

Conflict and Violence Prevention at the World Bank— Recommendations for the Spring Meetings

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April 16, 2024

The World Bank Governors meet at the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-World Bank (WB) Spring Meetings this week to discuss progress on the World Bank’s Evolution Roadmap. Much of this discussion will focus on financing, including commitments to the hybrid facility and the prospects for the upcoming International Development Association (IDA) replenishment. Equally important, however, is whether and how the World Bank continues to play a leading role in international support to countries affected by fragility, violence, and conflict.

This is made more salient not only because of the suffering and risks of horizontal escalation in the Middle East and the ongoing war on Ukraine but also because global conflict has escalated significantly in the last two years in many forgotten crises, from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Sahel, to Myanmar and Haiti. Criminal and interpersonal violence is also a significant risk, ranging from the resurgence of threats to state institutions from organized crime in Latin America to rising communal violence and gangs in African cities, including the unexpected penetration of criminal networks as far afield as Malmo in Sweden.

How is the evolution roadmap addressing conflict, fragility, and violence?

We draw two primary conclusions from recent trends in the World Bank’s approach. First, **the Bank has made significant progress in the “staying engaged” aspect of its strategy**—how to keep an appropriate presence in countries in active conflict or under unconstitutional regimes. Here, the Bank is in a difficult position, having to navigate local political economy situations with the views of both regional and non-regional shareholders and a limited number of instruments to engage in situations of high insecurity. Overall, it balances these challenges very well, from approving the new “Afghanistan 3.0” strategy to the thoughtful approach underway in the Sahel.

There are still dilemmas and difficulties here, but in many ways, these are a function of the Bank’s shareholders rather than the Bank management itself—how, for example, in situations where the Bank partners with the United Nations (UN) or organizations such as the International Committee of the Red

Cross (ICRC) to keep health, education, or social and economic livelihood conditions going; does it avoid a progressive collapse in local and national institutional capacity and partner with peacebuilding actors to contribute to recovery, and what are the pragmatic mechanisms for doing so?; and how to navigate the dialogue where regional organizations have taken a position that compromises that dialogue. Our [report](#) with Chatham House, discussed in several events during the World Bank’s Fragility Forum, summarizes evidence and ideas on this, including the importance of linking development to peacebuilding efforts and engaging with local institutions. It does not provide all the answers, and staying engaged in politically estranged situations will remain a challenge for development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors.

Secondly, despite this good progress, **the Bank is at risk of making a major error in not adopting conflict and violence as a global challenge but rather as a problem applicable to only a small number of “listed” fragile and conflict-affected states.** The first version of the Evolution Roadmap listed climate, pandemics, and conflict as global challenges. The current version has six challenges—health, emergency preparedness and response, food and nutrition security, forests, energy transition, water security, and digitalization. Conflict and violence are mentioned only because these global challenges should be adapted to the particular needs of fragile and conflict-affected states.

If adopted in this format, this would be a massive regression. Through a series of painful negotiations, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed that peace, justice, inclusion, and the strength of institutions were universal development challenges. They are not only applicable in a small number of the most fragile states but affect all countries. Politicians all around the globe know that political polarization, criminal violence, interpersonal and domestic violence are salient development challenges—whether in the US, France, Brazil, India, Nigeria, the DRC, Jamaica, Indonesia, or Timor-Leste. Not including violence and conflict prevention as one of the global challenges will disadvantage the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development countries that are facing these challenges from being able to access additional financing from the [Livable Planet Fund](#), which is designed to provide financial incentives for projects promoting global public goods, with a focus on middle-income countries. This is particularly important as we see many middle-income countries facing these challenges with costly spillover effects on their economies and that of their neighbors, which leaves IDA as the only financing channel for addressing violence and conflict. The Bank cannot address this challenge alone. Still, it has a vital role to play—from analyzing how public expenditure and economic shifts can help address conflict and violence in its analytical work to addressing violence reduction at the local level in its projects, as well as bringing together some of this global knowledge in a way that client countries can better access it.

The Bank, therefore, needs to adopt conflict, violence, justice, and institutional resilience as one of its global challenges, not just as a specialized country-specific niche. One objection, sometimes heard in the Bank's board, is that the fragile, conflict-affected, and vulnerable (FCV) categorization goes along with special financing allocations. This is in no way incompatible. There are, indeed, special financing allocations and even specific staff incentives necessary for countries with particularly extreme challenges of post-conflict recovery or prevention and refugee hosting roles. This necessitates a list that directs these resources to where they are most needed.

