Conflict Prevention: Concepts and Challenges

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Since the past decade conflict prevention has become a major focus on the international agenda. Key intra- and interstate conflicts of the nineties indeed shed the light on the urgent necessity to build an appropriate normative framework for the role of the international community in the containment of violent conflicts. The centre of attention has been driven towards conflict prevention, and a growing concern among international actors epitomises then Secretary General Kofi Annan's injunctions to move the United Nations "from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention". However, the crucial challenge concerning prevention is now to shift from conceptualisation to practical implementation in order to reduce the "unacceptable gap [that] remains between rhetoric and reality".[1]

Although the strong focus on conflict prevention only emerged at the end of the twentieth century, the concept is not entirely new. It can indeed be traced back at least to the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 that aimed at preventing new wars by a range of measures and principles such as the creation of demilitarised areas and neutral states.[2] More recently, the Marshall Plan and the European integration were consciously conceived of as insurance against renewed conflict between the Western European peoples as evidenced in, for example, Winston Churchill in his avant-gardist Zurich speech in 1946. The UN charter moreover includes a wide array of coercive or non-coercive measures intended to prevent violent conflicts from emerging or recurring (Chapter VI and VII). The ambition to prevent conflict is indeed one of the cornerstones that have

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[1] Annan, 2006.
[2] Ackermann, 2003, p. 340. It may be pertinent to note here that, although the Congress of Vienna has been credited for contributing to peace in Europe for decades, the principles applied have also been criticised for favouring a conservative order at the expense of national and civil rights.

backed the United Nations system since its birth, and prominent Secretary-Generals can be considered as the fathers of the current focus by the impulsions they gave to conflict prevention. A case in point is how the term "preventive diplomacy" was coined by Dag Hammarskjöld, who used it for the first time in 1960; he then referred to "keeping regional conflicts localised so as to prevent their spill-over into the superpower arena".[3] In the 1990s Boutros Boutros-Ghali employed the same concept with a different definition, i.e. "the use of diplomatic techniques to prevent disputes from arising, prevent them from escalating into armed conflict […] and prevent the armed conflict from spreading".[4] Along his broader ambition to enhance UN's moral responsibility and role on the international stage, Kofi Annan stressed the aforementioned necessary shift towards a "culture of prevention" notably through two prominent reports in 2001 and 2006.[5] A large number of UN, regional and non-governmental organisations now share a significant concern about conflict prevention; the creation of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1992 is an instructive example.

The international focus on conflict prevention is concomitant to a growing interest among researchers. A large numbers of contributions gave birth to a wide range of definitions and theories; the relation between conflict prevention and other concepts such as conflict management remains debated.[6] The aim of this article is therefore to give an overview of some theoretical concepts used to describe, analyse, and assess conflict prevention. First we will touch upon different definitions of conflict prevention and how these differences relate to moment when prevention occurs in the life-cycle of a conflict. In this connection we will present a threefold way to look at the implementation of prevention, namely as operational prevention, structural prevention, and systemic prevention. Finally, we will have a look at methodological hurdles that appear when trying to assess the efficiency of prevention.

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3   Ackermann, 2003, p. 340.
4   Boutros-Ghali, 1996.
5   Annan, 2001; 2006.
6   Svanström & Weissmann, 2005, pp. 23-28.

When in the conflict does prevention occur? Diverging conceptions

First of all the concept of "conflict" must be defined. A conflict requires a disputed incompatibility: two parties strive to acquire at the same time an available set of scarce resources, which can be either material or immaterial[7]. Conflict in itself is often a constructive element of a dynamic society; however it becomes very problematic when the parties to a conflict resort to violent means to advance their cause. Nevertheless, conflict resolution requires not only the reduction of the use of violence, but above all the dissolution of the underlying incompatibility so that the conflict cannot erupt again in the future. One way of preventing parties to a conflict from fighting each other could in some circumstances be to destroy their means of fighting, or to deter them from using force with a credible threat of military intervention. Typically, however, the literature on conflict prevention is mostly concerned with measures that can be undertaken by third parties and are not coercive in nature. The guiding principle behind the thinking on conflict prevention is that very destructive and costly ways of dealing with conflict can be made redundant if effective preventive measures can be taken beforehand.

