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*Policy Series: Operationalizing the New Agenda for Peace<sup>1</sup>*

## Seven Questions to Consider in Designing, Implementing, and Supporting Effective Nationally Led Violence Prevention Strategies

### About the Author

Céline Monnier is Senior Program Officer with the Center on International Cooperation.

The New Agenda for Peace (NAfP) calls for a shift to focus more attention on national prevention strategies, with a universal and more upstream approach to preventing all forms of violence. This is good news. By calling for all member states to create these strategies, the secretary-general is assuaging member states' fears that prevention may be used to meddle into their internal affairs or that the need for prevention can be stigmatizing. Member states are now in the driver's seat of this agenda. The Summit of the Future in 2024 is an opportunity for member states to recommit to prevention and to request the UN to better support their needs. To be able to do so, it is key to understand what in fact is a national prevention strategy.

**The lack of a common understanding regarding prevention has been a key obstacle to making progress on the agenda.** This has led to the use of the term prevention to describe an overly expansive range of activities. The lack of a common understanding has also fed inaction and has driven disjointed actions, thus resulting in ineffectiveness. The exact definition of prevention should be determined on a case-by-case basis for each country, with a vocabulary relevant to each context (e.g., prevention, social cohesion, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, etc.) respecting sensitivities, culture, and history, rather than a standardized vocabulary. However, it is already possible to identify elements that are necessary for effective violence prevention strategies across countries and regions.

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<sup>1</sup> The objective of this series is to unpack what is necessary to increase buy-in and for the implementation of effective nationally led violence prevention strategies, as recommended by the secretary-general in his New Agenda for Peace. This first policy brief aims to **discuss the requirements to ensure the effectiveness of nationally led violence prevention strategies**. This initial diagnosis is aimed at 1) calling for a greater and joint efforts among academics and the United Nations (UN) system to research and understand what the conditions for effectiveness are, and 2) understanding what national and local actors need to provide a relevant "tailored package" from the UN.

**This policy brief<sup>2</sup> presents seven necessary conditions** for effective national violence prevention strategies:

- political and social will,
- evidence-based approaches,
- disaggregated approaches to groups and geographical regions,
- integrated approach to addressing multiple root causes,
- sustainability,
- flexibility to adapt, and
- violence sensitivity of policies and initiatives.

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Acknowledgement of the necessary conditions for effective prevention by the General Assembly can help the UN better align its policies, practices, and programs to support national prevention efforts

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**Prevention needs to be a system**, rather than a set of isolated projects, to be able to address violence’s multiple root causes and lead to structural and sustainable change. The UN, given its structure, has fragmented the prevention agenda. The implementation of agendas such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to prevention, small arms control, localization of aid, enhancement of the role of civil society, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), the rule of law, and others all contribute to national and local efforts on violence prevention, but it is their integration, rather than their separation, that will achieve the long term and structural changes that are needed.

The upcoming Summit of the Future is an opportunity to [\*\*establish a coherent vision for the role and the relevance of the UN in prevention\*\*](#)—aligning approaches across different parts of the UN system—and to provide tailored-made packages and expertise for “member states seeking to establish or strengthen national infrastructures for peace,”<sup>3</sup> as promised in the NAFp. **Acknowledgement of the necessary conditions for effective prevention by the General Assembly can help the UN better align its policies, practices, and programs to support national prevention efforts.**

Because each context is different, the seven elements are presented as questions that can be used in the design and implementation of national strategies. The questions are universal, but the answers are context specific. These questions can therefore be used as a framework to facilitate conversation in countries and between national actors and the international community on how to strengthen national approaches to prevention.

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<sup>2</sup> The policy brief is based on research on violence and on violence prevention strategies—particularly crime prevention, prevention of violent extremism, and infrastructures for peace—and interviews of experts and practitioners.

