A child plays near an old tank, a relic of the civil war between the North and the South. Upper Nile State, South Sudan.
© SVEN TORFINN / PANOS

UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION: ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The concept of 'upstream conflict prevention' has gained increasing currency among the development, diplomatic and defence communities. Yet for many there remains a lack of clarity as to what the term means and how to put it into practice. This briefing therefore seeks to provide an overview of 'upstream' conflict prevention and illustrate how this approach can be put into practice.

Saferworld defines 'upstream conflict prevention' as a long-term approach that seeks to understand and respond to the underlying causes of conflict and instability before they result in violence.

Preventing violent conflict might at times take the form of last-minute diplomatic interventions to stop disputes from turning violent or military action to prevent escalation. However, moments of crisis are usually symptoms of long-standing tensions within or between societies. These tensions may be a result of, for example, political exclusion, lack of jobs, or inadequate access to basic services such as security and justice, health or education. By identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict, societies have the greatest chance of becoming more cohesive, resilient and able to manage tensions without resorting to violence.

The UK Government has made upstream conflict prevention a key pillar of its cross-departmental Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS). The BSOS represents a commitment to developing a coherent, comprehensive, and long-term approach to conflict prevention which involves supporting "political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all." It suggests that this type of "structural stability" is "built on the consent of the population, resilient and flexible in the face of shocks,

and can evolve over time as the context changes". The BSOS sets out the UK Government's ambition to co-ordinate its development, defence and diplomatic capabilities to pursue this vision. This is an important step forward.

The following briefing outlines the elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach, followed by selected case studies that illustrate what applying elements of this approach looks like in practice. It concludes with recommendations on how government, parliamentarians, and development and humanitarian actors can put this approach into action.

ELEMENTS OF UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION

When to work 'upstream'?

A common misconception is that upstream conflict prevention is suitable only in contexts that are 'pre-conflict'. However, in reality most contexts are a complex tangle of pre-, mid- and post-conflict at any one time. The defining feature of an 'upstream' approach is not when in the conflict cycle it takes place, but that it seeks to address the underlying drivers of conflict. In theory, interventions to prevent conflict upstream can be undertaken at any point during the conflict cycle, even at the same time as measures to address the symptoms of conflict are also being carried out.

A context-specific approach

Every conflict-affected or fragile context is different, and therefore there is no 'one size fits all' approach to preventing or resolving conflict. When engaging in any conflict situation it is essential to carry out a thorough and regularly updated conflict analysis. This analysis should aim to provide genuine insight into the underlying factors within and between societies that can create, catalyse and fuel conflicts. This conflict analysis should then be used to design responses which are tailored to the context at hand.

All kinds of interactions, including trade, aid, diplomatic relations and defence engagements can have both positive and negative impacts on conflict dynamics.

A holistic approach

If upstream conflict prevention is to be taken seriously, it is not enough for governments, NGOs and others to set up programmes to prevent conflict and carry on business as usual in the rest of their pursuits. All kinds of interactions, including trade, aid, diplomatic relations, and defence engagements can have both positive and negative impacts on conflict dynamics. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all overseas engagements are undertaken based on a thorough analysis of their potential impact on peace and security, with the aim of reinforcing dynamics that contribute to building peace in the long term. This presents a significant challenge, particularly given the number and diversity of different actors involved, but is a necessary undertaking if conflict prevention efforts are to be effective.

In order to have real impact, an upstream conflict prevention approach requires prioritisation of the needs and concerns of local communities in conflict-affected countries

Taking a people's perspective

In the past, development, diplomatic and defence interventions have been designed based on the perspectives of those within policy communities in donor countries, however there is increasing recognition that this approach has been ineffective. In order to have real impact, an upstream conflict prevention approach requires prioritisation of the needs and concerns of local communities in conflict-affected countries. In particular, it is important to include the perspectives of the most marginalised groups, such as women and young people. Involving affected communities in designing and delivering responses can not only improve understanding of conflict dynamics, but also ensure the local ownership of conflict prevention activities which is vital in order for them to be effective.

