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Bridging the Silos: Integrating Strategies across Armed Conflict, Violent Crime, and Violent Extremism to Advance the UN's Prevention Agenda

About the Author –

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The consequences of violence worldwide are dire. More than half a million people die from violent deaths each year.¹ In 2019, violence cost the global economy \$14.5 trillion USD, or \$1,909 USD per person.² Countries with armed conflicts account for 80 percent of humanitarian spending. Beyond these cold numbers, the human toll of violence results in the suffering of families, trauma-affected communities, and increased fear and hopelessness. Different types of violence—such as crime, violent extremism, and armed conflict—are often interlinked and share risk and resilience factors. Although currently siloed, the UN system has the capacities and knowledge to develop approaches to prevention that cut across interlinked forms of violence. This paper proposes some solutions.

In recent years, the secretary-general of the United Nations (UN) and member states have spotlighted prevention with the adoption of the sustaining peace resolutions and with support for the secretary-general's prevention agenda. The recent review of the UN peacebuilding architecture has focused on the urgent need to operationalize these frameworks.

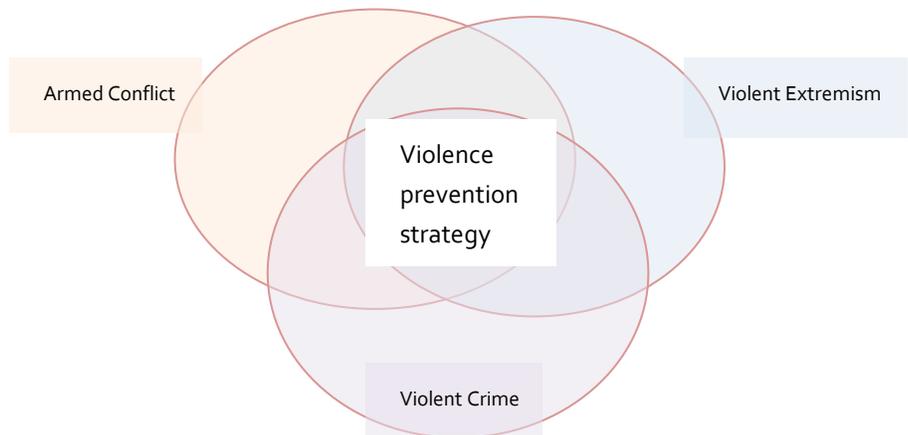
Violence can take different forms, ranging from violent crime—including homicides—to violent extremism and armed conflict. While these forms of violence are often intertwined and have several common root causes, the UN's efforts to prevent them are siloed.

¹ Claire McEvoy and Gergely Hideg, *Global Violent Deaths 2017: Time to Decide*, 2017.

² Institute for Economic and Peace, "Global Cost of Violence Continues to Decline," *Vision of Humanity*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-cost-of-violence-continues-to-decline/>.

This paper makes the argument that the UN can and should adopt a more integrated violence prevention strategy across these three forms of violence³. It draws from desk review of UN and academic documents, interviews with UN staff working on different types of violence prevention across the UN system, and a workshop among them. The paper discusses why there is a need for more integrated prevention approaches across different types of violence, what benefits that would bring, and what challenges need to be overcome first. It concludes by making four recommendations: governments should use the SDG 16.1 framework⁴ to bring actors together at national level; member states should ask the UN to develop evidence-based guidelines on prevention for countries to implement themselves; the UN should initiate a strategic dialogue at headquarters between fields to better identify commonalities in approaches; and country teams should develop an integrated strategy with specialized sub-strategies.

Figure 1. Commonalities and differences in the prevention of armed conflict, violent crime, and violent extremism



The need for integrated violence prevention strategies

The need for integrated strategies is driven by what should ultimately drive all UN policies and efforts: the facts on the ground. Different types of violence feed into each other and often have similar root causes. This means that these forms of violence are difficult to tackle in isolation, especially from the perspective of upstream prevention, and it is wasteful of resources and policy efforts to do so.

