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Strengthening Violence Prevention at the UN: 11 Overlooked Facts

In this policy brief, we argue that UN and member state efforts to prevent violence are often ineffective because why violence occurs is not well understood. We highlight the critical role of risk and protective factors in violence prevention work and outline 11 facts that are frequently overlooked when policymakers attempt to stop violence from occurring. To increase the effectiveness of prevention efforts, policymakers should be aware of these critical points and incorporate risk and protective factor analysis into existing UN diagnostic tools and inter-governmental processes.

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The UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the need to develop national prevention strategies to address the different drivers and enablers of violence in his policy brief on the New Agenda for Peace (NAfP).¹ The upcoming Pact for the Future is a pivotal opportunity to make progress on this front and advance the violence prevention agenda. To make this advance, it is essential to clarify how violence prevention differs from other activities, such as development and security, and what makes it effective.

In this policy brief, we focus on the prevention of three forms of armed violence—violent extremism, intra-state war, and crime.² We argue that, in contrast to general development and security efforts, activities to prevent these forms of violence are those that identify and address risk and protective factors. **Risk factors are characteristics or circumstances at the individual, family, community, societal, and international levels that precede violence and increase the likelihood that it will occur.**³ Examples may include specific types of inequality, shocks in food prices, and domestic violence against children. In contrast, protective factors counteract the adverse effects of risk factors and reduce the likelihood of violence. Examples may include positive family environments and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

In what follows, we outline 11 overlooked facts about risk and protective factors for organized armed violence and show how the study of these factors can help shape more effective violence prevention policies.

11 overlooked facts about risk and protective factors

1. Risk factors lower resistance to killing

Most people have a natural psychological resistance to killing. For example, Dave Grossman found that 80-85 percent of riflemen “did not fire their weapons at an exposed enemy, even to save their lives and the lives of their friends” during World War II.⁴ Innovations in military training eventually overcame this resistance to killing, and by the time of the Vietnam War, rates of shooting on target had risen to 90-95 percent. Scholars of genocide and mass murder reach similar conclusions, noting that perpetrators of these crimes are not intrinsically evil but are ordinary people whose natural resistance to killing is overcome.⁵ *The circumstances that reduce resistance to killing are risk factors for violence. If these risk factors are addressed, violence can be prevented.*

2. Risk and protective factors are often misidentified

Risk factors are often social injustices, but not every social injustice is correlated with violence. Policymakers sometimes mention poverty as the ultimate cause of violence, but the evidence for this association is mixed.⁶ Many low-income countries remain peaceful, and middle-income countries such as Colombia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria have been affected by conflict.⁷ The UN-World Bank Pathways for Peace report (P4P) also finds that poverty alleviation is insufficient to sustain peace and that inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, is not correlated with conflict. Only *horizontal inequality*—between groups—exhibits a strong correlation with conflict, and only when grievances are mobilized by a group rallying around its perceived injustice.⁸ Education is also commonly perceived as an antidote to violence. However, research finds that education has minimal impact as a protective factor against violent extremism⁹ and can increase antagonism and feed conflict.¹⁰ *If risk factors are misidentified, then prevention efforts will be ineffective.*

3. There may be common risk and protective factors across different contexts

While it is essential to acknowledge that the prevalence of certain risk and protective factors and their interaction are context-specific, it is also important to note that there may be similarities across contexts. For example, certain psychological risk factors rooted in evolutionary psychology—such as susceptibility to peer pressure, obedience to authority, and dehumanization of the enemy—may apply in different countries.¹¹ Other risk factors, such as inequality between groups (mentioned above), price shocks,¹² and lack of community cohesion¹³ among others, have also been shown to be relevant across geographical contexts. The World Health Organization (WHO) has reviewed thousands of research articles¹⁴ to establish a list of risk and

protective factors for some forms of interpersonal violence across different contexts. *A similar tool could be developed for other types of violence.*

4. Interventions focus on one or two risk factors at the expense of others

Decision-makers often focus on one or two risk factors at the expense of others. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the illegal exploitation of mineral resources was often regarded as the main source of violence by international actors.¹⁵ This, however, disregarded other essential sources of violence, including land conflict and local political and social antagonisms. While simplified single-cause narratives allow policymakers and the general public to navigate complexity and identify areas for action, they also divert needed resources away from other factors requiring attention. **More often than not, there is no single primary risk factor for violence.**¹⁶ *All factors across different fields (e.g., psychology, justice, economy, politics) and their interlinkages should be considered.*