In the past, however, the Bank has combined these considerations with an active approach to FCV across all client countries. This has enabled the Bank to respond appropriately to governments outside of the Fragility and Conflict Situations (FCS) list that may be seeking assistance related to conflict and violence through its analytical work and lending instruments. Both approaches can, therefore, be followed at the same time. It should not mean that countries outside the narrow "FCV list" are not able to set their own priorities on these issues and receive support.

There are other reasons why this is important. Many middle-income countries face these challenges and are asking for assistance, as the Fragility Forum underlined by adopting middle-income countries as one of its themes. This was also acknowledged by the recently concluded FCV strategy [mid-term review](#). Though the Bank does not address high-income countries as clients, the same thinking is true there: there are internal challenges in political polarization, interpersonal and gender-based violence, and extremism ranging from the UK to Sweden to Spain to Canada, to the US: opportunities for cross-country learning would be beneficial.

In addition, focusing on a narrow list of countries makes it harder politically to address the problem. In the negotiation on the SDGs, when these targets were among the most controversial, it helped enormously to have the US and others come to the table and acknowledge that they have problems in their criminal justice system. NYU's [Center on International Cooperation](#) (CIC) has just conducted costs of violence studies in [Costa Rica](#), [South Africa](#), and [Switzerland](#), where South Africa showed patterns of transformation from political to criminal violence, while Costa Rica showed particularly high threats from organized crime, and Switzerland showed an extremely high cost of domestic violence. When we admit that all our societies have challenges in reducing violence and sustaining peace, it is easier to have a frank political discussion without stigma.

Should the Bank maintain its financial allocations to prevention?

Since the 19th replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA19), the Bank has had a special financing envelope that includes an allocation for prevention and resilience—the “PRA” allocation. This allocation is based on certain crisis indicators, including the number of casualties and the government’s willingness to engage in a prevention plan.

The PRA has now been used in several countries. The results are mixed, but we would strongly argue that this is what should be expected. In DRC, for example, the PRA appears to have spurred a fairly deep discussion between the government, the Bank, and other actors, such as the African Union (AU) and the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO), on the link between political commitments, conflict, and development. Despite some setbacks that continue to this day with the situation with the M23 and the East of DRC, the Bank’s support to DRC seems to have been well adapted, in partnership, to nudging feasible reforms that cross the development and political arenas—for instance in the balance of a robust dialogue on corruption and implementation efficiency, on community involvement in conflict-affected regions, and redress for sexual exploitation and abuse.

Conversely, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso received the prevention allocation and yet subsequently experienced coups d’état and deteriorating stability and governance.

It would be understandable, therefore, if debate amongst the Bank’s shareholders asked whether this has been money wasted and whether the allocation for prevention should be diminished in the next IDA round. **We would argue that this is absolutely not the case.**

- First, the majority of the PRA allocations were made when the conflict was already escalating rather than upstream when better opportunities were available for institutional and developmental approaches to prevent it. In both Niger and Burkina Faso, the PRA was awarded before the respective coups d’état. Allocations were high (USD 700 million in the case of [both Niger and Burkina Faso](#)) and made as a one-off rather than phased in at a lower level, and increased only when prevention performance was heading in the right direction of travel.
- Secondly, new development objectives always face lessons learned, as was the case with climate and anti-corruption—the response when not 100 percent of these are successful should not be to withdraw but to learn lessons and adapt, particularly when the challenge is increasing.

- Thirdly, the experience has further brought to the fore the need for strategic partnerships in these contexts, not only to ensure that the Bank is well-informed on the dynamics at play but also to enable other organizations to leverage what the Bank is doing to build up on areas that require concerted, urgent effort.
- Fourth, a more evidence-based approach to prevention could improve the impact of national efforts and their support by allocations. The learning on prevention is constantly evolving.