³ This report focused on the broadest forms of violence that the UN deal with (i.e. violent crime, armed conflict, and violent extremism) and on upstream prevention, hence on the prevention of armed conflict itself, rather than on the prevention of escalation. Since the prevention agenda is nationally driven at the United Nations, this report does not deal with state sponsored violence, which might be better dealt with through other tools.

⁴ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Goal 16,” accessed June 28, 2021, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

Box 1. Components of an effective prevention strategy

The Pathfinders report, *A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention*, identifies key components of an effective violence prevention strategy—regardless of the type of violence. Among them, the report highlights that prevention requires to implement targeted interventions at risk places, people, and behaviors and to engage multiple stakeholders at all levels in multisector, multiagency, and integrated responses. This form of prevention is called **targeted (or area-based) prevention**. In other words, all actors carry out a risk and resilience diagnosis and address root causes for violence in a coordinated fashion.

Similarities among different types of violence prevention

Acts of violence often fall into more than one category. In Nigeria, for instance, conflict between farmers and herders can be viewed in several ways: as a crime, since cattle was stolen, as an ethnic conflict, when farmers and herders are not from the same ethnicity, and possibly even as an act of terrorism, depending on the legal interpretation.⁵ In Colombia, drug trafficking (violent crime) has been a source of funding for guerrilla groups (considered armed groups or terrorists by some). Additionally, a high proportion of deaths related to terrorism—95 percent—takes place in countries with at least one ongoing violent conflict.⁶ Without a global definition of terrorism, qualifying a group as terrorist, armed group, or criminal can often be a political decision, rather than a technical one. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, extremism is considered a crime by the government and is dealt with by the prosecutor’s office.⁷

Furthermore, many **risk and resilience factors are identical across the different forms of violence**. State fragility (absent state, exclusionary states, repressive state), gender inequality, and different forms of inequality and exclusion are risk factors for all types of violence.⁸ As a result, **prevention approaches across different types of violence are often the same**. UNDP conducted a program evaluation last year that concluded its efforts on PVE were “almost indistinguishable from wider conflict analysis, and most of the projects implemented could just as easily be labelled conflict prevention or peacebuilding.”⁹ Additionally, in Nigeria, UN peacebuilding actors report that tools across the different types of violence have been used to tackle farmer-herder conflicts.¹⁰

The benefits of integrated violence prevention strategies

Implementing a more integrated prevention approach will improve the impact of the UN’s work and foster a more upstream approach in line with the secretary-general’s prevention agenda. It will enable violence prevention strategies to address multiple risk and resilience factors by engaging multiple stakeholders at all levels in multisector, multiagency, and integrated responses. It may create economies of scale, avoiding duplication of investments and more efficient resourcing. It would also reduce stigmatization and politicization due to labels. Finally, it would support a more upstream approach to prevention, a premise that could be encapsulated by the notion that it is better (and cheaper) to prevent a disease than have to treat it.

From projects to strategies on prevention: addressing multiple risk and resilience factors to strengthen impact

Violence does not emanate from a single factor. Consequently, to prevent violence effectively, we need to first understand both the risk and resilience

Coordination around a violence prevention strategy would enable the UN to move from projects to strategies on prevention, addressing more risk and resilience factors in a consistent way and therefore achieving a stronger impact.

factors of violence and then to **address multiple risk factors and resilience factors** in a coordinated fashion (targeted prevention—see Box 1). Hence, prevention will be most effective when it engages multiple stakeholders—across the government, civil society, the UN, private sector, and so on—at all levels in multisector, multiagency, and integrated responses.¹¹

The UN has the capacity to do this more than it currently does. While a specialized agency focuses on decreasing hate speech in a country, another one provides support for youth employment, often without connection nor necessarily in the same area. Without a solid strategy tying these projects together, these efforts can be drops in the ocean. Coordination around a violence prevention strategy across the prevention of violent extremism, violent crime, and armed violence would enable the UN to pull its resources together.

