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# **Towards Effective Prevention: A Strategic Approach to Addressing the Underlying Causes of Violence and the UN's Role**

**Considerations for the Peacebuilding Architecture  
Review**

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# Introduction

**Understanding the impact of prevention efforts is a key focus of this year's Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR). However, measuring this impact has historically been challenging, particularly due to the difficulty of assessing what did not happen (e.g., the outbreak of conflict or violence). This paper outlines an approach pioneered with support from NYU's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) by developing an analytical tool for practitioners and decision-makers. The first section examines how measuring changes in risk and protective factors can help national actors assess their vulnerabilities and strengths. It then explores how member states, through the PBAR, can enhance the United Nation (UN) peacebuilding architecture to better support national and local actors in identifying and addressing these factors. In particular, integrating this risk and protective factors approach into national prevention strategies can be critical in ensuring their effectiveness.**

# 1. Understanding the Impact of Prevention

While member states pledged to strengthen and develop national prevention strategies to address violence and armed conflict, there is **no universally agreed-upon definition of what conflict and violence prevention** mean. Policymakers and practitioners, however, generally concur that efforts should focus on **addressing the underlying causes of violence**. Indeed, violence does not occur in a vacuum but rather results from the interplay of risk factors (underlying causes) and the erosion of protective factors (sources of resilience). In the Pact for the Future, member states committed to tackling the root causes of various forms of violence, including violent extremism, terrorism, conflict, and transnational organized crime. Similarly, the UN secretary-general's New Agenda for Peace urges them to develop national prevention strategies that address the drivers and enablers of violence and conflict within societies. Addressing these underlying factors is, therefore, central to the concept of prevention. However, risk and protective factors are not always obvious and vary across different contexts. As a result, identifying them requires rigorous research and context-specific analysis at national and local levels.

This first section on *Understanding the Impact of Prevention* unpacks these factors and explores how they can be leveraged to assess and improve prevention efforts. This policy brief mainly presents examples of risk and protective factors for two types of violence: intra-state conflict (i.e., civil war) and violent extremism or terrorism.<sup>1</sup> The examples come from a systematic literature review by CIC and funded by the UK government.

## 1.1 A mental shift: From crisis response to ongoing risk management

### 1.1.1 Good news: No need to prove a counterfactual

A common misconception is that the impact of prevention cannot be demonstrated because it is impossible to prove why something did not happen (counterfactual reasoning). This perception remains one of the biggest barriers to securing investments in prevention. This policy brief argues that this belief is flawed: prevention programs do not necessarily need to prove that violence did not happen.

Instead, they can show that the underlying causes of violence are decreasing or that the capacity for resilience is increasing as a result of prevention efforts.

To assess the effects of prevention, proxies can thus be used: risk and protective factors. A **risk factor** is a variable that precedes armed violence and increases the likelihood of its occurrence<sup>2</sup>. A **protective factor** does the opposite.<sup>3</sup> The theory of change is that if programming decreases risk factors and/or enhances protective factors, it contributes to violence prevention. When a specific type of violence, such as civil war, has never occurred in a country, risk and protective factors can be studied in other nations that have experienced it. This allows the country to assess whether similar factors are present in its own context. To some extent, risk and protective factors for all forms of violence exist in every country. By adopting a universal prevention approach, national actors can proactively address these factors, reducing the likelihood of violence breaking out.

## 1.1.2 Using risk and protective factors as proxies for prevention

### What do risk and protective factors look like?

**Key Message 1:** Risk and protective factors span all aspects of society and across levels from individual behavior to international dynamics and must be analyzed through multiple disciplines—from macroeconomics to psychology. Consequently, effective prevention efforts must be diverse, multilevel, and multidisciplinary in nature.

Risk factors span all disciplines. For instance, economic activities such as **resource extraction** can lead to conflict if, for example, the population becomes frustrated with negative externalities associated with the extraction process, such as pollution, land expropriation, or in-migration,<sup>4</sup> or if rebels obstruct the extraction of natural resources.<sup>5</sup> The **feeling of injustice** has been found to be an emotional driver that increases the likelihood of violent extremist behavior,<sup>6</sup> particularly when people feel unable to reach their goals through legal routes.<sup>7</sup> Risk factors can also be political, such as a **lack of trust in institutions**. Interviews have shown, for instance, that a lack of access to services and public officials—and thus the “opportunity to express grievances, request services, or affect the political debate”—leads to support for and engagement with violent groups.<sup>8</sup> Risk factors can also be linked to a **lack of security**, with people joining armed groups to seek protection.<sup>9</sup> The literature also finds numerous examples of psychosocial risk factors for violence, particularly linked to the **need for a sense of belonging within a group**, which can be a motivating

factor for individuals to join their peers and friends who are already members of armed groups.<sup>10</sup>

**Protective factors** tend to be less researched than risk factors, but they are important because they represent opportunities to strengthen what already works. Protective factors—like risk factors—can be found at all levels and in all areas of society. At the individual level, a study found, for instance, that **capacity for self-control (low impulsivity)** reduces the risk for people, particularly young people holding highly extremist beliefs, of engaging in far-right, far-left, and religious/ethnic extremist violence.<sup>11</sup> Someone's own **belief in non-violence** is also a protective factor.<sup>12</sup> At the interpersonal level, the literature abundantly supports the importance of good parenting skills, as well as **being embedded in social networks** that are not involved with armed groups or terrorist groups and disapprove of violence. At a more societal level, some research shows that the **perception of the legitimacy of the institutions of the state**, such as the police,<sup>13</sup> and the law more broadly<sup>14</sup> is correlated with less involvement in violent extremism. Wolfowicz, however, found that this effect is small.