Recent research and cross-country exchanges on prevention have raised the following lessons:

- **There is new evidence on what works in prevention.** Projects combining academic, government, and practitioner/multilateral research are producing new evidence on what works:
 - o For **conflict and one-sided violence**, this includes political narratives, economic and cultural interventions, institutions (a balance of constitutional guarantor/accountability institutions and service delivery institutions), security and justice reform, which sees these sectors as a service, not primarily as control; mitigating climate/ecological risk to conflict risk; government-civil society collaboration; and approaches that combine economic and social interventions with political, without assuming that economic interventions alone can solve complex political situations.
 - o For **communal and interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence**, good evidence exists on the type of interventions that complement effective policing grounded in human rights: providing victims and perpetrators with targeted mental health and psychosocial support; community-led monitoring; highly localized approaches of collaboration between subnational authorities, private sector, civil society and community groups to disrupt violence, develop security plans and provide livelihoods and improved spatial and environmental conditions; national reforms, including to alcohol and gun regulation; cultural norm-shaping; and international norms and tracking of small arms and ammunition.
- **These efforts can be organized in a framework that is useful to governments considering upstream prevention.** Effective prevention requires addressing the underlying causes of violence (risk factors) and strengthening sources of resilience (protective factors). No single risk factor can fully explain violence; the interaction among many factors does. Therefore, prevention efforts need to be structured as a system that addresses multiple risk and protective factors at different levels rather than as separate interventions. Countries generally already have mechanisms

addressing at least some risk factors. Whether these mechanisms are explicitly labeled as prevention measures or not, they should be considered part of a system. Since these factors are often structural, strategies need to be sustained over time and flexible to adapt to changes in circumstances. Given the context-specific nature of this exercise, prevention strategies need to be iterative to benefit from lessons learned.

- **Different types of violence can feed into each other.** The academic evidence shows that there are commonalities in preventing criminal violence and interpersonal violence, conflict, and violent extremism. Some underlying causes are the same across different types of violence. For example, inequalities (although inequality between rich and poor is linked to criminal violence, while inequality between groups is linked to civil conflict) and state capture and corruption. Prevention systems of different forms of violence have similar characteristics—an evidence-based approach addressing risk and protective factors and a multi-level approach working in partnership between different government agencies, communities, and local civil society at the national, provincial, and local levels.
- **Efforts need to be taken upstream.** By the time a crisis is imminent, for instance, when casualties rise, it is too late to adopt a broad set of measures, including in a country’s development plan. When we recognize that the challenges are universal, we also recognize that all countries need to address their risk and protective factors for violence on an ongoing basis. Additional finance incentives by multilateral institutions need boundaries, so they do not apply everywhere but must focus on upstream measures.
- **Success is possible.** Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and South Africa have navigated moments of tense political polarization and reduced criminal and interpersonal violence, either nationally or in particular localities.
- **Cross-country exchanges play an essential role, and there is currently insufficient exchange.** For example, there is insufficient global effort invested in exchanging between Africa and South Asia’s rapid urbanization and Latin America’s experience in recovering from violence due to rapid urbanization with weak governance and the growth of gangs and organized crime.
- **Partnership in violence reduction is crucial**—between government, civil society, and communities; between the UN and the World Bank; between development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors; and cross-regionally.

Violence reduction is also measurable, just as with any other development outcome.

The two crucial areas of results to look for are, on outcomes, a decrease in violent deaths, violent assaults, and fear of violence reported in surveys as constraining peoples' daily lives. The second is the always-difficult-to-measure counterfactual: when countries have all the conditions that could produce conflict and violence and yet avoid it (as is the case in Sierra Leone in the last 20 years given their history and neighborhood, South Africa during the anti-apartheid transition, Colombia after the peace agreement; and Kenya during recent elections—how did they do this?).

What is the takeaway from this? **In fragility, conflict, and violence, the world faces both a universal challenge and a particular challenge of states being left behind.** For the multilateral system, we would suggest that the UN and the Bank redouble their efforts on prevention and work more closely, together with regional organizations, to learn lessons from success and failure. And that member states adopt a more equal attitude, accepting that these are common, universal challenges.

Very specifically, we suggest that the Bank's member states consider adopting conflict and violence reduction as one of its global challenges while maintaining an operational and financing focus (i.e., list) on countries facing extreme difficulties who need additional resources. **We also suggest that the PRA be maintained in the upcoming IDA replenishment,** but with consideration given as to whether smaller resources over a larger number of country situations, initiated further upstream and phased in over time depending on performance, should be adopted as a lesson learned.

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All opinions and views expressed in this article solely represent the views of the authors and the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Support was provided through generous contributions from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.