<sup>3</sup> Given the focus on “all forms of violence” in the New Agenda for Peace, “infrastructures for peace” should be understood as violence prevention strategies more broadly, rather than solely focused on the prevention of conflict.

## A working definition of violence prevention

Violence prevention can be understood as a political and social commitment from all segments of society to collectively examine the root causes of violence and to address them over time, while strengthening sources of resilience.

This policy brief is intended as a conversation starter in the year leading up to the Summit of the Future. These parameters are probably non-exhaustive, and this framework for prevention should be researched further. In turn, each element has been the object of past research that can be linked more systematically. **This brief is a call for member states to lead on the development of an evidence-based framework for nationally led prevention strategies, and for experts, practitioners, and UN staff to feed into this discussion based on research and past experiences.**

### 1. How will political and social commitment for violence prevention be built and sustained?

No matter how technically sound a strategy is, preventing violence is only possible if there is sufficient will to address its causes. To achieve this commitment, societies—including [all segments of the population](#)—need to feel ownership over the strategy and understand its benefits. Consequently, **building and sustaining political and social commitment for prevention should be a deliberate effort and a component of the prevention strategy.** The Malawi National Peace Policy calls it “[High Level Awareness and Support](#).”

#### *1.2 Social marketing strategies for prevention*

The good news is that many countries across the world see the benefits of prevention, which explains the numerous strategies to prevent violent crime, violent extremism, and violent conflict. Violence prevention strategies **strengthen sovereignty** because they are nationally led in their design and implementation, they foster peaceful coexistence, national unity, and hence the capacity of the state to administer its territory and to prevent foreign powers from exploiting social fractures. Prevention can get politicians more **votes and more support from businesses**, can project a **positive image** of the country internationally, with a government “trying to do the right thing,” and can also **steer—rather than follow—donors’ investments** towards better support for national and local priorities. Even when a consolidated strategy is not in place, elements may exist, be it through isolated projects or local strategies.

This commitment to prevention can, however, be hindered when there is a **lack of understanding** that prevention is an available option, what it entails, and what benefits it brings. This lack of understanding can happen at all levels, from communities to high-level politicians. The reluctance to commit to prevention may also be anchored in **legitimate concerns**, including perceived low risk of conflict, questions about cost, sensitivities, and pressure for short-term results linked to political cycles. All these concerns have been at least partially

## The importance of inclusivity

The UN-WB Pathways for Peace report (P4P) and the 2016 Sustaining Peace resolutions highlight the importance of inclusive approaches to violence prevention. National prevention strategies should be inclusive in their design and in their implementation to ensure that different realities of different groups are reflected in the strategy (Question 3) and to ensure buy-in from all the relevant segments of the population and the government (Question 1). P4P also noted that inclusion is a protective factor against violence.

addressed by research and practice (see Annex on Page 14 for more information). Thus, a **social marketing strategy**<sup>4</sup> targeting all actors relevant to the implementation of the prevention strategy<sup>5</sup> is a critical component of the strategy in order to clarify prevention’s benefits,<sup>6</sup> address legitimate concerns, and sustain commitment over time.

### 1.3 Support for social marketing strategies

At country level, UN country teams (UNCTs)—and in particular, Resident Coordinators (RCs) and Peace and Development Advisers (PDAs)—can support national actors to strengthen commitment for prevention. In particular, they can provide reliable analysis and technical assistance in addition to convening and connecting actors to promote an inclusive approach that ensures buy-in across society.

### **Supporting advocacy for prevention, including by further developing the evidence base of its benefits**

is key to help build a case for prevention. For instance, the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies<sup>7</sup> is currently conducting several country-specific cost-of-violence studies that may serve as a useful model to those looking to strengthen the business case for prevention. The UN can also support in-country capacity—when requested—to undertake a nationally led cost-benefit analysis or to identify possible negative consequences if no action is taken. Strengthening evaluation capacity can also help national actors better understand what works, and in turn build confidence in prevention approaches. The international community can also help celebrate national actors’ achievements in violence prevention. For instance, global network such as [Peace in Our Cities](#) has helped mayors build political clout domestically by spotlighting impactful initiatives and facilitating access for mayors and local leaders to engage in global policy discussions in places such as the UN and the World Bank.