5. Understanding both risk and protective factors is critical

Academic research on the prevention of violence initially focused on the identification and remedy of risk factors. However, recent research has also highlighted the importance of protective factors, finding that a greater presence of these factors in a given context correlates with reduced likelihood of violence.¹⁷ Although protective factors have recently received more attention in the policy literature, they are often overlooked in conflict analysis. An example is provided by recruitment studies into armed groups that focus on push and pull factors without acknowledging that protective factors may act as a counterbalance.¹⁸ Greater attention to the study of protective factors would allow practitioners to better understand why violence does not occur and help strengthen what already works in a society, including mechanisms for managing conflicts.¹⁹ *Understanding both risk and protective factors is therefore critical for developing effective violence prevention strategies.*

6. Risk and protective factors exist at different levels

Risk and protective factors coexist at the individual level (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD), the interpersonal level (e.g., lack of family support), the societal level (e.g., horizontal inequality), and the international level (e.g., shocks on commodity prices). Focusing solely on the individual level may wrongly imply that someone is inherently evil while diverting attention from the conditions that contribute to their resort to violence. PTSD, for instance, increases the risk of aggression and is often the product of an unhealthy environment.²⁰ Ideally, this should be addressed at both the individual and structural levels—through mental health and psychosocial support, but also by removing the conditions that led to the trauma. If only the individual level is addressed, the person will likely be re-traumatized by the same circumstances. Likewise, exclusively focusing on structural factors in interventions may overlook the significant impacts these factors have already exerted on

individual behavior. *Understanding risk and protective factors at all levels is critical to developing integrated interventions and preventing the stigmatization of certain groups.*

7. Risk and protective factors vary over time

The reasons why people participate in violence change over time. Violence is also one of the most significant risk factors for further violence. For example, if someone experiences the loss of a friend or family member during an ongoing armed conflict, they may decide to participate in violence as an act of revenge.²¹ Ongoing armed conflict may also lower opportunity costs for participation in violence because war disrupts people's livelihoods, making it impossible for them to sustain themselves financially.²² The risk/protective factors for joining an armed group may also differ from those more directly related to killing. For example, when individuals decide to enroll, they may not anticipate the emotional impact of being instructed to take another person's life. As aforementioned, armed groups (including national armies) have employed many different tactics to overcome resistance to killing. These include innovative military training techniques, kill-or-be-killed scenarios, dehumanization of the enemy, and the creation of social bonds and peer pressures that make individuals unable to refuse, even when the group is committing atrocities.²³ *Therefore, risk and protective factors should be regularly reassessed, even when violence is ongoing.*

8. Different types of violence may have similar risk and protective factors

Different types of violence may have some risk and protective factors in common. For instance, state fragility, gender inequality, and different forms of exclusion can be risk factors linked to criminal violence, violent extremism, and armed conflict.²⁴ Various types of violence can also feed into one another. For instance, when children are victims of domestic violence, their likelihood of becoming violent adults increases across all forms of violence.²⁵ Acts of violence may also fall into more than one category, and the same group can be called a terrorist group, an armed group, or a criminal group by different stakeholders. Research finds that 95 percent of deaths related to terrorism take place in countries with at least one ongoing violent conflict,²⁶ highlighting that the risk factors for these types of violence may be similar. Limited resources for prevention work can, therefore, be used more effectively if they target risk and protective factors that are common to different types of violence. *Monitoring risk and protective factors across all forms of violence in a country can help ensure that prevention policies address violence where it is most harmful and pervasive rather than focus on the prevention of one type of violence a priori.*

9. Risk and protective factors are specific to groups and territories

Risk factors for violence, and violence itself, are often concentrated in certain geographical hot spots. For instance, in Bogotá in 2015, 1.2 percent of street addresses accounted for 99 percent of homicides.²⁷ Violence is also often

concentrated within specific groups. For example, a study by the UN University (UNU) found that “[i]n most cities, around 0.5 to 1 percent of the population is usually responsible for 75 percent of homicides.”²⁸ Age and gender are also important factors. For example, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2023 Global Study on Homicides highlights that 81 percent of victims were men.²⁹ Young men (15-29 years old) in the Americas were five times more likely to be victims of homicides than the global male homicide rate.³⁰ *An analysis of risk and protective factors at the national level is insufficient to capture these differences; a sub-national and disaggregated approach is also necessary.*

