Measures to prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction; (H) crime prevention.

⁸ The World Bank, “World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development,” *The World Bank*, 2011, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/25f2300c-f0d4-54de-8a56-30566e72003a>.

across the UN system on how to support coherently the development and implementation of effective national prevention strategies.

A possible model is the development of crime prevention guidelines by a group of experts, which was adopted by the UN Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) in its resolution 2002/13. A similar exercise could be undertaken for the prevention of all forms of violence.

The Pact for the Future could be a first step in this direction, by requesting the establishment of **a group of prevention experts to identify critical parameters for effective prevention approaches.**⁹ The UN Peacebuilding Commission meetings could also be an opportunity for member states to highlight good practices and lessons learned on national strategies, as well as their views on the types of support they would like to receive from the UN. Finally, the subsequent Peacebuilding Architecture Review could highlight how different parts of the UN system could support effectively national strategies.

Conclusion

Research shows that the most effective way to prevent violence is through a strategy that addresses multiple risk and protective factors. These efforts seek to strengthen the social contract and thus should be nationally and locally led. The Summit of the Future is an opportunity to shift the narrative on prevention at the UN by heeding the secretary-general’s call for all countries to develop nationally led strategies and set the groundwork for providing greater clarity on how to design and implement effective national prevention strategies to ensure that the UN can provide—upon request—effective support to national actors.

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Center on International Cooperation

777 United Nations Plaza,
8th Floor
New York, NY 10017

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⁹ See for instance some initial reflections: Céline Monnier, “Seven Questions to Consider in Designing, Implementing, and Supporting Effective Nationally Led Violence Prevention Strategies,” *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, September 14, 2023, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/seven-questions-to-consider-in-designing-implementing-and-supporting-effective-nationally-led-violence-prevention-strategies>.