Member states can help **normalize prevention at the international level** by committing, through the Pact for the Future, to adopt evidence-based nationally led prevention strategies on a voluntary basis. Experience has shown that normalizing the use of national mechanisms can help create political buy-in. For instance, the creation of infrastructures for peace in the African continent was partly incentivized by the commitment of African Union member states to establish “national institutions of mechanisms for prevention.”<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> [Social marketing is an approach used to develop activities aimed at changing or maintaining people’s behavior for the benefit of individuals and society as a whole.](#)

<sup>5</sup> Including high-level politicians, senior government technocrats, local leaders, civil society, communities, and businesses.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance: Hope-based communications is a pragmatic approach to winning support for policies and advocacy positions by showing how they will work; “About - Hope-based comms: a strategy for change,” <https://www.hope-based.com/about>.

<sup>7</sup> The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is an initiative of the NYU Center on International Cooperation, and a cross-regional impact hub of member states, as well as partners across international organizations, civil society, and the private sector committed to advancing SDG16+.

<sup>8</sup> “Heads of State and Government First Standing Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), Durban South Africa - Memorandum of Understanding on Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa,” July 8, 2002.

## Evaluation: a necessary tool for prevention

Evaluation of programs is an essential tool for a prevention strategy. Given the context-specific nature of prevention, evaluation should be used to adapt programming. In turn, being able to demonstrate that a program works will also foster political and social commitment.

However, evaluations are still too rare. Some of the reasons invoked are a lack of funding for evaluations, a lack of culture of evaluation, resistance to being evaluated, and a lack of understanding of how to evaluate. In addition, impacts of a project can take a long time to emerge and may not be able to be captured within the implementation timeframe for an individual project. Identifying opportunities to strengthen evaluation is essential to make progress on prevention and should be part of the discussions leading up to the Summit for the Future.

addition, the Pact for the Future can destigmatize the prevention agenda by underlining that, as no society is immune to violence, prevention is universally relevant. Indeed, even in some of the least violent countries in the world such as Switzerland, violence costs billions of dollars a year and account for nearly 5 percent of the GDP. In other words, every country, regardless of region and income-level, stands to substantially benefit from having these prevention strategies in place.<sup>9</sup> The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) can also serve as an important venue for normalization. The presentations by Canada, Colombia, and Norway of their own experiences on [Indigenous peoples, peace, and reconciliation](#) at the PBC meeting on June 19, 2023 is an example of a positive step to destigmatize and normalize prevention.

## 2. How will the strategy be informed by evidence?

The design and implementation of effective prevention strategies depend on a sound diagnosis and effective programming.

### 2.1 Building the evidence base in-country

What differentiates violence prevention from any other activity (e.g., security, development, or human rights work), is that the programming is based on a clear diagnosis of risk and protective factors for violence. A [risk factor](#) is a factor that contributes to the increased likelihood of a person or a group engaging in a violent act and a [protective factors](#) help to build or strengthen the resilience of communities and individuals to risks. Risk factors are often social injustices, but not all social injustices lead to violence. Consequently, **risk and protective factors are often misidentified**. For instance, [poverty is often considered a root cause for violence but is actually loosely correlated with conflict or homicide](#). In fact, wealth inequality is actually far more predictive of violence and, as such, is often the reason for poverty being inadvertently attributed as a driver and underscores the need for thorough analysis. If the risk is misidentified, the programming is unlikely to reduce the risk of violence, which is not to say that interventions are not useful in addressing other important development needs.