10. Not all factors are domestic

External shocks can deepen pre-existing risk factors or create new ones. Recent events such as the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine have led to global shocks in commodity prices³¹ as well as increases in inequality and polarization, all risk factors for violence. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), for instance, called on all countries and stakeholders to “recognize that the very nature of increasingly common global shocks is such that countries are not individually responsible, and that therefore solutions must be based on global, and not solely country-based, risk.”³² For instance, the Black Sea Grain initiative succeeded in lowering the global food price index.³³ *A better understanding of exogenous risk and protective factors can highlight how external partners can help address these factors.*

11. Early warning signs are not the same as risk factors for violence

Predictive models, early warning systems, and violence observatories are often considered tools for violence prevention. However, they frequently do not monitor risk and protective factors for violence, and instead focus on early manifestations of violence or violence itself, such as “armed attacks,” “homicides,” or “kidnappings.”³⁴ These models often signal that violence is already happening on a small scale and may increase. Conversely, studying risk and protective factors answers the question, “Why is violence/peace happening?” Answering this question allows decision-makers to understand what they need to address to prevent violence. *Monitoring risk and protective factors, in addition to the early signs of violence, allows for earlier responses directed towards violence prevention rather than de-escalation.*

Strengthening the UN’s expertise on risk and protective factors to better support national prevention efforts

To address the abovementioned issues, this section presents a series of recommendations on how the UN system can use risk and protective factors to strengthen its prevention efforts.

Create a database of risk and protective factors

The [World Health Organization has created a database of the risk and protective factors](#)³⁵ for interpersonal violence. However, local, national, and international actors do not have access to a similar tool for other types of violence. The UN could create such a database as part of the tailor-made package of support and expertise promised in the NAFp. This database should draw from research in all relevant academic disciplines (e.g., political science, economics, psychology, etc.) and build on past and current efforts such as the 2011 World Development Report, P4P, the forthcoming Flagship Report of the [Halving Global Violence Task Force](#),³⁶ and the Prevention Project.³⁷ It should also identify risk and protective factors at various levels (individual, interpersonal, societal, international), assess how these factors combine, and explore whether they are common to different types of violence. The database would have the particular benefit of being a flexible tool for all UN member states, in line with the principle of universality promoted by the NAFp.

Support local and national data collection on risk and protective factors

If developed, the aforementioned database could give national and local actors a starting point for analysis. However, given that the specific combination of risk and protective factors and their interaction will be context-specific, the UN could also support national and local actors in building their own data collection and analysis systems as part of the package. This is particularly important because, too often, diagnostics are undertaken by international partners at the national level only every few years. However, the study of risk and protective factors shows that these diagnostics should be nationally and locally led to foster political and social commitment, disaggregated by group and territory, and frequently assessed, given that these factors constantly change. Support for national actors could easily be incorporated into existing forms of UN support for national violence prevention strategies, including infrastructures for peace, national action plans to prevent violent extremism, and crime prevention strategies.

Include risk and protective factors in existing UN diagnostics

To support national prevention efforts, the UN could analyze risk and protective factors more systematically, including within the Common Country Analysis (CCA). The CCA could also be used to map all existing efforts to address risk and protective factors, irrespective of whether these are labeled prevention efforts.³⁸ In turn, this would help the UN system strengthen and complement existing national efforts via the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) in collaboration with national governments.

The UNSDCF could ensure coordination among UN entities by mapping out how each entity should address different risk and protective factors. It could also foster connections between various plans relevant to violence prevention, such as crime prevention, Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE),

infrastructures for peace, control of small arms and light weapons, Women Peace and Security (WPS), and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS). Additionally, the UNSDCF could help UN entities understand their roles in violence prevention, particularly by aiding national actors in addressing exogenous risk factors. For instance, an entity like UNCTAD might not immediately see a role for itself in prevention efforts but could address significant risk factors, such as the rise in prices mentioned above.