The definition of "conflict prevention" itself is not agreed upon among researchers. The different definitions indeed differ according to the aim of prevention, from reducing violence to resolving the incompatibility, the time perspective (using a short- or long-term view) and the means, in particular with regard to their coerciveness.[8] Different conceptions of prevention are used according to the conflict stage when prevention is implemented. Conceptualising conflict into a life-cycle may help to visualise how the three notions can be applied.[9]

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[7] Wallensteen, 2002.
[8] Wallensteen & Möller, pp. 4-5.
[9] Svanström & Weissmann, 2005, p. 9.

Figure 1: Conflict Cycle

The narrowest conception (sometimes referred to as *primary prevention*) implies that prevention occurs only before violence has broken out. A broader conception (*secondary prevention*) includes prevention during the violent phase as well; here it is more the expansion of the conflict (geographically and/or in intensity) that is aimed at being contained. Boutros-Ghali's aforementioned definition fits this second type as it deals with preventing disputes from escalating into armed conflict as well as preventing armed conflicts from spreading. Though the most debated, a third conception (*tertiary prevention*) would also add peace-building in the aftermath of violent conflict so as to prevent the recurrence of violence. This third conception is notably shared by the Carnegie Commission, who stresses that the prevention of future conflict can be achieved "through the creation of a safe and secure environment in the aftermath of a conflict and the achievement of a peace settlement".[10]

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[10] Carnegie Commission, 1997, p. XVIII.

How does prevention take shape in practice?
A three-level approach

Strategies for prevention fall into three broad categories according to the scope of their focus. A distinction is usually made between direct and structural prevention, the latter being a broader perspective. The border between the two is, however, blurry and both can be implemented simultaneously. A third conception was introduced by Kofi Annan, who referred to "systemic prevention" from an even larger focal point.

Direct prevention (also referred to as "operational"[11] or "light"[12] prevention) aims at giving an immediate answer to an imminent crisis. The aim of prevention is then very sharp and specifically targets the reduction of violence between identified actors, in a rather short-term perspective. Examples of practical measures that can be implemented in direct prevention can be fact-finding, monitoring, negotiation, mediation and confidence-building. The Carnegie Commission classifies such measures into four broad categories, i.e. "early response" to "early warning"; preventive diplomacy (political, non-coercive measures); economic measures (sanctions, inducement, economic disputes resolution mechanisms); forceful measures.[13]

Structural (or "deep"[14]) prevention involves a wider perspective, i.e. a larger scope of targets and actions in a longer term. Structural prevention does not only aim at reducing violence but also, if not above all, at addressing its root causes and the environment that gave birth to it. Here latent conflicts are dealt with and the final goal is to ensure human security, well-being and justice.[15] The importance of gender issues is, for instance, highlighted by the United Nations Development Fund for Women's actions (UNIFEM), which seeks to give a gender perspective to conflict prevention mechanisms. It thus answers the Security Council

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[11] Carnegie Commission; Annan.
[12] Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005.
[13] Carnegie Commission, 1997, pp. XXI-XXVIII.
[14] Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005.
[15] Carnegie Commission, 1997, p. XXVIII.