There is already some recognition of the importance of having a violence prevention strategy. For instance, UNODC acknowledges that “while specific phenomena, such as recruitment and exploitation of children, require tailored approaches, prevention measures can only be effective if they are rooted in a comprehensive strategy to prevent violence in general and if they can mobilize different state and non-state actors, including various types of professionals, civil society and community-based organizations.”¹² SDG 16.1’s objective to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere” provides a framework to look at violence through a more integrated fashion.

Reducing politicization and stigmatization

Some member states are reluctant to adopt prevention strategies because they feel that there is a stigma attached to it. This is particularly true for the prevention of armed conflict. As we highlighted in one of our previous policy briefs, “post-conflict countries, in particular, wish to show that they have graduated from conflict, and thus may not want to refer to it in their engagements with the UN, donors, and in their national plans and strategies.”¹³ Similarly, it can be difficult to implement a project in a community to “prevent

⁵ Interview respondent A based in Nigeria, December 2020.

⁶ Flávia Carbonari et al., “A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention” (Pathfinders (Center on International Cooperation), March 2020), 6.

⁷ Kyrgyz Republic, “Кодекс КР От 2 Февраля 2017 Года № 19 ‘Уголовный Кодекс Кыргызской Республики’ (Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic),” 2017, 314–15, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111527>.

⁸ Carbonari et al., “A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention.”

⁹ Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu, “Evaluation of UNDP Support to Conflict-Affected Countries” (New York: Independent Evaluation Office UNDP, December 2020), 91.

¹⁰ Interview respondent A based in Nigeria.

¹¹ Carbonari et al., “A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention.”

¹² Giulia Melotti et al., “Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System” (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017), 16, https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf.

¹³ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “The Prevention Agenda: Mapping Out Member States’ Concerns” (Center on International Cooperation, July 2, 2019), 3.

violent extremism,” as the beneficiaries may push back, refusing to be labeled as potential terrorists. Adopting an integrated violence prevention strategy could **reduce politicization and stigmatization due to labels**. Indeed, “violence” does not have the same degree of negative connotation as “armed conflict” or “violent extremism”—as all societies have some degree of violence.

Fostering more upstream approaches to prevention

By advancing the prevention agenda, the secretary-general highlighted the need for a parallel track to the traditional UN roles of crisis management and post-conflict peacebuilding. Through a violence prevention agenda that addresses risk and resilience factors—and bringing in the capacities of the whole UN system—a more upstream prevention approach could be operationalized.

Key challenges

While adopting a violence prevention approach could significantly improve the impact of UN prevention efforts, the way the UN system is set up creates challenges.

First, **responses to each type of violence have their own separate architectures**. Conflict prevention has the peace and security and peacebuilding architectures, PVE is part of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and the commission and the congress on crime prevention and criminal justice—established by ECOSOC. Sometimes, these divisions are present within an organization. For instance, an interviewee working on violent crime prevention mentioned that they were not aware of what the PVE branches of their own organization were doing. Moreover, different silos may also show some tensions and friction between them stemming from competition for needed political prioritization and thus resourcing.

Second, while both PVE and prevention of armed conflict actors are based in New York, the main actors in urban safety—UN-Habitat and UNODC—are based respectively in Nairobi and Vienna, which can hinder collaboration.

Third, different fields also use different vocabulary around violence prevention. Each “silo” has its own “grammar” or semantics, which often undermines the organic collaboration stemming from “speaking the same language.” For instance, experts and practitioners will refer to “drivers” or “root causes” for armed conflict, “risk and protective factors” for violent crime, and “push and pull” factors for violent extremism.

Fourth, there is a plethora of risk and resilience diagnosis tools for violence. A joint UN country team analysis around violence is still uncommon at country level, however, let alone at local level. The Common Country Analysis (CCA), which informs the country team’s programming, is sometimes used, but it does not have a component on risks for violence. Consequently, for this analysis to be

included, usually the resident coordinator's office (often the peace and development adviser) or UNDP needs to initiate this effort. Interviews with actors at field level suggest some concerns about the CCA being too broad, looking primarily at national rather than local dynamics, and also not being updated frequently enough (only every couple of years) to capture rapidly evolving conflict risks.

