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Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy: What Works and What Doesn't?

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This meeting note was drafted by Robert Muggah, a principal at the SecDev Group. It highlights key insights from the forum, “Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy: What Works and What Doesn't?,” which was attended by more than fifty participants from permanent missions to the United Nations, the UN Secretariat, multilateral agencies, think tanks, institutes, and universities. It reflects the *rapporteur's* interpretation of the themes that emerged during the discussion and not necessarily the views of all other participants.

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The purpose of the first International Expert Forum, “Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy: What Works and What Doesn't?,” was to explore the theory and practice of preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. Launched at the International Peace Institute (IPI) in New York on December 15, 2011, the forum is a joint collaboration of the Folke Bernadotte Academy, the SecDev Group, IPI, and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). The first forum was divided into three sessions: insights from research; insights from the field; and a stock-taking session focusing on the implications of research and analysis for policy and practice.

Introduction

The introductory session considered the historical precedents and legacy that helped shape early efforts in the fields of diplomacy and conflict prevention. In their contributions, Ambassador Mårten Grunditz, permanent representative of Sweden to the United Nations, Ambassador Ragnar Ängeby, head of the Conflict Prevention in Practice Program at the Folke Bernadotte Academy, Mr. Francesco Mancini, director of research at IPI, and Dr. Robert Muggah, principal at the SecDev Group, spoke of the legacy and implications of the expansion of these activities in the wake of the UN Secretary-General's 1992 *Agenda for Peace* report and the resurgence of investment in associated activities following the Secretary-General's 2001 report on conflict prevention. The speakers also mentioned the importance of the 2005 *World Summit Outcome* document and the Secretary-General's 2011 report on preventive diplomacy, the first of its kind devoted exclusively to the issue. Particular attention was drawn to the apparent “renaissance” of these themes over the past five years and the increasing institutionalization of practices within and outside the UN system. Moreover, the value of analyzing the “big picture” or historical patterns of preventive diplomacy—as a complement to case studies—was stressed. At the same time, there are large knowledge gaps regarding what works, and what does not, when it comes to preventing the emergence or escalation of conflicts. Preventive diplomacy is an art, not a science. Additional research may help move the field towards a fruitful synthesis of art and science.

A number of recurring policy prescriptions are part of the overall considerations for contemporary early diplomacy and conflict prevention. These include a concerted focus on adopting comprehensive strategies that take into account local contextual realities; the value of early-warning systems; the undertaking of joint assessments; the promotion of information sharing and coordination among different actors; the enhanced participation and role of women as negotiators and mediators; the leveraging potential of regional institutions such

as the African Union (AU), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and the fundamental importance of local conflict-prevention capacities and of capacity support, including guidance for mediators. These recommendations are currently being mainstreamed within and across the UN system. Forum participants also signaled a number of important vehicles, including the Mediation Support Unit in the UN's Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) crisis-response capacities, including its peace and conflict advisers and architectures for peacebuilding activities.

The introductory session showed how changes in the type and modalities of armed conflicts during the past two decades have precipitated transformations in the nature of early diplomacy and conflict-prevention efforts. Specifically, new forms of armed conflict and collective violence and the expansion of perpetrators—from rebel groups to organized crime networks—have given rise to new approaches and responses to diplomacy and prevention. These changes have compelled many organizations to alter and adapt their approaches. There is also a recognition by the international community that the so-called “causes of conflict” are often different from the “causes of peace”—the factors that caused the actors involved to resort to violence may be quite different from the factors that will enable them to move towards a peaceful settlement of the dispute. This latter insight has direct implications for how diplomats and practitioners tailor their interventions. Preventive diplomacy is, most often, a stepwise undertaking, in which one initial meeting leads, hopefully, to a series of fruitful discussions. One should, thus, think in terms of cumulative steps to peace—initial steps may lack direct effects and only the last prevention tool may have a direct and decisive effect. Indeed, the idea of steps to peace implies that quick breakthroughs should not be expected, and any rapid progress should be the exception, rather than the norm. This suggests that a long-term plan is needed when approaching the mediation of individual conflicts. Temperance is also important. Unfortunately, low-level conflicts that escalate to wars almost always do so within an eighteen-month

period. Hence, time is of the essence. It is therefore vital that the tools of preventive diplomacy be sharpened and made more effective.