Foster evidence-based discussions in intergovernmental bodies

A thorough understanding of risk and protective factors can also support more evidence-based conversations on prevention in intergovernmental bodies. The upcoming **Pact for the Future** is an opportunity for UN member states to make progress on the prevention of all forms of violence, a topic that is not currently covered under any General Assembly items, by stressing the importance of developing national violence prevention strategies. As highlighted throughout this policy brief, violence is the result of accumulated and interconnected risk factors, and prevention efforts should, therefore, address these multiple risk factors at different levels. This is why **national violence prevention strategies** (with differentiated approaches to groups and territories)—rather than isolated projects—are essential.

More evidence on risk and protective factors could also enable the **Security Council** to better support national prevention efforts upon request. In addition, this evidence could help clarify what peace operations can be expected to achieve regarding prevention and ensure that the mandates of these operations fit within a broader nationally-led peacebuilding strategy. This is particularly important as experience has shown that “the prioritization of securitized responses at the expense of pursuing political solutions has only served to exacerbate grievances and prolong violence.”³⁹

The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) could also structure conversations around good practices and opportunities to address risk and protective factors for violence. It could support—upon request—countries that decide to discuss their prevention approach. The PBC’s role in raising member states’ awareness of how external shocks can deepen risk factors for violence could also be strengthened, in line with the 2020 ambassadorial-level meeting, which highlighted how COVID-19 (an external shock) negatively impacted peace.

Create momentum for violence prevention by measuring its impact

Although early prevention efforts—when there is no evident sign of violence—are critical, national actors and donors often do not invest in prevention. Monitoring risk and protective factors could help change this by contributing to a sense of urgency by flagging when risk factors are rising and pinpointing prevention efforts that need to be undertaken before violence takes root.

A more in-depth understanding of risk and protective factors can also help answer the question, “What works in prevention”?

Stakeholders in the policy community often note the challenge of measuring the effectiveness of prevention efforts, especially when the absence of events defines success. Rather than trying to prove a counterfactual (i.e., demonstrating that a violent event did not occur thanks to prevention efforts), evaluations can assess whether relevant risk factors decreased and protective factors increased. Therefore, the UN and donors should support national and local actors, upon request, to develop better evaluation and monitoring metrics and use the results to strengthen political and social commitment to prevention.

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Conclusion

In the lead-up to the Summit of the Future, member states and UN staff often struggle to answer, “What makes prevention different from the other kinds of activities that the UN supports?” This policy brief argues that violence prevention is the act of addressing risk factors and strengthening protective factors for violence. Although much existing academic work has identified these factors, this research is scattered across different disciplines and not readily available to decision-makers.

Building on past and present efforts—such as the UN-World Bank Pathways for Peace report, the 2011 World Development Report, and the aforementioned Prevention Project—the UN could address this gap by developing a **database of risk and protective factors. Such a database—coupled with support to national data collection efforts—could be part of the tailor-made package of support and expertise promised in the NAFP for national prevention efforts.** This tool could be relevant for any country, and the UN could provide universal support for prevention. The database of risk and protective factors would:

- **Improve the effectiveness of interventions** by dispelling myths and fostering early action. There are various ways upstream prevention efforts can try to stop violence before it starts, e.g., through legislative reforms, social cohesion efforts, and/or psychosocial support. However, if violence is already occurring, conflict may beget more conflict, and only de-escalation will be feasible. As such, this tool could be paired with the policy and programmatic recommendations based on good practices that have effectively addressed specific risk and protective factors (e.g., reducing certain types of inequality and/or strengthening effective conflict resolution mechanisms).
- **Strengthen existing UN tools**, such as the CCA and UNSDCF, by providing an evidence-based approach to analyzing violence prevention.

- **Improve evaluation** by measuring the effectiveness of prevention efforts against increases and decreases in risk and protective factors. In turn, improving evaluation **can strengthen political and social commitment** to violence prevention by highlighting what works.
- **Support more evidence-based conversations in intergovernmental processes**, including at the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Peacebuilding Commission, by providing more expertise to member states on violence prevention.

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Endnotes

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² Domestic violence is not considered in this policy brief.

³ In the policy literature, terms such as risk factor, root cause, driver, or push and pull factor are often used in various ways. Here we follow the definition of a risk factor as outlined in Helena Kraemer et al., “Coming to Terms with the Terms of Risk,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 54, no. 4 (April 1997): 337–343, <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.1997.01830160065009>—a risk factor is a correlate that precedes violence and may therefore play a causal role.

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