Finally, while several interviewees for this report highlighted that donors have become more supportive of national priorities in the recent years, in many instances donors follow their own priorities in a country—both in terms of the type of violence they want to tackle and the area of the country in which they want to work.

Four recommendations

Despite these difficulties, clear benefits will be reaped from operationalizing more integrated prevention strategies. We summarize in four recommendations.

Leverage frameworks for nationally led approaches

1. Use the SDG 16.1 framework to bring actors together at national level

National actors have primary responsibility for implementing prevention strategies.¹⁴ Hence, national and local governments have a key role to play to bring the three prevention agendas together. SDG 16.1 provides a framework to organize discussions at field level on risk and resilience factors for different types of violence.

In practice, national governments often have a variety of frameworks for different types of violence from national or local crime prevention strategies, prevention of violent extremism strategies, social cohesion efforts, peacebuilding plans, and so on. These frameworks provide excellent entry points to kick start national efforts, with the support of the UN when requested, to strengthen collaboration across sectors.

The UN has been providing guidance to member states on how to develop their National Actions Plans on Preventing Violent Extremism and to implement the Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime.¹⁵ In reality, these frameworks ought to do the same: they look at the political, social, and economic root causes of grievances that may lead violence to break out. Ideally, this analysis should look at the common risk and resilience factors across the different forms of violence, while identifying the differences and continuing to address them separately. This clarification will lead governments to better prioritize their prevention

¹⁴ General Assembly, "Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture," UN Doc. A/RES/70/262, May 12, 2016.

¹⁵ Sebastien Feve and David Dews, "National Strategies to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism - An Independent Review" (Global Center on Cooperative Security, September 2019).

programs and avoid duplication. When this analysis is not done jointly, at least a dialogue or a coordination mechanism could be implemented at field level to facilitate collaboration and move towards a more integrated approach.

At the local level, national actors can rely on mechanisms such as local safety committees to identify common risk and resilience factors across different types of violence. These local safety committees can bring together the police, local authorities, and civil society organizations to identify risks and resilience factors for violence and co-create local prevention plans. These already exist in many different countries, from France to Tunisia to Timor-Leste.

2. Member states should ask the UN to develop evidence-based guidelines on prevention for countries to implement themselves

Member states can ask the UN to develop evidence-based guidelines on how to develop national and local prevention strategies through a UN resolution (for instance: ECOSOC or the General Assembly) or request an office to develop guidelines. These could build on existing frameworks guidelines on crime prevention—developed by the ECOSOC resolution 2002/13—and the National Actions Plans on Preventing Violent Extremism Reference Guide—developed by the Office of Counter-Terrorism.¹⁶ That way, national actors would have a toolkit to develop their own prevention frameworks.

In turn, that would help the UN to organize itself on prevention. There is no overall office responsible for prevention at the UN, resulting in a fragmented approach to strategy, implementation, resourcing, and capacity-building support. Since prevention tools are scattered throughout the UN system, it can also be difficult for national actors to know the available resources and have access to them. Indeed, numerous UN entities are relevant for the prevention agenda, including PBSO, UNODC, UNOCT, UNIDIR, UNESCO, OHCHR, UNWOMEN, UNICEF, and so on. Having nationally led strategies would provide a framework for UN's work on prevention in country and enable the UN to support and build national capacity in different areas of expertise, while contributing to an overall approach to prevention.

Member states could also make sure that there is a better integration of these three architectures by insuring cross-pollination between related processes, such as the peacebuilding architecture review, the review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and the commission and the congress on crime prevention and criminal justice.

¹⁶ United Nations Office of Counter terrorism, “Developing National and Regional Action Plans to Prevent Violent Extremism,” n.d., https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/UNOCT_PVEReferenceGuide_FINAL.pdf.

Countries that are already undertaking efforts to join violence prevention agendas at field level—for instance among Pathfinders¹⁷—could become champions of “integrated prevention agendas” and promote them at the UN’s headquarters.