Insights from Research

Speakers in the opening session noted that whereas many mediation characteristics may appear to be new, much also remains the same. A new feature is that the field has become more crowded with mediators and mediation attempts since the early 1990s. Since 2005, normative shifts have arisen that have effectively raised the bar in terms of promoting a “culture of prevention” and the protection of civilians in armed conflict. What has also changed is the role of new communications technologies—from social media to crowdsourcing—and their potential to both influence and speed up the initiation and termination of conflicts. A number of important trends were discussed that signal how approaches to early diplomacy and conflict prevention are evolving.

First, a growing consensus is emerging that early prevention is as important as late prevention. The shift from “supermen” mediators to a “sprinkler system” of early-response systems that detect potential instability was mentioned. Second, there is now a common sense view that a “cycle of prevention” is critical—with as much focus on preventive peacebuilding as postconflict peacebuilding. Finally, there is a growing commitment to so-called structural prevention, with a focus on creating rule-based and predictable mechanisms to deter and reduce the onset and duration of massive violence.

A historical review of preventive diplomacy suggests that states continue to be the primary actors in successfully mediating armed conflicts. Nonstate actors have begun to play a more active role in cooperation with the UN since the end of the Cold War. An empirical review of what does and does not work in conflict prevention generated a number of findings related to the characteristics of successful intervention. A short list of key elements includes: (1) consideration of structural factors (geography, ethnic composition, etc.); (2) leveraged mediation (incentives and sanctions); (3) identification of third-party interveners (states versus NGOs); (4) timing (the earlier the better); and (5) multiparty initiatives (“too many chefs may spoil the broth”). The field has become increasingly crowded with

mediators that often do not work in sync and, unproductively, even compete with one another. At the same time, the UN continues to be the most active actor, although its comparative role has decreased as the number of other actors engaged in mediation has risen. This latter development is in line with Article 33 the UN Charter which calls upon parties to any dispute that is “likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security” to “first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.”

Research in this field of conflict prevention is still in its infancy and the analysis of trends and case studies is just underway. Broad comparative studies are able to detect strategic-level patterns and trends, but are unable, and are not intended, to capture the more micro-level organizational and behavioral factors detected in case studies. In other words, broad comparative research is usually able to say something about “what” is going on, but has less to say about “why” a particular conflict occurs since context and detail are not assessed. On the other hand, case studies are unable to offer the big picture or to identify whether individual cases are unique or commonplace. The insights and analysis from case studies and broad comparative studies therefore need to be combined, as together they offer an ability to look at both sides of the coin and provide answers to different questions.

Research to date has comparatively less to say about the composition of mediation teams that prove most effective (gender, geography, etc.). The focus of research has been, until recently, on the mediation of interstate versus intrastate conflicts, the main concern of mediators. The key reason for this approach is that much of the research has focused on the issues of interest to practitioners at the strategic level (i.e., the policy planners) instead of the concerns of practitioners at the operative or field level (the mediators). This asymmetry is caused, in large part, by the difficulty of obtaining field-level data. There is also a tension between the questions being asked by researchers as opposed to the needs being raised by practitioners—there are simply few rewards in academia for the latter. A closer working relationship between academia and the UN Mediation Support Unit, among others, is urgently needed in order to move the practice and research

forward together as efficiently as possible. Practitioners, on the one hand, want good and useful policy answers, while academics, on the other hand, are constantly searching for good research questions whose answers can be useful to practitioners. This joint collaboration is invaluable and constitutes an important platform upon which to build.

The critical importance of research in informing and shaping policy responses was noted. The possibilities for creating more structured exchanges were highlighted, as was the need to operationalize research in a more structured fashion. There is a pressing need for a list of strategies that will work and, as a result, there is a need for further research to inform such a list. Speakers also underscored the lack of hard data and the need to create a consensus on how to measure both the short- and long-term impacts of preventive efforts. Commentators called for a better definition of such key concepts as “conflict” and “prevention” and for improved interaction between practitioners and academics that may serve to address their mutual concerns.

