

Approaches to Conflict Prevention: Some Societal Issues to Consider

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to conflict prevention theory. The purpose of the paper is to document how to achieve success in conflict prevention in society. The paper argued that conflict prevention in society should be understood as a technical social process. Conflict prevention work requires the services of people with social competencies and technical expertise acting together with parties at the 'right time' to achieve success. First, it reviews existing understandings and approaches to conflict prevention. Second, it presents an organised systematic conflict prevention proposal, detailing the main elements that have to be considered in the process. Four elements: the issues, the actors, the context and timing, are highlighted as crucial in conflict prevention. The establishment of conflict prevention team with a mix of quality social, professional and technical profile is suggested as a first step. It is recommended that if conflict prevention is to be improved, there is the need to assign that responsibility to a standing conflict prevention team that will design processes for a better understanding of the sources of conflict, watch early warning signs; and be prepared to deal with the psychological, the substantive and procedural issues.

Keywords

Conflict, Conflict Prevention, Conflict Prevention Team, Actors, Approaches

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1. Introduction

Conflict prevention continues to be an important focus for the UN, development agencies, practitioners and academics since World War II (DFID, 2010; Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2016). Much progress has been made in the field of conflict prevention, both at the normative and the operational levels but the gap between rhetoric and action in preventing violent conflicts remains wide (Williams, et al., 2010). Interest of elites in exploiting ethnic differences for political gains, the absence of well-established mechanisms for prevention in certain regions, and the destabilizing role of external meddling continue to impede the development of effective prevention strategies are cited as issues creating a gap between rhetoric and action (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2010; Williams et al. 2010). Conflict prevention concerns heightened as the world continues to witness ongoing

devastating effects of conflicts including state failure in Somalia, refugee flows from the Middle East aside from the loss of human lives in genocides, ethnic conflicts and civil wars (DFID, 2010; Security Council, 2015).

The extant literature argued that definitions of conflict prevention are general, have weak operational utility and do not serve a policy purpose (Möller, Öberg & Wallenstein, 2005; Muggah & White, 2013; Hoffman, 2014). Specifically, Woodrow (2008: 22) argued that, 'relatively little attention has been paid to how specifically to evaluate conflict prevention activities; much more effort has been expended in developing frameworks'. The implication is that there are gaps in conflict prevention theory and practice related to how to do conflict prevention work (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2016). The problem starts with how conflict prevention is understood.

One group of definitions presented conflict prevention as a strategy (Carnegie Commission, 1997; Lund, 2002; Carment

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& Schnabel, 2003). The Carnegie Commission (1997) explained it as pre-emptive action to stop the emergence of violent conflict, prevent ongoing conflicts from spreading and prevent the re-emergence of violence. Lund (2002) explained it as any structural means to keep tensions and disputes from escalating into significant violence and the use of armed force, to strengthen the capabilities of parties to possible violent conflicts for resolving their disputes peacefully, and to progressively reduce the underlying problems that produce those tensions and disputes. Carment & Schnabel (2003) explained conflict prevention as a medium and long-term proactive operational or structural strategy undertaken by a variety of actors, intended to identify and create the enabling conditions for a stable and more predictable international security environment. Yet to explain conflict prevention as a strategy is problematic. It does not support the development of policy practices that view conflict prevention as a process and a practice.

Sriram and Wermester (2003) belong to one group of author who view conflict prevention in terms of measures of success depending on a context. They proposed a case-by-case approach which argues that conflict prevention must be context-sensitive, taking history, risks and goals as well as other dynamics into consideration. Väyrynen (2003) adds that success depends in part on the political context and the ability to read it correctly. The defect in that school of thought is that comparability is lost and analysis is done post-mortem. For analytical, research and development purposes a useful definition of conflict prevention must be applicable to various contexts and cases to facilitate planning and development of tool kits and policy processes.

The understandings of Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (1997) and Wallensteen and Möller (2003) present an “either... or” coding system based on assumption that if there is no direct outbreak of hostilities or military action then there is conflict prevention. Goertz & Regan (1997) see conflict prevention in terms of turning rivalry into a ‘détente’-type of relationship that lasts for a long period (more than a couple of years). The argument against this is that the absence of hostilities could mean negative peace. It does not account for an atmosphere of fear and suspicion which fuel the development of enemy images and can explode at the least opportunity.