**Technology can play a role as an enabler** of violence or peace: the internet has been used extensively to share violent extremist content, and media coverage can spread divisive narratives. Conversely, a study suggests that video games with pro-social effects can reduce the risk of radicalization.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, **different social groups are not affected in the same way by risk and protective factors** depending on their demographics (e.g., age, gender). For instance, research has shown that “sensation seeking, a psychological trait associated with a desire to join an armed rebel group, peaks at around 18 years of age and declines as people get older.”<sup>16</sup> Risk and protective factors can also be gender-specific.<sup>17</sup> For instance, as mentioned in a recent CIC publication,<sup>18</sup> one study found that “in the United States, female members of far-right groups were 10 years younger than men, less likely to have a criminal history, equally as likely to be employed but less likely to hold a tertiary education. Women accounted for 10 percent of the involvement in violent incidents and usually completed only one attack, whereas men were more likely to commit repeated offenses.”<sup>19</sup>

### 1.1.3 Using risk and protective factors to understand what works in prevention

**Key Message 2:** The effects of prevention efforts can be measured through their capacity to decrease risk factors and enhance protective factors for violence.

Prevention programs tend to be most effective when they address risk factors and protective factors for social groups or locations disproportionately affected by risks. Once these risk and protective factors and their differentiated impact on different social groups have been identified in particular contexts, **we can evaluate prevention programming by its capacity to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors.** In fact, UN programming already uses some risk and protective factors as proxies to evaluate implementation. For instance, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) assessed its program’s effectiveness in supporting the reintegration of former members of Non-State Armed Groups in Somalia<sup>20</sup> by examining whether it **increased their sense of belonging**<sup>21</sup> (a protective factor). As another example, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) evaluated the effect of a program entitled “Cultural heritage as a driver for inter-community dialogue and social cohesion”<sup>22</sup> through several indicators, including how much it increased **trust in public institutions** (a protective factor).<sup>23</sup>

However, the effectiveness of this approach hinges on accurately identifying risk and protective factors—key proxies that determine the success of prevention programming. If these factors are misidentified or overlooked, prevention efforts may fail to address the true underlying causes of violence. Unfortunately, misidentifying risk and protective factors is a common occurrence.<sup>24</sup> The following section explores why and highlights opportunities for improvement.

### 1.1.4 Choosing the right proxies for prevention

**Key Message 3:** Risk and protective factors are not always immediately apparent. While observation and consultation play a crucial role in identifying factors, they are often insufficient. Additionally, given limited resources, decision-makers must prioritize investments in the risk and protective factors that yield the greatest return on investment. **Rigorous research methodologies, beyond mere consultations, are essential for true evidence-based approaches and the effective prioritization of limited resources.** However, such research is often not easily accessible to practitioners and decision-makers, creating a gap between knowledge and policy implementation. In some cases, new research might also be needed.

### 1.1.5 Counter-intuitive, nuanced, and overlooked risk and protective factors

**Risk and protective factors are not always intuitive.** For instance, **education** is often considered a protective factor for violence in policy discussions.<sup>25</sup> The Secretary-General Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recommends, for instance, that each member state develop its own national plan of action to prevent violent extremism, with a focus on seven priorities, including one on “*Education, skill development and employment facilitation*.”<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, research shows that across different types of violent extremism (i.e., lone wolf actors and organized groups), education is not always a protective factor. For instance, studies have shown, at best, a tenuous connection between **low levels of education** and the chances of an individual engaging in violent extremism. A study on lone wolf terrorists in the United States found, for example, a slight tendency for active shooters to have received less education: 51.5% had not surpassed the high school level, 18.2% had attended some college, 21.2% had a college degree, and 9.1% had graduate-level training.<sup>27</sup> Another study on domestic terrorists found that “lower education tends to promote terrorism in a cluster of countries where socioeconomic, political, and demographic conditions are unfavorable, while higher education reduces terrorism in a cluster of countries where conditions are more favorable. This suggests that country-specific circumstances moderate the effect of education on terrorism.”<sup>28</sup>

Other authors concluded that **low levels of education are not a risk factor** at all. They found that “terrorist offenders in the West often have some degree of post-secondary education [...]”<sup>29</sup> and that a higher percentage of the people involved in suicide terrorist attacks had higher education than the general population.<sup>30</sup> A study found that “[f]ive of the most lethal suicide bombers possessed a higher education degree or were studying for one..., younger and less educated suicide bombers were more likely to detonate their bombs too soon, get caught by the authorities or give in to doubt.”<sup>31</sup> Other studies found that higher education in Indonesia,<sup>32</sup> as well as in Europe, North America, and Oceania<sup>33, 34</sup> **was not a protective factor for violent extremism.**<sup>35</sup>

**The level of education remains important in its own right, and other aspects related to education might still be protective factors.** For instance, a meta-analysis found a statistically significant relationship (although with a small effect) between school bonding and reduction in extremist behaviors.<sup>36</sup> Prevention programming might thus be more effective if it focuses on increasing the quality of the experience in schools or the feeling of belonging through school rather than on the number of people getting higher education.



Another commonly assumed risk factor is the presence of refugees. However, this may not always hold true. In Guinea,<sup>37</sup> for instance, researchers found that **having lived in or visited a refugee camp** could reduce the chances of conflict spillover. Hearing about refugees' experience of civil war decreased the host communities' willingness to engage in violence. In the words of one interviewee: "We saw the refugees, we heard their stories, we visited their camps, and they came to our houses begging for food and water. We were shocked and scared, and even though we know that our leaders are corrupt and greedy, we also did realize that going into war will never be a solution to our problems. I asked myself, "Why war, what good will it bring us, if not more poverty and death?"<sup>38</sup>

Some risk and protective factors are also very specific. For instance, **certain types of inequalities may be more strongly associated with intra-state conflict** than others. **Horizontal inequality** (i.e., inequality between groups) is often found to be associated with an increased risk of the onset of intra-state conflict.<sup>39</sup> However, even within that category, different types of horizontal inequality might have different impacts. Cingranelli, using a global dataset of more than 190 countries, found that negative horizontal inequality—where one group is significantly worse off than the rest of society—has a strong influence on risk of intra-state conflict. As negative horizontal inequality increases, the probability of avoiding civil war declines from about 87% at the lowest levels of inequality to about 75% at the highest levels.<sup>40</sup> However, the same author found that **positive horizontal inequality**—where an elite or rich class holds more resources than the rest of society—has no significant effect on the risk of civil war. Several studies also find that vertical inequality, as measured by the GINI coefficient—i.e., inequality among individuals or households—rarely shows a significant relationship with the onset of intra-state conflict.<sup>41</sup> This does not preclude vertical inequality from being associated with other types of violence.