Operationalization at the UN

3. Initiate a strategic dialogue at headquarters level between fields to better identify commonalities in approaches

At headquarters level, UN entities¹⁸ dealing with violent crime, violent extremism, and armed conflict prevention should have periodic meetings to strengthen expertise on prevention and discuss commonalities in approaches across sectors. Particularly, policy departments could discuss **the evidence-base on risk and resilience factors** for each type of violence and identify where they overlap across sectors.

Identifying the causes of violence is not often straightforward. For instance, in a recent CIC workshop for UN staff on the prevention of violent crime, violent extremism, and armed conflict, participants were asked to name risks factors for violence. As presented in Figure 3, “poverty” was among the risk factors mentioned most often. Some participants reacted very strongly when they saw the visual, arguing that recent research shows that poverty is not a risk factor for violence; rather, inequality is. This situation highlights that the understanding of what constitutes a risk factor for violence varies across the UN system. This is not surprising. Research on violence prevention is vast, complex, context specific and evolves over time. To address this situation, the UN system could have periodic workshops on the causes of violence and resilience factor, including by inviting violence researchers to share the results of their latest studies. This understanding could better inform the design of their programs.

¹⁷ Pathfinders, “SDG 16 Plus | Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies.,” Pathfinders, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.sdg16.plus>.

¹⁸ Including DPO, Joint-program, UN special representative for Violence Against children, UNWOMEN, EOSG, UNDCO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIDIR, UNOCT, UNODC, UNIDIR, PDAs.

4. Country teams should develop an integrated strategy with specialized sub-strategies

While it would be beneficial to have an ongoing dialogue at headquarters on risk and resilience factors for prevention, indubitably, these factors remain context-specific and therefore they need to be discussed at national and at local level, as well.

At field level, the UN could move more towards an integrated strategy on prevention—where common risk and resilience factors are dealt with jointly—with specialized sub-units on PVE, crime, and armed conflict or even thematic units such as climate. As highlighted by the Pathfinders report, this multisector, multiagency, and integrated responses would increase the effectiveness of prevention approaches, particularly if the strategy is also implemented at local level.

Ideally, this strategy would support national actors' efforts, if they already have an integrated strategy. When it is not the case, a pillar of the Common Country Analysis and then the Cooperation Framework could be on violence prevention. A recent CIC survey to PDAs reveals that some efforts are already underway to better integrate violence prevention under the CCA.

These frameworks should create the space for subsequent more frequent and more detailed violence risk and resilience analysis since the CCA is very broad, seldom reflects local dynamics and is only updated every few years. The UNCT could meet periodically to discuss what risk and resilience factors the different UN entities identify, how they are addressing them, as well as how their programs can complement each other's. Particularly, UNCTs could consider adopting more area-based (or targeted) prevention approaches (see *Figure 1*). The RC office has an important role to play to facilitate coordination among the different violence prevention experts.

Funding will have an important role to play to facilitate integrated approach across prevention agendas. To achieve greater impact, funding should be based on the needs identified in the risk and resilience analysis and enable collaboration, to avoid duplication and prioritize the most needed areas. The PBF is a key tool to facilitate joint programming and the integration of the agendas. For instance in Kyrgyzstan, the PBF funded a Peacebuilding Priority Plan—although mostly focused on the prevention of violent extremism²¹—involving UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, UNODC, UNFPA, and UN OHCHR. Even more importantly, pool funding on SDG 16.1 would be necessary to enable a closer collaboration over the long term.

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Conclusion

Violence remains an urgent challenge that defies simple explanations or solutions—and it touches at the core of the UN’s work across the whole system. The UN already has much of the capacity and knowledge it needs to develop creative and relevant strategies for preventing violence. By shifting incentives and structures to support nationally led and crosscutting/collaborative approaches, the UN can make progress against the secretary-general’s goal for a more preventive approach in all of its work.

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²¹ Peacebuilding Fund, “Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP) | United Nations in Kyrgyz Republic,” United Nations Kyrgyz Republic, accessed May 17, 2021, <https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/31253-peacebuilding-priority-plan-ppp>.