For example, leading up to the 2008 war over South Ossetia, international views of the conflict as being 'frozen' since ceasefires were signed in the early 1990s failed to account for tensions as they fluctuated on the ground. This failure to account for changing local realities meant a lack of understanding of the unfolding nature of the conflict. The general lack of a strategic approach for preventing conflict and building peace meant that over time, the established monitoring and security mechanisms, as well as humanitarian and development assistance, became hostage to political goals and less focused on meeting the needs of conflict-affected communities. This resulted in a situation where these mechanisms could not adapt as conditions deteriorated from 2006, and in fact they ended up contributing to the creation of an environment in which a return to violence was possible.[1]

UK policy and upstream conflict prevention

Ultimately, identifying and tackling the root causes of conflict is about improving the lives of people in communities affected by conflict and instability. This speaks to a range of UK policy objectives. Conflict and instability threaten UK national security by creating under-governed spaces where terrorism can flourish. This also undermines development – not a single Millennium Development Goal has been reached in the world's most conflict-affected countries.[2] And human rights abuses both fuel and are fuelled by conflict. Supporting upstream conflict prevention can therefore help in protecting national security, making UK development aid more effective and creating a more stable international environment for UK trade and investment.

WHAT DOES TAKING AN UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION APPROACH LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

The following are practical examples of taking elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach and putting them into practice. In each of these contexts, Saferworld conducted a detailed conflict analysis in which members of the conflict-affected communities participated, and designed responses based on the underlying drivers of conflict identified in the analysis.

This map highlights some of the countries where Saferworld works.

TAKING ACTION ON SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION IN JONGLEI, SOUTH SUDAN

The ready availability of arms can make conflicts more likely to escalate and contribute to long-term cycles of violence and instability. For example, in the case of Jonglei state in South Sudan, the practice of cattle raiding has become increasingly violent due to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Violent cattle raiding is a product of political, social and economic factors in which gender roles, ethnic identities and social hierarchies play a large part. However, easy civilian access to small arms and light weapons and the destructive power these bring, have almost completely destroyed traditional checks and balances that were built into raiding practices.[5] A plan for long-term conflict prevention must

therefore include civilian disarmament programmes, appropriately coupled with improved security provision, peace and reconciliation processes, and development progress. Saferworld research and advocacy currently works to support peaceful civilian disarmament in South Sudan.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons within societies is closely related to the poorly regulated international arms trade. Therefore promoting the responsible regulation of arms transfers globally, such as through the implementation of a robust international Arms Trade Treaty must also be a key part of addressing conflict and instability in the long term.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN PAKISTAN

Access to justice is recognised as a key challenge in many conflict-affected countries and supporting the process of building accountable, legitimate institutions that respect human rights is a key element of preventing conflict upstream. Supporting the security and justice needs of vulnerable communities can make a practical contribution to improving conflict dynamics at local and national levels.

For example, the lack of access to timely and impartial justice to address social and political grievances has been identified as one of the drivers of conflict in the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), one of the most conflict-affected areas of Pakistan. Flaws with informal and formal justice provision allowed militant groups to advocate and gain support for alternatives, as illustrated by the Taliban's imposition of their version of Sharia courts in the region between 2007 and 2009.

Recent experiences of militancy highlighted that Jirga, a meeting of elders convened by an intermediary to hear grievances and reach decisions by consensus, can play a constructive role in conflict transformation and resolution. This system has many flaws however, including the exclusion of women and minorities, poor implementation of human rights principles and a lack of clarity on its status in the wider judicial system. Saferworld is working in FATA and KP on community peacebuilding initiatives to address local concerns. Our research has concluded that longer term conflict prevention will require reform of the wider justice system in Pakistan, strengthening the functional linkages between informal and formal mechanisms.[4] Improving access to justice could mean adapting the Jirga system to be more representative and inclusive. This will also mean enhancing understanding of its role and contribution to reducing militancy, as well as in promoting reconciliation in the region.

SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE POLITICS IN YEMEN

Upstream conflict prevention should be understood as a process of supporting societal change: helping countries to become more cohesive, resilient and able to manage their internal conflicts without resorting to violence. A core element of this is supporting countries to develop responsive and accountable governments and addressing the exclusion that can play a key role in driving conflict.

In Yemen, consultations with local communities revealed that political and economic exclusion was a major factor driving the protests that led to the resignation of President Saleh in 2011 and is a significant contributing factor to conflict and extremism in the country more generally. While Yemen's transition faces many challenges, it is also an opportunity to support Yemeni aspirations for a more transparent and inclusive political system that is better able to ensure the livelihoods and security of all Yemenis. Saferworld is working with Yemeni partners to promote the inclusion of young people in transition negotiations by building new networks of youth actors and building their capacity to advocate for their political demands to be met. Overall, a key recommendation emerging from Saferworld's consultations with Yemeni youth is that inclusion and buy-in from all Yemeni voices, including youth, women, and marginalised voices from outside the capital city of Sana'a, is integral to any transition agreement that sets out a blueprint for long-term peace.[3]

PROMOTING CONFLICT-SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

Any outside intervention has the potential to affect conflict dynamics; therefore it is important that a 'whole of government' approach is taken to upstream conflict prevention – including trade, aid and diplomacy – to ensure that the UK does not inadvertently undermine its own efforts to promote peace and security in the long term. At a minimum, taking a conflict-sensitive approach means seeking to 'do no harm' by ensuring interventions do not exacerbate conflict. However, Saferworld believes that wherever possible, a 'maximalist' approach should be taken which seeks to maximize positive peace-building impacts.