This paper takes a different understanding, going beyond the limited deterrence propositions by Wallensteen of Möller (2003) and those presenting conflict prevention as a strategy. In this paper I take a view close to that of Muggah and White (2013) that “Conflict prevention is a broader concept referring to the monitoring, containment, and reduction of risk factors that shape war onset, intensification, and spread.” The view taken in this paper is that conflict prevention is a technical social process, not a one-off achievement of an

armistice. Conflict prevention ought to be understood as a systematic social process aimed at ensuring that social relations that underlie and create tensions do not translate into active confrontation or the development of enemy images. That would involve continuous sensitivity to needs, interests, identities and values. In that sense, it is important to understand what should be dealt with in conflict prevention work.

2. Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Several writers tried to synthesize approaches to conflict prevention but Wallensteen & Möller (2004) argued that nothing close to a prevention theory can be distilled from the literature. Given the plethora of understandings, Wallensteen and Möller (2004) suggested that there are two ways of understanding conflict prevention. One is direct preventive actions which avert a crisis that is judged to be in a dangerous phase of military escalation, intensification or diffusion. The second is the structural prevention, where the idea is to create such conditions that conflict hardly arise or do not threaten to escalate into militarized action.

2.1. Approach 1: United Nations and Development Agency Type Approaches

The United Nations approach is mainly preventive diplomacy which mainly includes working with governments (Connolly, 2015). Eliasson (1996) listed as actual use of military force, on the basis of UN chapter VII; threats to use military force, on the basis of UN Chapter VII; use of Chapter VII peaceful coercive measures such as sanctions; imposition of targeted sanctions; use the new generation of peace keeping operations including preventive deployment; stimulating the parties to use the eight measures of Chapter VI, Art 33; UN or Regional Organizations sending fact-finding missions; and reacting to early warning signs. Lund (1996) similarly presented a three prone typology of conflict prevention approaches. The first is military approaches: usually security-focused measures restraints on the use of armed force and threat or use of armed force (Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies, 2016). The second is non-military approaches: coercive diplomatic measures (without the use of armed force) and non-coercive. The third development and governance approaches: policies to promote national economic and social development, promulgation and enforcement of human rights, democratic, and other standards and national governing structures to promote conflict prevention applied by international development agencies. An example is the DFID (2010:28) commitment to make all development assistance conflict sensitive which

includes tackling the underlying issues causing conflict; and to “ensure that development work takes better account of its possible effect on conflict.”

2.2. Approach 2: Contextual and Case Based Approaches

Hampson (2002), Ackerman (2003) and Väyrynen (2003) talked of the contextual approach which argues that conflict prevention must be context-specific in order to be effective. Within that thinking is the ‘cause-based approach’ to conflict prevention. Hoffman (2014) explained that the approach first requires that the causes of the conflict are identified. Then, specific indicators to measure changes for each cause of conflict could be identified. The rationale is that a reduction in the causes of conflict will be reflected in a reduction of violent conflict (e.g. no violent conflict will manifest because there is no cause for it to erupt). Hoffman explained that within that approach, effective prevention can be proven when the causes of conflict are eliminated or become no longer relevant. Thus “prevention is successful if the causes of violent conflict have become no longer relevant, have decreased in number, or have been reduced in intensity” (Hoffman, 2014:6). What is not clear is the guiding methodology required to identify the causes and how the impact of each cause can be identified. A grey area is what measures are required to reduce the intensity of each cause. When can the causes be identified and by whom? Walleensteen and Moller (2004) noted timing as important in suggesting that when a conflict erupts it is often claimed that preventive action was taken “too little, too late”. This leads to two questions: When is “early” in a conflict and how can we know it when we see it? How can we be sure whether a preventive action failed because it was “too” late or if it failed to address other elements in the potential conflict situation? In addition, “early” may not mean the same thing in different contexts, especially if some conflicts are on a steeper escalation curve than others.