Insights from the Field

The second session explored the experiences of practitioners in a wide range of settings. The challenges of “no-war, no-peace” situations were raised; for example, Timor-Leste from 2006 onwards. The importance of combining short-term operational responses with longer-term structural prevention was noted. A recurring theme related to the particular ways in which the preventive-diplomacy tools of the United Nations and of the international community could be better leveraged, including good offices, mediation units, and dispute-resolution experts. Another theme related to the proliferation of actors—entities other than government institutions or UN agencies—involved in these activities. The critical role of coordination—of what, by whom, and for whom—was repeatedly emphasized, together with the need to think in terms of long time horizons (five to ten years as a minimum) when evaluating the impact of prevention.

The importance of impartiality in shaping effective outcomes was also raised, in that the moment when a mediating party is considered to be “a player,” there is a rapid collapse of its legitimacy. Moreover, public diplomacy seldom

generates a positive response: it is better to be supportive in public and harsh in private rather than the other way around. As noted by one speaker: “The first best outcome is resolution of a crisis such that most people were unaware that there was ever a crisis. The second best outcome is that any awareness is snuffed out before it escalates. The third best outcome is that local leaders are viewed as responsible for resolving the crisis. The least best outcome is that international parties are seen to resolve the crisis.”

Practitioners also drew attention to the changing dynamics and scales of armed conflicts in which they work. Specifically, there was discussion of “turbulence, tensions, and transitions.” Crises in the twenty-first century have often occurred more rapidly than conventional responses were prepared to react. As such, they were more difficult to identify in advance or respond to. Increased attention, it was pointed out, would be required to develop baselines to measure success and to better understand the patterns of and relations between actors’ behavior. Two critical insights that the UN has developed relate to “insider mediation”—individuals from a particular country who have inspired trust and confidence and who can undertake quiet mediation. This may facilitate the development of “peace architectures,” whereby local processes and capacities for managing structural risks are strengthened. There are many examples of peace architectures, from Ghana to Kenya. This constitutes an area for further topical research.

The discussion highlighted the shifting terrain of collective armed violence and, in particular, a possible role for new actors. The assumption that the state was the exclusive, or even the most important, actor was challenged. Many participants alluded to the increasingly pivotal role of private and insider mediators and, most importantly, to their ability to step outside of state-centric frameworks and to reach out to a broader group of stakeholders in the course of negotiations. Moreover, business enterprises—not just multinational, but also national investors—have particular forms of access, skills, and information sources, and often long-term planning horizons, to better manage risk and instability. Many companies are already heavily invested in the business of prevention and new entry points are required to further

engage them.

More research is needed on these questions and it was argued that the discussion of definitions is of real, rather than just academic, concern. There is a need to combine case studies with broad and systematic comparative research to a greater extent than is presently the case. At the same time, research is often difficult to carry out due to the confidential nature of the negotiating process. There are, thus, hurdles to be overcome in order to move mediation from a pure art form that relies on too many assumptions to a practice that is informed by insights emanating from research based on data.

Participants also reviewed the large array of local prevention activities already underway in societies affected by conflict and chronic violence. A recently published OECD report, *Investing in Security*, was mentioned. The report maps out the vast terrain of small-scale, local-level mediation and conflict-prevention activities that seek to mitigate and contain violence before it escalates. Most interlocutors agreed that while still only partially understood, many of these efforts could be (and are being) usefully harnessed, in some cases with a view towards scaling them up. In addition to identifying ways and means of financing these activities, donors were encouraged to improve communications between them and to adopt more flexible financing mechanisms. Likewise, to be more effective, some participants highlighted the importance of adopting more comprehensive and proactive conflict-prevention efforts, beginning with better inter-donor cooperation. There is also a need to link international and local efforts and to better tap into local efforts and activities.

Taking Stock of Insights: Implications for Policy and Practice

Notwithstanding the important successes in preventive-diplomacy and conflict-prevention efforts, the participants recalled the uneven record to date. The recent crises and inaction in Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Syria were reminders of the difficulties of turning principles into action. When asked “what works?,” one participant stressed the importance of (1)

recognizing the full cycle of crises in order to anticipate and adequately respond; (2) increasing internal and external awareness through public debate and media attention; (3) getting “close to the crisis” and the needs on the ground; and (4) talking proactively to all stakeholders and forging new partnerships. In a world of scarce resources, this participant added, it is also important to avoid what patently does not work, including: (1) one-size-fits-all approaches; (2) overly rigid institutional structures and institutional responses; (3) exclusive ownership of a crisis response; (4) ignorance of the realities on the ground; and (5) short-term and loose commitments that lack planning and follow-through.