Risk and protective factors can be identified through using scientific research on violence (e.g., academic studies showing inequality as a risk factor). In turn, national and local actors should identify what specific risk and protective factors are relevant in their contexts. The diagnosis should then also be undertaken in a **participatory manner**, to make sure that those affected—who know their context best—can shape the strategy. This underscores the need

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<sup>9</sup> Li Li, Anke Hoeffler, and Teresa Artho, “Cost of Violence Study - Switzerland” (New York: Pathfinders, forthcoming report).

## There is no need to prove a counterfactual

An important bottleneck to making progress in prevention is the stubborn belief that a counterfactual cannot be proven. But prevention strategies do not need to be measured against their effect on violence; evaluations can also focus on the evolution of risk and protective factors for violence and explain through a theory of change the impact on peace. For instance, rather than monitoring the increase or decrease in terrorist acts, the prevention strategy can monitor the trend in negative experience with the security sector and in size of a systematically excluded group, both risk factors for violent extremism.

to enlist mayors, community leaders, and civil society organizations as local partners in these efforts. **A diagnosis determined through an inclusive manner is already a prevention effort** because it is the opportunity for all segments of society to collaboratively identify the root causes of violence and how to address them. Diagnoses should be undertaken periodically to reflect changes in circumstances, and the methodology used for diagnoses should be carefully tailored to avoid politicization.

The **risk factors identified can be included in monitoring systems**, such as early warning or violence observatories. In fact, the UN-WB Pathways for Peace report (P4P) called for a shift from early warning of violence to awareness of risk, but this shift has yet to take place. When monitoring is done, it typically tracks violence trends—e.g., homicide rates, communal conflicts, election related violence—rather than risk factors for violence (e.g., increase in basic commodities prices, lack of trust in institutions). As such, current monitoring approaches are often limited in their ability to support efforts to pre-empt the outbreak of violence.

The national strategy should incorporate theories of change to clarify how different **programming** will reduce the risk for violence by addressing risk and protective factors. To decide what programs to use, national actors can draw inspiration from and adapt good practices from other contexts, when transferable. However, effectiveness in one context does not ensure success in others. National actors can also benefit from adopting [participatory action research](#) and [iterative approaches](#) to learn more about what works in their context. **Evaluation is therefore a necessary component of effective programming.** Some countries such as the [United Kingdom](#) and [Canada](#) have developed their own database of evaluations of programs.

### *2.2 Supporting in-country capacity for evidence-based approaches*

For strategies to be truly nationally owned, national actors are the ones that should carry out **research, diagnoses, monitoring, and evaluation.** International partners can play an important role supporting national actors in developing their evidence-based approach. The UN system in particular can adopt a more systemic approach to help national actors build systems for research, data collection, and analysis for prevention, including by supporting partnerships with institutions that might have relevant expertise (e.g., academia). The process of identifying the problem will invariably require detailed studies that have cost implications. The international community is well-positioned to support national actors to undertake these detailed studies, including through assisting with the required financial resources. The UN can also adapt its common country analyses to consider risk and protective factors for violence.



International partners can also provide access to **good practices** in terms of prevention programs. The Inter-American Development Bank for instance launched [the Security and Justice evidence-based platform](#) for prevention programs in Latin America. Other examples include [the Prevention Project](#), which identifies good practices to strengthen state's capacity to deliver on its human rights obligations, and the Pathfinders [Inequality Solutions portal](#); where both of them can help address some specific risk and protective factors for violence.

Peer-to-peer exchange can also be facilitated. For instance, the UN supported a study tour for Gambians to learn from the Ghana Peace Council. PBC members also expressed an interest in this entity playing a stronger role in exchange of experiences. The **UN should also invest in institutional learning** to understand what has worked in supporting national prevention efforts, both within its programs and through the PBC.