Some risk and protective factors **are often overlooked**. For instance, a recent CIC policy brief on the prevention of recruitment highlights three risk and protective factors that are frequently ignored.<sup>42</sup> The first is situational avoidance as a protective factor: civilians often avoid certain areas perceived as risky because of previous incidents of (forced) recruitment and/or the known presence of armed groups. The second is defection programs, which can be a risk factor for recruitment. While defection programs aim to disengage individuals from armed groups, emerging research shows that armed groups might become more effective at recruiting if they frequently have to replace members because individuals have fled the group. The third one is personality traits, such as sensation-seeking (mentioned above),

which, in combination with the generalized boredom of rural life, may lead young people to seek to join armed groups.<sup>43</sup>

### 1.1.6 Relationships between factors: interactions and strength of association

Adding to the complexity, violence is driven by multiple interrelated drivers—no single risk factor alone can predict or inevitably lead to its occurrence. In other words, most risk factors are not causal, and they can be mitigated by protective factors. This multifaceted nature makes outbreaks of violence challenging to predict. Moreover, it underscores **the importance of understanding how these factors interact**. For instance, while price shocks in agriculture might be a risk factor, their impact may be exacerbated by interacting with other factors. A study found that “areas impacted negatively by global agricultural price shocks, with high labor intensity of agriculture and where unemployment increased and wages decreased, are more likely to experience increased violence.”<sup>44</sup> Protective factors can also interact among themselves, as well as with risk factors, and can mitigate their impact. While information on risk and protective factors for violence is rarely consolidated, even less is known about how these factors interact.

Additionally, not all risk and protective factors carry the same **weight in influencing the likelihood of violence**. For instance, a quantitative analysis explores how various human rights violations are more, less, or even not correlated with an increased risk of violence.<sup>45</sup> A meta-analysis<sup>46</sup> on violent extremism classified risk factors for violent behaviors, ranging from those with a very small effect (e.g., religious upbringing), to small (e.g., unemployment), to moderate (e.g., deviant peers, job loss), to large (e.g., previous incarceration). This information could be beneficial for prioritizing prevention programming. Based on the example above, focusing prevention programming on counter-narratives for religious ideology might have close to no impact, while investing in strengthening the capacity to resist peer pressure might bring a higher return on investment.

These examples underscore the importance of critically examining our assumptions about the underlying causes of violence and, more importantly, adopting a holistic approach rather than overemphasizing select factors. Even extensive consultations may not be sufficient to accurately identify risk and protective factors, as **individual perceptions alone can be limiting**. Additionally, the weight of different factors and the interactions between factors might not be evident. **Research and evaluation can play an important role in bridging this gap by providing evidence-based insights.**

### 1.1.7 Developing indicators for risk and protective factors: measuring what can be changed, what cannot, and where support is needed

**Key Message 4:** There is no need to predict to prevent. By developing risk and protective factors indicators, national and local actors can shift from crisis response to upstream prevention. This approach is universally applicable, as no country is immune to violence, and all have both risk and protective factors that influence its occurrence. Some indicators are already collected for other purposes and can be more systematically leveraged for prevention.

Risk and protective factors can be classified into three categories: 1) **dynamic factors** that can be addressed through programming and policies (e.g., trust in institutions, the need to belong to a group); 2) **static factors** that cannot be changed (e.g., age); and 3) **exogenous factors**, which originate outside the country but still have an impact (e.g., changes in trade that lead to food price shocks). Once national and local actors identify the relevant risk and protective factors in their contexts, they can develop a set of indicators to measure them. A few examples of these indicators and their potential contributions to policymaking are highlighted below.

*At the individual level:*

- Several authors have found that a history of violence, measured through **criminal records**, is a risk factor for lone-actor terrorism.<sup>47</sup> This insight helps illustrate how different forms of violence are interconnected;<sup>48</sup> once a person has committed a violent criminal act, they are more likely to engage in terrorist violence. It also highlights the overlap between risk and protective factors for violent crime and lone-actor terrorism. This finding can encourage governments to invest more in crime prevention strategies to prevent lone-wolf extremism. Additionally, this indicator is easy to design, and the data is already collected for other purposes.

*At the society level:*

- Research focused on Colombia found that a 68% drop in **coffee prices** was correlated with an 18% increase in guerrilla attacks and a 31% increase in paramilitary attacks in coffee-producing municipalities compared to non-coffee-producing municipalities.<sup>49</sup> Possible explanations include the substitution of coffee production with coca cultivation, or the decline in coffee workers' wages, which led to their recruitment into armed groups for the explicit purpose of preying on oil rents. The author measures this risk factor using **changes in coffee prices, based on historical price data by**

**municipality**, which is produced by the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia (NFCG).<sup>50</sup> The study also highlights that revenue generated from taxing coffee accumulates in the National Coffee Fund (NCF), and the NFCG uses these resources to stabilize coffee prices against external shocks. This is an example of a relatively simple indicator to design, as the necessary data is already being collected. Tracking such an indicator can provide insight into how government efforts to mitigate external price shocks<sup>51</sup> contribute to violence prevention and how it fits within a broader national prevention strategy.