Resolution 1325 that affirms the "important role of women in the prevention […] of conflicts and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security".[16] Structural prevention may therefore be incorporated in development assistance programs, all the more so due to the increasing role of development in conflict management / peace building questions.[17] Poverty reduction is indeed thought to be related to human security and both issues should be tackled together: poverty should not be merely considered as a situation of unfulfilled material needs, but above all as a lack of protection and empowerment. Thus, a multidimensional approach is needed in order to prevent conflicts. Structural prevention should, therefore, include political, social, and economical features, among which the promotion of a vibrant civil society and good governance, the protection of human rights and reintegration of former combatants as well as economic development is intended to reduce poverty that leads to grievances. Also sustainable use of natural resources should be promoted so as to avoid conflicts over resources. In sum, "development cooperation actors have increasingly come to see that they need to work *in* and *on* conflicts, rather than trying to work *around* them, because all development activities affect, and are affected by, the conflict dynamics and structures".[18]

The term "systemic prevention" was coined by Kofi Annan to refer to "measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular states".[19] Systemic prevention concerns issues that can be dealt with efficiently only collectively through global partnerships and frameworks on an international scale. Some major focuses highlighted by Annan are illicit arms trade, drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, conflict diamonds, and, similarly, the prosecution of war crimes and human rights violations, for example through the institutionalisation of the International Criminal Court. An instructive example concerns the issue of conflict diamonds and the so-called "Kimberley process".

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[16] UN, 2000.
[17] Melander et al., 2004, p. 29.
[18] Melander et al., 2004, p. 30.
[19] Annan, 2006, p. 5.

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Launched in 1992, this joint initiative of governments aims at stopping the trade with conflict diamonds through an international scheme guaranteeing conflict-free origins. Today it has become a widely recognised and institutionalised process and covers 99.8 % of the global production of rough diamonds.[20]

Does prevention work? The difficulty to assess the efficiency of prevention.

Assessing the efficiency of prevention is highly complex. Preventive actions may have helped to avoid a conflict; but is it possible to ascertain that there was causality between prevention and the absence of conflict? The effects of conflict prevention cannot be studied without questioning the causes of war, which is a knotty issue and adds even more complexity to the ambition to measure the efficiency of conflict prevention.[21] A very large number of conflicts or situations must therefore be assessed in order to arrive at reliable and generalisable results. This is further complicated by the lack of consensus among researchers on the definition of conflict prevention, and the concept of success is consequently not agreed upon either. Which preventive measures should be taken into account? Should a context-specific approach be adopted?[22] Or rather, following Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall's definition of success, i.e. "the conjunction of a de-escalation of political tensions and steps towards addressing and transforming the issue in the conflict"?[23] The risk however is to consider only conflict management (though a first step to success) instead of conflict resolution. A long-term approach must therefore be adopted in order to prevent this effect and the situations must be watched over long periods of time. Selection effects (prevention is only implemented in some situations) and external factors also constitute

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[20] Annan, 2006, p. 7.
[21] Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005.
[22] Sriram & Wermester, quoted by Wallensteen & Möller, p. 7.
[23] Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, quoted by Wallensteen and Möller, p. 8.

hardships that must be overcome when trying to assess the efficiency of conflict prevention.[24]

Wallensteen and Möller[25] thus describe three different methodological processes, i.e. (1) listing to the disputes where escalation did not take place; (2) locating "serious disputes": situations that indicate danger; (3) analysing cases with repetitive experiences of serious disputes. Möller, Öberg and Wallensteen deepen the study by applying a dataset of sixty-seven escalating ethnic conflicts (1990-1998)[26] to a typology of conflict prevention measures and trying to find correlations. They found that "a number of expectations about the effectiveness of preventive measures may be overstated";[27] verbal attention may for instance worsen the situation, what they found to be a common pattern to non-coercive actions. Although it stresses major methodological problems and impasses, this study nevertheless reveals how progress can be achieved in the study of this complex subject. To further develop this line of research is presently a key ambition of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Sweden. As part of this undertaking a unique new dataset on preventive measures have been collected in cooperation with the Folke Bernadotte Academy, covering more than 4,000 events relating to international conflict prevention. This data is now being analysed, and we, therefore, hope to be able to present new findings on the conditions for successful conflict prevention in the near future.

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[24] Möller, Öberg & Wallensteen, 2005.
[25] Wallentseen & Möller, pp. 18-25.
[26] Öberg, quoted by Möller, Öberg & Wallensteen, p. 1.
[27] Möller, Öberg & Wallensteen, 2005, p. 25.

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