### 3. How will different realities across a population and within the territory be reflected in the strategy?

**Countries are not homogenous:** different groups and territories are affected differently by violence. They might even be affected by different types of violence, with [81 percent of overall homicides victims being men](#) while [82 percent of intimate partner homicides are women](#). The same is true for a territory: a country can be affected by different types of violence in different areas (e.g., violent extremism, community conflicts, farmer-herder conflict). Violence is often also concentrated in specific geographical areas. In Mexico, [50.6 percent of all homicides](#) were concentrated in six out of thirty-two states. In addition, programs to address risk factors for violence often need to be tailored to different groups (e.g., ethnic groups, youth). Achieving peace for one part of the society might not be the same as for others. As such, it is critical for **the prevention strategy to be disaggregated** to understand how different groups and territories are affected by different risk factors, and how they can be addressed in a tailored and integrated fashion.

To address the differences in territory, the **importance of local approaches** is well established in the literature. Cities, for instance, are more aware of local dynamics than national governments and can be more responsive to their inhabitants. The city of Medellin, Colombia, managed to [reduce its homicide level](#) from 433 homicides for 100,000 inhabitants in [1991](#) to around 15 in [2021](#), a sharper decline than the national average. The example of Colombia further underscores how approaches vary by local context. The city of Palmira, also in Colombia, achieved a similar drop in homicides by taking a differing approach that focused on [data and targeting of social service and law enforcement efforts](#),

while the city of Cali adopted a [public health approach](#). Certain dynamics might have an uneven impact on different parts of countries, for instance the influence of extractive industries or spillovers of conflict across borders. This underscores again the need to enlist mayors, community leaders, and local peacebuilders both to [identify the needs of their communities and to support the implementation of the strategy at local level](#).

Prevention strategies should identify and work with groups that are more or differently affected by risk factors of being perpetrators, victims of violence, or bystanders. Understanding the risk factors affecting the groups is key, because not all groups will react the same way to the same program. At the same time, strategies should take steps to avoid stigmatizing a specific group or territory, creating more tensions by prioritizing or seeming to prioritize a group or a territory over another. Understanding the linkages between groups is also critical: a strategy focused only on one group (e.g., youth) may miss dynamics and opportunities to create linkages (e.g., between generations) or create resentment from the group who is not part of the approach (e.g., men feeling sidelined by programs focused on women).

National strategies should plan and budget for a disaggregated approach by groups and by territories, with an adequate support from the UN when needed. Such strategies are an opportunity to mainstream considerations from the WPS and YPS agenda, as well as to consider other relevant groups, within a coherent strategy rather than through siloed plans.

#### **4. How will the strategy be integrated to address multiple root causes?**

While some prevention programs are effective by themselves, the most effective efforts [engage multiple stakeholders at all levels in multi-sector, multi-agency, integrated responses](#). This stems from the fact that risk and protective factors are interconnected and can accumulate.

For example, [the former security secretary Cali, Colombia](#), found that creating employment opportunities was not sufficient to disengage young people from armed groups—in contrast to [conventional wisdom](#)—because the absence of employment opportunities was not the only risk factor. Given the level of violence of the neighborhoods they grew up in, many young people preferred opportunities to gain quick money over stable employment because of their incorrect belief that they were likely to die in their twenties or younger. Sensation-seeking, difficulties with anger management, family abuse, and neglect also are risk factors that drove them towards armed groups. In addition, many never had legal employment and were struggling with the basic social skills necessary to take these jobs. Consequently, to disengage those young



people from violent groups, a variety of activities were required **across sectors** including job creation, life skills training, and psychosocial support to create positive family relations and foster optimism regarding future prospects. No single activity would have worked in isolation; it was the combination of all the different efforts that led to results.

A prevention strategy also requires other types of coordination. For instance, **coordinating among different actors** is key; the governments can prevent police abuse of force, the private sector can invest in jobs creation and in social corporate responsibility, civil society can implement psychosocial programs in communities, and academia can support evidence-based approaches, and so on. In particular, prevention and law enforcement should not be considered as contradictory but rather as complementary efforts. **Prevention efforts also need to be aligned across different levels of government.** Cities and communities are critical players in prevention strategies. However, local approaches have limits. Some risk factors can only be addressed at national level (e.g., lack of trust in national institutions) and [a lack of coordination with the national government may reduce the cost-effectiveness](#). In certain cases, national and local governments may even compete, for instance when they are led by different political parties. Different departments and municipalities at the same level might also face similar challenges and may benefit from the **horizontal coordination** that prevention strategies can provide.