*At the international level:*

- Weidmann<sup>52</sup> found that **ethnic conflict in a state's major communication partner**, as measured by international **phone call volume between countries**, is a risk factor for the spillover of ethnic intra-state conflict, even in distant states. If monitored, this indicator could help decision-makers assess the urgency of investing in social cohesion and promoting unifying narratives.

In summary, national and local actors can develop indicators for risk and protective factors to monitor trends, inform policy decisions, and assess the effect of prevention programs. Many of these indicators are likely already being collected for other purposes (e.g., coffee price shocks, criminal records) but may not be analyzed collectively for prevention. Others may need to be specifically developed to fill gaps in understanding.

## 1.2 A two-pronged approach to prevention: Evidence-based and context-specific

**Key Message 5:** Identifying risk and protective factors requires both an evidence-based and a context-specific approach. Upon request, national and local actors should have access to consolidated, rigorous research on risk and protective factors and support for data collection and analysis.

As highlighted above, identifying risk and protective factors is not intuitive. Research can help understand which specific factors are related to an increase or decrease in the likelihood of violence. This analysis, however, must be understood within specific contexts. Each country, and local areas within that country, will have their own specific web of risk and protective factors. The evidence base should thus support

local and national context analysis. This section recommends a two-pronged approach to ensuring impactful prevention efforts.

### 1.2.1 What is causing violence? Improving the diagnosis

As described above, identifying these factors is **easier said than done**.<sup>53</sup> That is why research can support more effective decision-making in prevention. Unfortunately, that **research is not readily available**. While many academic articles and grey literature have been produced, that information is not consolidated. Academic articles might also be difficult to access, often sitting behind paywalls. That may force decision-makers and practitioners to make difficult choices about how to invest in prevention and evaluate its impact, if they lack the time or resources to conduct the necessary research themselves.

To support decision-making in prevention, CIC—funded by the UK government—has conducted a systematic literature review to identify these risk and protective factors, consolidate them, and transform them into a tool for decision-makers and practitioners. This tool presents the risk and protective factors by discipline (economic, political, rule of law, psychosocial, etc.) and level (e.g., individual, societal). It describes the strength of their association with violence and interactions with other variables when this information is available. It also disaggregates the information by gender and age, wherever possible. This effort and other initiatives to clarify what research says about risk and protective factors should be made readily available to national and local actors.

### 1.2.2 Context-specific approach

While existing research can significantly improve understanding of the risk and protective factors for violence, it does not always lead to definitive conclusions on how to prevent violence. The findings might be contradictory, fail to untangle different interactions, and face significant challenges in measuring systematically. That is one of the reasons why **no prevention formula can be established based on the review of literature across the world**. Instead, insights from research should be tested in different contexts to assess their relevance and identify specific interactions. Given the specificity of individual contexts, new research might also need to be produced. Prevention efforts must also be iterative, allowing national and local actors to continuously refine their strategies and determine what works best in their unique environments.

That being said, it can be challenging for national and local actors to begin diagnoses in a vacuum. While risk and protective factors often stem from social injustices, not all social injustices qualify as risk or protective factors, leaving practitioners and decision-makers to navigate the difficult task of selecting the appropriate proxies to prevent violence. **Existing research can provide national and local actors with a valuable starting point** by offering insights into commonly identified risk and protective factors for violence, areas with mixed research findings, and factors that have been ruled out.

Each context, however, will have only a subset of risk and protective factors, with their unique interactions and interconnections. Therefore, national and local actors will need to collect and analyze their own data to assess how international research applies to their specific context. This **diagnostic** process is similar to a mediation dialogue, whereby national and local stakeholders are encouraged to identify and collectively agree on the underlying causes of tensions and the sources of resilience. As such, the diagnosis itself becomes a key preventive activity. This highlights the importance of national actors being in charge of the process, rather than relying on international partners.

Once the diagnosis is completed,<sup>54</sup> some **risk and protective factors could be actively monitored**. While violence observatories and early warning systems typically focus on the early onset of violence, such as armed attacks or cattle raids, or its direct manifestations like rising homicide rates, they often fail to track underlying risk and protective factors, such as trust in institutions, food price shocks, or horizontal inequality. Monitoring these factors could enable a more proactive, upstream approach to prevention before violence erupts. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, many risk factors escalated—such as an increase in inequality, a security vacuum created by the lockdowns, an increase in food prices—but went unnoticed because early warning systems and violence observatories did not capture them.<sup>55</sup> They were focused solely on measuring violence levels, which often declined due to movement restrictions. As a result, once the lockdowns ended, violence flared in different areas, a potentially preventable development had the rise in risk factors been recognized and addressed in advance.<sup>56</sup>

Risk and protective factors should therefore be considered for incorporation into the methodologies of violence observatories and early warning systems. While risk and protective factors do not predict the timing of violence, areas with fewer risk factors and stronger protective factors are generally less likely to experience violent outbreaks. Additionally, monitoring the underlying causes could improve early responses by providing national and local actors with information on what they need

to address (e.g., rise in inequality, loss of trust in the judicial system, shock on food prices), rather than just alerting them to increasing violence.

National and local actors can also use their diagnosis to **identify their prevention architecture** by clarifying which existing policies and programs are currently addressing these factors (e.g., efforts to increase a sense of belonging, tackle divisive narratives, and increase trust in institutions).

Finally, monitoring risk and protective factors enables national and local actors to **assess the effectiveness of prevention programs continuously**. Given the context-specific nature of violence, prevention must be an iterative process. Monitoring plays a crucial role by identifying whether interventions are successfully reducing risks and enhancing protective factors. Moreover, strategies that are effective at one point may lose their impact if the underlying risk and protective factors change. Implementing robust monitoring systems will allow for **timely adjustments** to prevention programs, ensuring their continued relevance and effectiveness over time.