Most participants were optimistic about the future of preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. Indeed, it was noted that the wider norms of protection and prevention are increasingly being accepted across the UN and multilateral systems. A key point, underlined one participant, was the importance of “operationalizing” recent normative guidelines and prescriptions. Moreover, the UN may find it useful to build on and work with the expanded networks of actors involved in these issues. The UN is often involved in the most difficult cases, where others have failed and have given up, which explains, to a considerable extent, the UN’s mixed record. The easier cases are usually resolved without the UN’s involvement.

The participants agreed that some persistent challenges remain. These include difficulties in predicting “threshold” events; the political challenges within the Security Council and among the wider UN membership regarding intervention; lingering concerns associated with sovereignty issues; and the difficulties of achieving coherence, coordination, and complementarity given the rise of diverse actors. One participant offered a series of recommendations on how to get around these obstacles, including (1) engaging earlier than typical operational responses; (2) addressing root causes alongside issues of political leadership; (3) focusing on those fragile states and settings most vulnerable to armed conflict and collective violence; (4) initiating constructive engagement (track 1.5 and 2); and (5) developing more research on the political economies of conflict.

Moving Forward

The first International Expert Forum reviewed some important conventional wisdom and signaled emerging trends for the community of practice concerned with preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. A prevalent theme was the need for practice to be better informed by findings from solid research to complement the insights of practitioners. However, a number of key recommendations can be distilled from the discussions and serve to move the prevention agenda forward:

Acknowledge the changes in the landscapes of armed conflict and collective violence. Recent evidence shows that the number of armed conflicts has dropped considerably from their height in the 1990s (from thirty-nine in 1992 to twenty-five in 2010) and that, on average, these conflicts have become much less deadly in terms of direct or battle-related deaths. And yet, evidence also suggests that other forms of collective violence have been steadily increasing, such as violence generated by transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, and ordinary crime. The participants noted the determinants and characteristics of these changing patterns of violence, and the importance of focusing on those areas exhibiting greatest “need.”

Address the root causes of conflict, but also recognize that the causes of peace may be different. In empirical terms, the so-called “causes of conflict” only partially overlap with the “causes of peace.” The factors that caused the actors involved to resort to conflict are quite different from the factors that will cause them to move towards peace. This insight has direct implications for how diplomats and practitioners tailor their interventions. Creating opportunities and incentives for peace should not be neglected in favor of a focus on the perceived causes of a particular conflict.

Recognize the critical opportunities for diplomacy and prevention in these environments, but also recognize the challenges to coordination. DPA’s recently established Mediation Support Unit has fielded more than fifty missions. UNDP and other UN departments and agencies have undertaken a vast range of programs to support

conflict prevention. Regional organizations are more active in preventive diplomacy than ever before. Civil society organizations' initiatives have also proliferated. The early-diplomacy and conflict-prevention sector has become increasingly crowded, and there is a lack of coordination, and even competition, among the actors. The dramatic proliferation of nomenclatures, actors, and activities has created some confusion and contradiction in the responses generated. The challenge is understanding how to develop effective, coordinated, and coherent responses and how to take full advantage of opportunities whenever and wherever they are available.

Deepen the knowledge base on the micro-determinants of “success” in preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. In the aggregate, there is overwhelming evidence in the literature that prevention succeeds—that is, it contributes to a de-escalation or end in fighting and a more durable peace. And yet, there is less evidence and understanding of the basic micro-characteristics of success, including the influence of variables associated with strategy, location, repeated trials, mediator identity, sequencing of different prevention tools (i.e., direct talks, moderated talks, indirect talks via mediators, good offices, etc.), and other factors. There are interesting findings from systematic research, but they are too few to constitute a solid—instead of suggestive—basis for policy. Further research and reflection is needed.

Purposefully invest in and evaluate early-diplomacy and conflict-prevention strategies that appear to work. Early intervention is critical, before parties lock in their positions. Direct and bilateral

efforts are effective and their impartiality is key. Insider mediation, national architectures for peace, and other related strategies are of increasing relevance (although still not subject to scientific evaluation). Likewise, one-size-fits-all solutions should be avoided given the unique contextual features shaping each conflict situation. While lessons will be learned and can be applied with adaptations, the heterogeneity of each setting needs to be underlined.