2.3. Approach 3: Core Capacity Approach

A third approach that can be distilled from the literature is what Hoffman (2014) called ‘core capacities approach’. The approach assumes that violent conflict would not occur if certain core capacities are built and are present in a society and are fully functioning. Violent conflict emerges when these capacities are somehow diminished or missing. Conflict prevention work should thus focus on developing such core capacities in conflict prone areas because their presence implies that violent conflict is not likely to occur. Given that understanding, Hoffman explained that there are five types of core capacities required as follows: 1. Structures 2. Mechanisms 3. Processes 4. Skills 5. Values. The contents of these capacities were not explained in Hoffman’s paper. Yet

Hoffman explained that, from a programming perspective, very specific activities to build each of the five types of core capacities could also be developed. For example, Hoffman contended that “electoral training can be used to increase the “processes capacity”. Whereas work at the structural level might include initiating constitutional reforms.” He further explained that the next step in the process of measuring success in this manner would be to devise appropriate measures for each of the five types of core capacities listed above, and then to apply these measures at various points before, during, and after the intervention. The reasoning in this approach is that “prevention is successful if the society has the structures, mechanisms, processes, skills, and values” (Hoffman, 2014:9). The questions that can be asked of this approach are plenty. What structures are required, and who duty is it to establish? Are they to be established by Law such as National Peace Councils such as delineated by Awinador-Kanyirige (2014)? What are the preventive mechanisms that should to be put in place, and are they institutional, community or state level? What processes are appropriate - desirable and essential - and what is the measure of appropriateness? What are the skills, and are they technical, social or professional skills? What are the values? These are no simple questions when left unattended.

The essential point is that, each preventive approach is presented without any procedural design and implementation proposal. For analytical utility, it should be possible to develop a systematic approach. The challenge is how to organise the values in the different strands of thinking into a conflict prevention theory that shape research and practice. It is difficult, partially due to the degree of conceptual ambiguity, to define what is success or failure in conflict prevention. Given the ambiguity, this paper tries to flesh out certain issues that have to be addressed in a conflict prevention process.

3. Some Issues to Consider in the Process of Conflict Prevention

In our view conflict prevention theory should focus on understanding who should prevent conflict, where and how? Four elements - the *context*, the *issues*, the *actors* and *time* – are crucial.

3.1. The Context

Every potential conflict situation occurs in a particular context. Conflict prevention should begin with analysis of three contexts: the socio-cultural, the political and the historical. The aim is to identify power structures and systems, beliefs and personalities within the conflict

relationship. The socio-cultural context involves mapping out the social groups according to their levels of interdependence and cohesion or their polarization in relation to the cultural issues and differences that are an essential part of the social landscape. Socio-cultural issues such as ethnicity, religion, language or other defining factors tend to be deeply rooted and can impede the prevention processes and do determine prospects of a successful outcome. Social disparities including wide educational disparities that can significantly hamper efforts should be identified and taken into account. The human resources available to support the preventive activities within the society should be deconstructed. The availability of local or community peace setters who work as facilitators is important for the analysis. The presence of comparatively sophisticated NGOs, with a capacity to research on the conflict related issues, and to engage in public policy formulation can enable strong civil society participation. Such scenarios should be harnessed if they exist within the context.

The political context relates to issues of power relations and structures of governance including how ruling regimes often have a stake in perpetuating social fissures and some degree of lawlessness that exacerbates the risk of future conflicts (Väyrynen, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 2010). Key considerations for political context analysis are issues of credibility, stability of government institutions and authorities; level of cohesion or tension within the government or governing party; extent to which minority parties cooperate in the political process; lack of experience with or trust in democratic governance; political cleavages and divisions along ethnic lines; threats of government overthrow; need for political reconstruction in the aftermath of protracted civil war; political pressures from outside the country; corruption, and political disillusionment and apathy among the population; political crisis and confrontation. Williams *et al.* (2010) explained the need to examine the prospect of violence in resource-rich nations invite international crime networks and other non-state actors to operate; unsettled geographical issues based on a variety of drivers such as ethnic tensions, resource issues and tension over the division of economic assets; a lack of stable mechanisms for political transition; and the meddling of external actors in fragile states.