Given the complexity and the multiplicity of underlying causes of violence, only national and local actors have the capacity to effectively identify and address them. That means that national and local actors must have **access to existing research**, often behind paywalls and time-consuming to gather, as well as the resources to **collect and analyze data** relevant to their context. International partners can play a crucial role by providing support in these areas.

## 2. Challenges and Opportunities for UN Support to National Actors

**Key Message 6:** Adopting an evidence-based approach to prevention presents significant challenges. The UN is well-positioned to support regional, national, and local actors upon request; however, its support remains fragmented, underfunded, and not easily accessible.

### 2.1 UN support to national and local actors

National and local actors are best positioned to understand and address the risk and protective factors for violence in their contexts. However, adopting an evidence-based approach and building the capacity to collect, analyze, and monitor data is challenging in any country, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Upon request, the UN system could play a crucial role in supporting the above-mentioned two-pronged approach, helping national and local actors adopt evidence-based approaches to assess and enhance the effectiveness of prevention efforts. While universities and other research institutions may be better suited to produce research, the UN, with 193 member countries, can be crucial in centralizing this research and making it easily accessible to national and local practitioners and decision-makers worldwide. Additionally, the UN could support national and local actors in building their capacity to collect and analyze data, enabling them to conduct their own diagnoses without relying on external actors, and to monitor and refine their prevention strategies.

#### 2.1.1 The UN is well-placed to support national and local actors in adopting an evidence-based approach...

**The UN can, and does, support an evidence-based approach in various contexts.** For example, in the Caribbean, the Regional Peace and Development Officer for the English-speaking Caribbean helped develop the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE) tool, a peacebuilding data set to identify the underlying causes of tensions in seven English-speaking Caribbean nations (Belize, Jamaica, Bahamas, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago). The analysis, which includes predictive models, challenges existing assumptions, revealing surprising findings: dysfunctional family dynamics and mental health issues were identified as risk factors for a positive attitude towards violence, ranking slightly higher in statistical relevance than gang and gun presence and community violence. Notably, a gender equality mindset and positive feelings toward outgroups



emerged as the most statistically significant protective factors for violent behavior, closely followed by a safe and peaceful childhood, economic security, and older age, while religiosity was also found to reduce the likelihood of violent inclinations.

### **Box 1: Risk and protective factors as the cornerstone of national prevention strategies**

Data collection and analysis on risk and protective factors can be anchored to relevant national prevention strategies, such as the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) national action plan, crime prevention strategies, or Infrastructure for Peace. This analysis should help build national prevention strategies based on existing national and local efforts to strengthen, rather than replace, the current system.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the identified risk and protective factors can be included in early warning systems or violence observatories as components of the national prevention strategies, and used to monitor the implementation of programs under the national prevention strategy.

This approach is not new; several national prevention strategies have already adopted elements of it. For example, the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs) of the New Deal embraced a similar framework. The New Deal sought to address the root causes of conflict, emphasized national ownership, and promoted an integrated approach to peace, development, and security. National prevention strategies can build on these lessons, leveraging insights and efforts from the New Deal to enhance their effectiveness.

The SCORE data is also granular enough to identify the specific demographic group and its geographic location (e.g., women living in poverty in x town, or men aged 18 to 29 with lower levels of education in y community) and deploy programs and initiatives tailored to the specifics of the particular community level. Evidence gathered through the SCORE can inform and challenge existing theories of change, prioritize issues, uncover root drivers and unexpected links, and adapt the design of specific programs to strengthen social cohesion and develop a shared vision for peaceful development. This information also helps national and local actors prioritize investments of limited resources.

The UN system also supports national and local actors in developing **indicators**. For example, the PBF in Tunisia<sup>57</sup> had planned to support the development of Everyday

Peace Indicators (EPI), a method for understanding and tracking changes in areas such as peace and violent extremism. In this approach, communities create their own indicators, which are then measured over time.<sup>58</sup> While these indicators do not always measure risk and protective factors, some could, such as the sense of belonging to a community. UNDP has also developed a PVE indicator bank,<sup>59</sup> and UNOCT is assisting the Kenyan government in creating indicators to assess the effectiveness of its Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) action plan, building on existing indexes like social cohesion. Additionally, the UN provides **support on how to evaluate programs and strategies**; for instance, UNOCT created a toolkit to evaluate national action plans for preventing violent extremism.<sup>60</sup> The Peacebuilding Impact Hub also supports national actors by **synthesizing best practices** across UN entities and external partners **to enhance data collection methodologies**, establish **long-term data systems**, and strengthen **UN collaboration with national statistical offices and research institutions**.

The UN can also **support national actors in data collection and analysis**. In Togo, for instance, the Peace and Development Advisor (PDA) as part of the Joint Programme UNDP/Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), with the support of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), worked to strengthen “the national conflict prevention mechanism including the Inter-ministerial Committee for Preventing and Combating Violent Extremism (CIPLEV) at different levels (local and national level [...]) by reinforcing the data collection and analysis system.<sup>61</sup> As a result, the implementation of this digital platform, accessible to different peace infrastructure actors, has digitized the data collection and reporting process, enabling integrated, coherent, and rapid decision-making.

It is also worth noting efforts from the **Peacebuilding Impact Hub** to consolidate and enhance existing UN methodologies for peacebuilding measurement. The Hub, which is already working to gather evidence of effective peacebuilding, can constitute a shared repository of methodologies and case studies that national actors can access when designing or refining their prevention strategies. Additionally, the Hub’s Country Spotlight Exercises (or deep dives) could allow for an assessment of the cumulative effect of peacebuilding interventions in a given setting.

The examples of UN support mentioned above are not specifically designed to support an evidence-based approach or the collection, analysis, and monitoring of risk and protective factors, but they have the potential to do so.