Support multiple collaborative tracks of research on early diplomacy and conflict prevention. The participants supported the development of more predictable and collaborative research between institutions and scholars. A more routine exchange—including through the International Expert Forum and related seminars—would allow scholars to better understand the critical gaps in knowledge, particularly in the practitioner world. Formal collaborative efforts between UN organs, such as the Mediation Support Unit, and academic institutions were also encouraged to allow for more targeted research. It was also widely recognized that multiple tracks of research are required: quantitative research on trends and patterns of success in mediation and prevention coupled with more focused, in-depth studies of organizational and institutional change. Some participants suggested developing a typology or list of strategies that work, supported by case studies that include the experiences of particular regional institutions. Other interlocutors suggested developing a glossary of terms or a lexicon to facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue.

Agenda

Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy: What Works and What Doesn't?

The International Expert Forum

Thursday, December 15, 2011

09:00 – 09:45 **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

Ambassador Mårten Grunditz, *Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations*

Introductions

Mr. Francesco Mancini, *Director of Research, International Peace Institute*

Ambassador Ragnar Ängeby, *Head of Conflict Prevention in Practice Program, Folke Bernadotte Academy*

Dr. Craig Calhoun, *President, Social Science Research Council*

Dr. Robert Muggah, *Principal, SecDev Group*

09:45 – 11:15 **Session 1: Insights from Research**

This session discusses the main findings and insights from recent research. What does this research show regarding the different types and modalities of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy? What diplomatic, military, and development options exist to prevent disputes from arising or spreading once conflict has occurred? Why do particular conflicts take a particular course of action? If a conflict was prevented, did it take place at a later time and, if so, why? How do we evaluate the short- and long-term success of the tools employed?

Chair

Dr. Michael W. Doyle, *Harold Brown Professor of International Affairs, Law and Political Science, Columbia University*

Presenters

Dr. Bernd Beber, *Assistant Professor, New York University*

Dr. Karl deRouen, *Professor, University of Alabama*

Discussants

Ambassador Josephine Ojiambo, *Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Kenya to the United Nations*

Dr. Alice Ackermann, *Senior Operational Adviser and Head, Planning and Analysis, Conflict Prevention Centre, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*

11:15 **Coffee Break**

11:30 – 13:00

Session 2: Insights from the Field

This session discusses the insights of practitioners. Which conflict prevention strategies have the United Nations, member states, regional organizations, and other external and national actors pursued? Which strategies have been most and least successful, and why? How has the practice of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy evolved in recent years? What are the comparative advantages and disadvantages of different actors? In particular, what is the contribution of regional and subregional organizations?

Chair

Ambassador Abdullah Alsaïdi, *Senior Fellow, International Peace Institute*

Presenters

Mr. Atul Khare, *Head of the Change Management Team, Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General; Former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Timor-Leste and Head of the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste*

Dr. Chetan Kumar, *Senior Conflict Prevention Adviser, Conflict Prevention and Recovery Team, Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR), United Nations Development Programme*

Discussants

Dr. Achim Wennmann, *Executive Coordinator, Geneva Peacebuilding Platform; Researcher, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies*

Mr. Steven A. Zyck, *Afghanistan Team Leader, NATO Civil-Military Fusion Centre; Fellow, Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit, University of York*

13:00 – 14:45

Session 3: Taking Stock of Insights: Implications for Policy and Practice

With the number of armed conflicts on the rise, and with the demands on the United Nations and regional organizations for preventive diplomacy increasing, a more effective approach to conflict prevention is needed. Given the insights from research and practice, what conclusions can be made? What are the implications for research and for policy in the short, medium, and long term?

Chair

Ms. Fabienne Hara, *Vice President, International Crisis Group*

Presenters

Mr. Levent Bilman, *Director of Policy and Mediation Division, UN Department of Political Affairs*

Dr. Michael Lund, *Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace*

Discussant

Dr. Bertrand Ramcharan, *Director of the Guyana Institute of Public Policy; Fellow, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, City University of New York*

14:45

Closing Remarks

Mr. Francesco Mancini, *Director of Research, International Peace Institute*

Dr. Birger Heldt, *Director of Research, Folke Bernadotte Academy*

Dr. Robert Muggah, *Principal, SecDev Group*

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