Historical context analysis comes from the understanding that potential conflict situations have historical antecedents (Yamaguchi, 1991). It involves mapping the stories and narratives from different perspectives. There is need to use historiography to make sense of historical data Part of the historical context knowledge may be publicly available in news stories, articles, books or other documents that describe how events unfolded. Analysing the historical context also involves knowing the history of the issue(s). For example,

what previous attempts have been made to address the issues, and what were the outcomes? Do people in the society feel that something has changed to create an opportunity for a different outcome? Has a long-term leader been removed? Has the society witnessed the emergence of a powerful advocate for change? Is there is a tradition of deciding issues? Is there a history of failed attempts that has made people cynical about the possibility of resolving issues? The analyses of these questions in the historical context are important to frame conflict prevention initiatives in the contemporary society.

3.2. The Actors

Actors are people whose interests, needs and identities are at stake. Conflict prevention process should include actor mapping - the process of identifying actors to create a visual map of individual and group positions on the key issues and the social relationships (the relationship among different interest groups and their leaders as well as the shifting balance of power). It includes identifying the 'political culture': the attitude to power that seems to prevail in the mind and in the actions of the major 'power brokers'. A typical actor mapping process begins with identifying expectations and incentives driving the desire for conflict. Actors' interests, needs, goals and concerns must be clarified in order to understand what is at stake for the different groups (Higgins, *et al.* 2015). The analysis must identify actor perceptions of how the potential conflict and how it would develop. Allies of the various actors must be identified to know where people actually stand in relation to the others. The analysis needs to map out the actors' willingness to participate in preventing the conflict and the disincentives to the various actors.

Community peacesetters – individuals and groups who are opposed to hostility emerging from their own group must be identified. There is evidence that successful conflict prevention, resolution or peace building begins with drawing on energies provided by community peacesetters (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2007). The next step in actor analysis is to map out the power relations among the actors. This involves identifying people's capacities as power brokers—people with connections to influential parties. The analysis must clarify the nature and source of the power people wield. Spoilers (those who can directly or indirectly undermine or derail the conflict prevention process) should also be identified. Spoilers may include conflict financiers, gun suppliers or people whose power depends on the perpetuation of the conflict. Mapping potential spoilers is important to the analysis because they can block or sabotage the prevention process. The last step in actor mapping is to assess the potential role of the different actors and the contributions

each actor or group of actors can make to the conflict prevention process. Conflict generates is a serious problem in low and middle-income countries, involving many thousands of young people who are usually the potential combatants but can also be the driving forces for change if they decide not to fight (Higgins, et al. 2015; Human Rights and Policy Studies, 2016). Other people who hold sway (political leadership, professionals from the potential conflict zone, opinion leaders) and women groups offer immense support to conflict prevention. In some cases religious leaders may be very critical to the process if the area is dominated by a particular religion or if religious issues are involved.

3.3. The Issues

The issues are the problem, the unmet needs of identity and security. Identifying the issue involves a process of needs assessment in which the task is to explore more widely and deeply, in order to understand the dynamics from a variety of perspectives and to frame the challenge more robustly. The needs assessment process should strive to get a sense of the problem's history or background, recognizing that there are likely to be competing versions of the story and that the differences may be significant. These issues must be identified and properly defined to guide action. In so doing, it is important to investigate the situation from different angles including visions and opportunities; biological/physical environment; organizations; infrastructure; legal, policy and political institutions; economic conditions and markets; and social and cultural conditions. The situational analysis should identify the root causes of the conflict and look for the opportunities for change including past efforts to deal with the conflict (Brabant, 2005). For example, in the Middle East countless Palestinians feel that their legitimate identity is being denied them, both personally and nationally. Numerous Israelis also feel they have no security individually because of suicide bombings, nationally because their state is not recognized by many of their close neighbours, and culturally because anti-Semitism is growing worldwide.