## 2.1.2 ... but this support is inconsistent, fragmented, and underfunded.

### *Inconsistent support for national actors*

Risk and protective factors often vary at the local and even micro-local levels, evolving over time. As such, their identification and monitoring are most effectively carried out by national and local actors on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately, conflict analyses supported by international partners are typically conducted every few years at the national level, rather than at the local level. Moreover, the UN usually evaluates its own prevention programs. While some efforts have involved local and national actors, such as universities, in monitoring and evaluation, the UN primarily assesses its programs independently. Consequently, these efforts do not always build the capacity of national and local actors to independently identify and monitor their risk and protective factors once the UN's involvement ends, and may not fully reflect national and local perspectives.

### *Fragmented support for national prevention efforts*

The UN currently **lacks a unified framework to provide support and assess the impact of its support** for national actors in identifying and addressing risk and protective factors to prevent violence. First, this is true in **supporting data collection and analysis**. Typically, no single entity is responsible for capacity-building in data collection and analysis; instead, support is provided through a sectoral approach. Different agencies, funds, and programs assist various ministries in strengthening their data collection and analysis capacities, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) working with Ministries of Health, UNICEF collaborating with Ministries of Education, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) supporting Human Rights Commissions in their statistics and planning divisions. Similarly, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) provides support to national governments for data collection on areas like gender-based violence (GBV), family planning, and sexual and reproductive health.<sup>62</sup> However, these efforts are not focused on identifying risk and protective factors for violence and may not be well suited to inform prevention programming.

Secondly, the UN also lacks a clear, holistic approach to offer **support to national and local actors in addressing their risk and protective factors**. While many agencies, funds, and programs can target specific risk and protective factors, such as UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s work on mitigating food price shocks, these efforts are often not explicitly framed as prevention, as they fall outside their core mandates. Although various UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes (AFPs) and

Secretariat bodies may have their own frameworks<sup>63</sup> for assessing contributions to peacebuilding and prevention, there is no overarching framework that defines how the UN, as a whole, supports national and local prevention efforts or establishes clear expectations for the organization's role in this area.

Third, the UN system ***lacks a standardized method for measuring the impact*** of its diverse prevention programs. Different entities interpret their role in prevention through varying frameworks—for example, OHCHR is guided by human rights treaties. While some programs use proxies that represent risk or protective factors for violence,<sup>64</sup> not all of these proxies are supported by literature linking them to violence. Furthermore, many programs may not adopt a diagnostic approach, such as conflict analysis,<sup>65</sup> and even when diagnoses are conducted, they do not always identify risk and protective factors grounded in empirical evidence. Consequently, the selected proxies may have little or no effect on reducing or preventing violence.

**Planning instruments designed to facilitate UN coordination to support national actors on prevention may prove insufficient.** UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes (AFP)s' support is often project-based, and addresses isolated risk and protective factors. Even when the same UN entities participate in multiple initiatives to address different risk and protective factors, there may be no overarching theory of change to guide the entire portfolio.<sup>66</sup> While conflict analysis is occasionally incorporated into the Common Country Analysis (CCAs), it is not a mandatory component, despite the argument for the universality of prevention. Additionally, although the UN has developed guidance to encourage examining the root causes of conflict, this framework offers only a few examples rather than a comprehensive and evidence-based list of factors. That means that UN country teams (UNCTs) may lack a shared understanding of the broad range of risk and protective factors they aim to help national and local actors address. In theory, PDAs under the UNDP-DPPA joint program could play a significant role in supporting UNCTs in developing that shared understanding. Unfortunately, the number of international PDAs has declined from 71 to 35 between the end of 2023 and now, with further positions to be discontinued in the upcoming months.

When risk and protective factors have been identified in the CCA, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) could serve as a coordination tool for the UNCT to support national and local actors in addressing different risk and protective factors. However, while the UNSDCF is subject to evaluation, it may be too broad in some circumstances to capture the specific nuances of local realities.

**National and regional strategies** could help address some of those challenges and enhance a more coherent approach. By integrating risk and protective factor data collection systems into national prevention strategies, countries can ensure that, even if UN support is uncoordinated, the strategy itself will provide a framework for alignment. Regional frameworks can fulfill the same objective.

### ***Underfunded and therefore insufficient support to member states***

While understanding impact is a central focus of policy discussions on prevention, **funding for data collection, analysis, and evaluation, and capacity building in these areas, remains both severely limited** and highly fragmented. Identifying and monitoring risk and protective factors over time requires long-term investment, but most projects are typically time-bound. That can create a significant challenge for national and local actors who wish to monitor their risk and protective factors, such as through early warning systems or violence observatories, since maintaining sophisticated data collection and analysis mechanisms becomes difficult once project funding expires.

Fragmentation, as discussed above, is also a result of the types of funding available and the lack of coordination on key indicators for measurement. First, the limited access to pooled funding for AFPs exacerbates fragmentation in efforts to support national and local actors in identifying and addressing risk and protective factors for violence. Second, some agencies, such as UNICEF, run large, multi-year data collection projects, but these efforts may not incorporate risk and protective factors.

To address these issues, leveraging existing data collection frameworks by ensuring that they cover risk and protective factors is likely one of the most viable solutions to address issues of fragmentation and limited funding in the short term. A good starting point would be collaborating with national statistical offices to integrate indicators that track risk and protective factors into regular surveys and liaising with UN agencies to ensure that projects gather and track data for relevant risk and protective factor indicators.

Additionally, in the current financial climate, where donors are cutting in bilateral funding, many important ongoing efforts to support national and local data collection and analysis systems might end, and multilateral support will become even more relevant.