For example, a livelihood project was planned in Northern Kenya that would provide livestock to community members, who would then distribute the offspring to other families, thereby multiplying the benefits. A consortium of which Saferworld is a part, conducted a conflict analysis which revealed deep divisions between tribal groups and identified the potential for the project to exacerbate those tensions if there was a perception that it would favour some groups over others. As a result of the conflict analysis, the project was adjusted so that livestock was allocated across these divides, and the offspring were distributed to other tribal communities. The project also encouraged communication and increased inter-action between the groups; and as a consequence of this trading and sharing, saw an improvement in community cohesion. Therefore not only did the project avoid fuelling conflict, it had a positive impact on building peace within and between communities.

While challenging, implementing an upstream approach to conflict prevention has the potential to secure real and long-term gains in promoting a more peaceful and stable environment for all.

PUTTING UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION INTO ACTION

For UK Government

The UK Government must invest time and resources in putting the bold vision set out in the BSOS into practice, including:

- ensuring awareness of and buy in for the progressive vision of stability laid out in the BSOS throughout Whitehall and country offices
- working to translate this progressive vision of stability into context-specific implementation plans
- incentivising officials to prioritise shared BSOS objectives over those of individual departments
- ensuring all interactions, including trade, aid and diplomacy are seen through the lens of conflict prevention, not only those activities specifically targeted at conflict prevention
- ensuring that engagement to protect UK national security interests is consistent with efforts to promote the security and development needs of ordinary people living in conflict-affected states
- when carrying out a conflict analysis and programme design, ensure that the perspectives of the people affected by conflict and insecurity, including the most marginalised groups such as youth and women, are taken into account
- promoting the principles of responsible, legitimate and transparent governance in all interactions with other states.

For Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians can play a key role in ensuring that the government is held to account on conflict prevention work by increasing parliamentary scrutiny of conflict prevention activities, for example by:

- finding an effective way of providing formal parliamentary scrutiny of cross-departmental BSOS implementation
- tabling an annual parliamentary debate on conflict prevention and posing parliamentary questions targeted at BSOS implementation, as well as on departmental activities in conflict-affected states
- ensuring attention in Parliament is given to longer term conflict prevention activities that are focused on improving the lives of those who are affected by conflict and instability, resisting the temptation to only focus on the crisis of the day
- working with parliamentarians in other countries to promote the principles of accountable and inclusive politics.

For the development and humanitarian communities

Development, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors all have an important role to play in upstream conflict prevention, for example:

- taking a 'do no harm' approach to delivering humanitarian assistance based on a thorough analysis of conflict dynamics
- ensuring that, wherever possible, development programming takes a maximalist approach to conflict sensitivity by addressing the root causes of conflict
- when consulting communities on their development needs, include questions on their security and justice concerns
- ensuring that development interventions also address security and access to justice where these are community concerns, as the ability to live peaceful, secure lives and to seek redress against injustice is a basic need on a par with health care and education.

Displaced Somali women
queue for food at a centre
operated by the government
and local NGOs, south of
Mogadishu.
© REUTERS/FEISAL OMAR
COURTESY OF THE THOMSON
REUTERS FOUNDATION –
ALERTNET

SAFERWORLD
PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in over 17 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

All our publications are available for download from our website. We can provide hard copies of specific publications upon request.

NOTES

1 Saferworld. (August 2010). The war over South Ossetia: two years on. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/news-and-views/comment/44

2 World Bank. (2011). World Development Resport 2011. http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/fulltext/

3 Saferworld. (November 2011). People's Peacemaking Perspectives: Yemen. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/resources/view-resource/597

4 Saferworld and CAMP. (March 2012). The Jirga: justice and conflict transformation. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/resources/view-resource/647

5 Saferworld. (March 2012). People's Peacemaking Perspectives: South Sudan. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/resources/view-resource/625