3.4. Timing

Time is a cross-cutting issue in conflict prevention. According to the Security Council (2015) conflict prevention occurs at a time when there seems to be a renewed interest in such issues within the Security Council and the wider UN architecture. When things get done is extremely crucial. Often times when conflicts erupt, it is claimed that preventive actions have not been taken at the "ripe moment" (Zartman, 1989). Timing applies when watching for early warning signs and the ripe moment to ensure that preventive action is not taken "too little, too late." Any conflict prevention process must happen at the right time in order to be successful. Actor

mapping, context and issue analysis must be conducted at the right. A study of early warning signals is useful and informative in identifying when preventive action is needed.

3.5. Conflict Prevention Team

The success of conflict prevention depends largely on how it is skilfully approached. The task of conflict mapping and developing a design to prevent conflict is both a social process and a technical activity. Specific kinds of knowledge - cultural knowledge and understandings of the political culture are essential. Professional expertise is required to map the political and cultural context, the actors to be involved and how to engage with the actors. Expertise is required to frame the scope of the issues (including the nature of the relationships), the main issues to be addressed and the technical path to pursue. Technical skills are required to budget for the potential resources to be used. This requires a team with the capacity to understand and deal with people's fears and expectations, budgets, negotiations, interviews, schedules and logistics. Typical competencies the team needs to perform its role effectively include personalities who are:

- skilled, well-organized, professional, ethical, non-partisan
- competent in managing resources and relationships
- respected by potential belligerents
- politically astute, sensitive to local culture and history
- sensitive to the human dynamics of dialogue
- able to convey genuine caring and commitment
- able to learn and adjust to changing realities.

The team needs to be further structured to have a group (a Board) that provides strategic assessment and direction, and that monitors the process as it unfolds. An Executive Secretary or Administrator is needed to be responsible for documentation and implementation of decisions made by the Board. A crisis communication expert who manages the public relations and media activities of the team is essential. A process expert and facilitator is required to advice and design capacity building activities for the team and parties as may be required. At the minimum, the expert needs to have

- familiarity with various approaches and process tools for group facilitation, as well as an understanding of their applicability in different situations and for different objectives
- good understanding of conflict prevention processes
- experience working in different political and cultural contexts and commitment
- political intuition—ability to grasp the political dimensions of the context that will permeate and influence

the process

- cultural sensitivity—ability to adjust to situations of cultural diversity
- a collaborative work style—a non-prescriptive approach
- communications/advocacy skills.

The process expert has the task to prepare the team to engage with psychological, procedural and substantive issues. Psychological issues relate to managing risks posed by sponsors, conveners, participants and interested onlookers, all of whom have interest in feeling recognized, respected and heard. The substantive issues relate to the contents of conflict prevention initiatives. Procedural issues relate to the way in which the process unfolds such that actors can build trust in the process as legitimate, fair and worthwhile.

The search for a team with such profile makes it very difficult to assemble a new team for different conflict prevention initiatives. Experts advised that it is sensible to undertake conflict prevention with a standing team, “whether or not it includes all the knowledge or skills needed” (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007). Membership can be reviewed or modified as may be required. The team needs to find ways of working with people who are outside the official team and who may be willing to provide input and support.

4. Conclusions

This paper argues that conflict prevention theory should consider the practice as a technical social process aimed at altering the social relationships and influences underlying violence and the creation of enemy images. Conflict prevention should be an organised and systematic activity. The first step to effective conflict prevention is to establish a Conflict Prevention Team (CPT) composed of non-political, non-partisan, socially competent and professionally sound people. The team should be prepared by a process expert to deal with psychological issues, the substantive issues and procedural issues that usually determine successes and failures. The CPT should be tasked to constantly review early warning signals and plan processes of prevention. Despite differences in topographies, four critical considerations in the process include careful analysis of the context, actors, issues and the timing of preventive efforts. Context analysis should focus on a better understanding of the sources of conflict, the socio-cultural, the political and the historical to identify power structures and systems, beliefs and personalities within the conflict relationship. The issues should be mapped by drawing on opinions through individual consultations, focus groups, polls, surveys, questionnaires or some combination of these formats. Information sources include anecdotal evidence, books, newspapers or other media. The

engagement process is equally critical. The task of the CPT would be to work with actors and stakeholders in every potential conflict situation to prevent escalation.

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