# 3. Leveraging the PBAR to Allow for More Impactful Prevention Efforts

## 3.1 Conclusion

The Pact for the Future demonstrated a renewed commitment from member states to prevention, particularly national prevention strategies. The PBAR now presents an opportunity to move from pledges to creating the conditions for effective prevention approaches. This policy brief highlights a few key conditions for impactful prevention approaches, particularly:

1. There is **no need to establish a counterfactual** to demonstrate the effectiveness of prevention. Prevention can be measured by its ability to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors.
2. Risk and protective factors are complex and multifaceted; identifying them requires a **context-specific and evidence-based approach**. To ensure national ownership, national and local actors should have access, upon request, to consolidated research on these factors, along with the opportunity to assess how they manifest within their own contexts.
3. **For prevention to be effective, it must be an iterative process**. National and local actors should have access, upon request, to support for monitoring their risk and protective factors, as well as their prevention programs, enabling them to make necessary adaptations when needed.
4. **There is no need to predict to prevent**. It is essential to shift the focus from crisis response to continuously addressing risk and protective factors.
5. **Investing in an evidence-based approach may incur costs, but failing to do so can be even more costly**. Without a solid evidence base for identifying risk and protective factors, prevention becomes speculative. Poorly defined proxies can lead to ineffective programs that fail to achieve their intended impact on prevention.
6. **Risk and protective factors are cumulative and interlinked**. Prevention efforts should adopt a holistic approach.
  - 6.1 Understanding risk and protective factors enables national actors to identify existing policies and initiatives that address these factors, even if they are not explicitly labeled as prevention, and to **develop national prevention strategies that reinforce and strengthen the overall system**.

6.2 The **UN is well-placed to provide support to national actors on developing effective prevention approaches.** However, this support is currently fragmented and underfunded. To ensure its effectiveness, these shortcomings must be addressed.

## 3.2 Recommendations

Prevention is back on the agenda. The priority now is to ensure that it is grounded in evidence to ensure its effectiveness. In turn, the UN system must be adequately equipped to offer meaningful support to national and local actors, helping restore trust in the system. Building on the conclusions outlined above, the PBAR can be leveraged to advance progress on these key areas, particularly:

- While respecting national ownership and context-specificity, member states could **recommit to adopting evidence-based approaches to prevention**, including national prevention strategies.
- Member states could **request the UN system to provide coherent support, upon request, to national and local actors seeking to develop evidence-based prevention approaches.** Ideally, this support would follow a two-pronged approach:
  - The **UN system should ensure that evidence-based approaches to prevention**, particularly rigorous research on risk and protective factors, which is often behind paywalls, **are made easily accessible and available to national and local actors through dedicated tools for their use.** The multilateral system urgently needs to rebuild trust with its members. As highlighted in the 2024 Secretary-General's report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, "building a common empirical base shared by all States would be an important step toward fostering confidence and enhancing trust." In this context, the Peacebuilding Impact Hub can play an important role in centralizing that information. In turn, the Peacebuilding Commission can use this information to support evidence-based national prevention approaches and coherent UN support to increase effectiveness.
  - This support should include **assistance with data collection and analysis**, upon request. Specifically, the UN system should offer consistent and integrated support to national prevention strategies to address multiple risk and protective factors for violence.
- The UN system should assess and strengthen, where necessary, its capacity to address evidence-based risk and protective factors by **utilizing the appropriate proxies.**



- Risk and protective factors are interconnected and cumulative. The PBAR should advocate for **increased pooled funding to support comprehensive efforts** that assist national and local actors in identifying and addressing these interconnected and multifaceted risk and protective factors.
- The UN could **consider developing a prevention tracker** to better assess its contributions to prevention by addressing risk and protective factors, even when these efforts are not explicitly labelled as prevention (e.g., addressing shocks on food prices).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The terms violent extremism and terrorism are not defined consistently. UN Member States have yet to reach consensus on an international convention that legally defines terrorism. The 2023 General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/210 uses the terminology “violent extremism conducive to terrorism and terrorism.” In this policy brief, the terms violent extremism and terrorism are used interchangeably, in line with common practice in existing literature.

<sup>2</sup> David P. Farrington and Brandon C. Welsh, “Understanding Risk and Protective Factors,” in *Saving Children from a Life of Crime: Early Risk Factors and Effective Interventions. Studies in Crime and Public Policy* (Oxford Academic, 2006), 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195304091.003.0012>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Vally Koubi, Gabriele Spilker, Tobias Böhmelt, and Thomas Bernauer, “Do Natural Resources Matter for Interstate and Intrastate Armed Conflict?,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 227–243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313493455>.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Wimmer, “War,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): 173–197, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043416>.

<sup>6</sup> Sadaf Rakhshandehroo, Nils Duits, Dick Bergman, Robbert-Jan Verkes, Maaike Kempes, “Psychopathology in female offenders of terrorism and violent extremism: a systematic review,” *Frontiers in psychiatry* 14, no. 1123243 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1123243>.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Kenyon, Christopher Baker-Beall, and Jens Binder, “Lone-actor terrorism—a systematic literature review,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 10 (2023): 2038–2065, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1892635>.

<sup>8</sup> Mercy Corps, “Motivations and empty promises: Voices of former Boko Haram combatants and Nigerian youth,” (2016), <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/boko-haram-nigerian>.

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<sup>10</sup> World Vision International, “No Choice: It Takes a World to End the Use of Child Soldiers,” February 4, 2019, [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/WV\\_ITAW\\_No\\_Choice\\_Policy\\_Report\\_2019%20SP%20Online\\_2.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/WV_ITAW_No_Choice_Policy_Report_2019%20SP%20Online_2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Lieven Pauwels J. R. and Robert Svensson, “How Robust Is the Moderating Effect of Extremist Beliefs on the Relationship Between Self-Control and Violent Extremism?,” *Crime & Delinquency* 63, no. 8 (2017): 1000–1016, <http://doi.org/10.1177/001128716687757> in Friedrich Lösel, Sonja King, Doris Bender, and Irina Jugl, “Protective Factors Against Extremism and Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Research,” *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (2018): 89–102, <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-170241>.