Prevention strategies should also consider, in line with the NAFp's vision to reduce all forms of violence, the **synergies between different violence prevention strategies**. Some risk factors for violence are the same, and some forms of violence influence other. Violence against children, for example, is a risk factor for all other forms of violence.<sup>10</sup> [Building state capacity and legitimacy, strengthening institutions, and promoting trust between the state and the society](#) also contributes to preventing all forms of violence. Given the potentially devastating effects of small arms, the [program of action on small arms and light weapons](#) should also be linked to prevention strategies. [Coordinating efforts across different types of violence](#) prevention can therefore help save resources, strengthen the approach, and enable the strategy to adapt if risks for violence change (e.g., from internal conflict to violent extremism).

#### ***4.1 Supporting a holistic approach to prevention***

To increase effectiveness, both national and UN actors should **commit to adopting and supporting more integrated strategies for prevention**

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<sup>10</sup> Research has shown that “[i]n the early years of life, it is critical to prevent violence in the home. Early exposure to violence has been associated with long-term trauma, impacts on brain development, and the development of learned behaviors that use violence to enforce power relations or handle conflict,” Flávia Carbonari, “A Review of the Evidence on a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention,” March 2020, [https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2020-10/6c192f\\_f6036b2b1ecf4fd1a3d7687ff7098a46.pdf](https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2020-10/6c192f_f6036b2b1ecf4fd1a3d7687ff7098a46.pdf).

## Quick wins and long-term change

To address the pressure of short-term results, experience shows that the strategy will benefit from focusing both on [quick wins and long-term change](#). The strategy can for instance combine conflict resolution mechanisms to defuse risks for violence with longer-term change such as governance reforms. Some short-term programs can also produce impressive results. In the US for instance, the focused deterrence approach seeks to modify the behavior of high-rate offenders—who are also often victims—through a combination of a law enforcement, social service and opportunity provision, and community-based action approach, which led for instance to a [63 percent reduction](#) in youth homicide in Boston in the short term. These can be anchored in longer-term strategies to prevent recruitment in the first place.

rather than isolated projects. Such strategies should **build on what exists**. Prevention is like a puzzle. Most countries already address some of the risk factors for violence, whether they call their efforts “prevention” or not<sup>11</sup> and possess protective factors. All of those are pieces of the prevention puzzle. Strategies should identify, assess the effectiveness, strengthen, and build on existing effective prevention approaches—including regional, local, and national structures that contribute to prevention—to avoid creating duplicative systems. Regional and global strategies, in turn, should also be aligned with national strategies to help national actors address exogenous risk factors.

Coordination mechanisms can have different levels of formality. While a formal structure can provide benefits, particularly in terms of sustainability (i.e., institutionalization), in some cases coordination mechanisms [have proven too heavy and bureaucratic](#), have become politicized, or have lacked the necessary influence to draw in the relevant actors. The UN system could draw lessons learnt from its experience supporting Infrastructures for Peace (I4P), crime prevention, and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) strategies to **identify good practices on coordination and facilitate exchange** between relevant actors upon requests. This in turn could help the UN scale up its support to national actors in articulating their efforts as part of the prevention puzzle. UN sustainable development cooperation frameworks could also be used more systematically to support different elements of the national strategy, whether the strategy is formalized or not.

## 5. What conditions need to be in place for the strategy to be sustainable?

**Prevention is a long-term and continuous endeavor** which is not limited to crisis management and to periods of heightened tensions, such as elections. Prevention not only strives to de-escalate tensions, but also to address their root causes, which might take decades or even generations.