<sup>12</sup> Nicole Fox and Hollie Nyseth Brehm, “I Decided to Save Them’: Factors That Shaped Participation in Rescue Efforts during Genocide in Rwanda,” *Social Forces* 96, no. 4 (2018): 1625–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy018>; Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*, (Cornell University Press, 2009),

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Wolfowicz, Badi Hasisi, and David Weisburd, “What Are the Effects of Different Elements of Media on Radicalization Outcomes? A Systematic Review,” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 18, no. 2 (2022): e1244, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1174>.

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<sup>17</sup> Céline Monnier and Marta Bautista Forcada, "Acknowledging Differences: Five Reasons Why Using a Gender Lens in the PBAR Can Make Prevention and Peacebuilding More Impactful," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, March 2025, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/five-reasons-gender-lens-in-pbar>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandra L. González, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak, "How Women Engage Homegrown Terrorism," *Feminist Criminology* 9, no. 4 (October 2014): 344–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085114529809>.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, "Supporting the Reintegration of Men and Women Formerly Associated with Non-State Armed Groups in Somalia through Social Cohesion Activities: Project Evaluation Report," August 22, 2024, [https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/somalia\\_social\\_cohesion\\_project\\_evaluation\\_report\\_final\\_22\\_august\\_2024.pdf](https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/somalia_social_cohesion_project_evaluation_report_final_22_august_2024.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Examples of indicators include: "Number and % of participating men and women formerly associated with non-state armed groups who report an increase in how much they are trusted by community members," "Number and % of participating men and women formerly associated with non-state armed groups who report re-creating social links with community members in Baidoa and Kismayo."

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Cultural Heritage as a Driver for Intercommunity Dialogue and Social Cohesion," *Evaluation Resource Centre*, July 31, 2023, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/13155>.

<sup>23</sup> Examples of indicators include: Perception about capacities of public institutions to address community needs, Number of people who have trust in public institutions

<sup>24</sup> Céline Monnier and Joanne Richards, "Strengthening Violence Prevention at the UN: 11 Overlooked Facts," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, May 2024, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/strengthening-violence-prevention-at-the-un/>.

<sup>25</sup> Education is a focus area of the UN secretary-general Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism <https://docs.un.org/en/A/70/675>, and the secretary-general in his New Agenda for Peace also recommends to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to address the underlying drivers of violence and insecurity (Action 4), and recommends to "Accelerate implementation of proven development pathways that enhance the social contract and human security, such as education and health care – underlying driver of violence and insecurity, New Agenda for Peace."

<sup>26</sup> General Assembly, "A/70/674 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General," December 24, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/456/22/PDF/N1545622.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>27</sup> Joel A. Capellan, "Lone Wolf Terrorist or Deranged Shooter? A Study of Ideological Active Shooter Events in the United States, 1970-2014," *Studies in conflict and terrorism* 38, no. 6 (2015): 395–413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1008341>.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Wolfowicz, Yael Litmanovitz, David Weisburd, and Badi Hasisi, "Cognitive and Behavioral Radicalization: A Systematic Review of the Putative Risk and Protective Factors," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 17 (2021): e1174, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1174>.

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<sup>33</sup> Countries studied: United States, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Austria, Denmark, Australia, Switzerland.

<sup>34</sup> Bart Schuurman and Sarah L. Carthy, "Contextualizing involvement in terrorist violence by considering non-significant findings: Using null results and temporal perspectives to better understand radicalization outcomes," *PLoS ONE* 18, no. 11 (2023): e0292941, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0292941>.

<sup>35</sup> Muluk, Sumaktoyo, and Ruth, "Jihad as Justification."

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Lösel, Sonja King, Doris Bender, and Irina Jugl, "Protective Factors Against Extremism and Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Research," *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-102, <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-170241>; Wolfowicz et al., "Cognitive and Behavioral Radicalization."

<sup>37</sup> Ibrahim Bangura, "Resisting War: Guinean Youth and Civil Wars in the Mano River Basin," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 14, no. 1 (2019): 36–48, <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-170241>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Lars-Erik Cederman and Manuel Vogt, "Dynamics and Logics of Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 9 (2017): 1992–2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717721385>.

<sup>40</sup> David Cingranelli, Skip Mark, Mark Gibney, Peter Haschke, Reed Wood, and Daniel Arnon, "Human rights violations and violent internal conflict," *Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2019): 41, [doi.org/10.3390/socsci8020041](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8020041).

<sup>41</sup> Debraj Ray and Joan Esteban, "Conflict and Development," *Annual Review of Economics* 9, no. 1 (2017): 263–293, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-061109-080205>.

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- <sup>44</sup> Olga Shemyakina, "War, Conflict, and Food Insecurity," *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 14, no. 1 (2022): 313-332, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-resource-111920-021918>.
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- <sup>46</sup> Wolfowicz et al., "Cognitive and Behavioral Radicalization."
- <sup>47</sup> Khaled M. Khan and Armstrong Nhlabatsi, "Identifying Common Behavioural Traits of Lone-Wolves in Recent Terrorist Attacks in Europe," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 11, no. 7 (2017): 1861-1865, <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1131295> in Jonathan Kenyon, Christopher Baker-Beall, and Jens Binder, "Lone-actor terrorism—a systematic literature review," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 10 (2023): 2038-2065, <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/35507>.
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- <sup>53</sup> Monnier and Richards, "Strengthening Violence Prevention at the UN."
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- <sup>55</sup> Céline Monnier, "How to Be Conflict Sensitive in the Midst of a Pandemic? A Case Study on Colombia," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, July 2022, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/how-to-be-conflict-sensitive-in-the-midst-of-a-pandemic-a-case-study-on-colombia/>.
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