Unfortunately, many prevention strategies only last one election cycle, wane at the same time as donor funding, or are only focused on quick fixes. This in turn undermines trust in prevention overall, given that strategies are seldom given the chance to show effectiveness. National actors should be aware of common pitfalls to be able to plan around them. **Institutionalizing** the strategy, **relying on civil servants** who remain across different administrations, working on influencing **organizational culture**, and **building on existing programs and community mechanisms** are all means to enhance sustainability. **Civil society organizations and the private sector** have a

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, [people-centered community-level justice](#) institutions can help address some of the risk factors for violence of violence.

particularly important role to play to ask for continued efforts on prevention across election cycles.

Ensuring **adequate resourcing** is another critical aspect of sustainability. When international donors are involved, they should adopt a do no harm approach by following a series of principles, drawing from policy recommendations on good peacebuilding financing to implement their commitment enshrined in the [2022 resolution on financing for peacebuilding](#). They should pay particular attention to avoiding the development of initiatives that cannot be continued once they leave the country, provide long term funding, and be tolerant to setbacks. The [US Global Fragility Act](#) is a promising example of a ten-year commitment to support specific countries. In addition, donors should avoid the practice of earmarking financial assistance, which [undermines both cost effectiveness and project performance](#). In turn, national actors should consider opportunities to decrease their dependency on donors. For instance, national actors and donors may benefit from starting with a lighter structure that is affordable and sustainable. The private sector can also play an important role through sustained financing, given its often vested interest in seeing the communities they operate be safe, peaceful, and stable.

Ultimately, the strategy should transform into a **culture of prevention** that permeates all parts of society, including the private sector, with the understanding that preventing violence is a long term, ongoing endeavor which may experience setbacks.

## 6. What conditions need to be in place for the strategy to be flexible?

### **Risk and protective factors for violence are not static; they evolve.**

This became particularly clear during the COVID-19 crisis. The knock-on effects of measures to contain the virus (e.g., lockdowns) had a direct impact on risk factors for violence, such as sudden increases in food and commodity prices; the increase in inequality between those who had the possibility to work remotely and those who fell outside of safety nets; or the impact on the social fabric imposed both by forced distance (between households) and forced proximity (within households and neighbors). Prevention programs were often suspended at times when risk factors were increasing. The Russian invasion of Ukraine created further exogenous shocks that have been felt across the globe.

These crises can also create opportunities for national actors to foster peace. For instance, [CIC's research in Colombia](#) showed that in different places during the COVID-19 crisis there were solidarity economy initiatives focused on social benefit instead of financial profit, and the government expanded access to health care. Such efforts can be built upon to mitigate some of the economic

shocks and decrease both economic and healthcare inequality, addressing thereby risk factors for violence.

In addition, because prevention is so multisectoral, progress does not necessarily happen following a schedule and windows of opportunity can open and close at a moment's notice. The types of risk factors for violence can also change, as we are seeing with a shift from risk for violent extremism [from the middle east to the Sahel](#).

Despite the volatility of risk factors, **policy frameworks are often locked into four- or five-year time horizons and unable to adapt**. Such strategies can quickly become unfit for their context. To address these issues, it is important for **strategies to be able to adapt to the change in risks**, including by ensuring that national infrastructures for peace or prevention strategies are risk-driven rather than focused on one type of violence (e.g., armed conflict or violent extremism). In other words, the prevention strategy should use long-term planning but also be able to course-correct within the planning cycle. The UN common country analysis should be used to capture these changes and adapt support from across the UN system accordingly. In addition, the secretary-general could promote violence prevention plans during global crises to be able to adapt country-specific cooperation frameworks to help governments prevent violence when there is a sudden increase or change in risk factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, similar plans were presented to respond to socioeconomic and humanitarian shocks [but not for violence](#).

## Polycrisis: An argument for universality

[A recent report from the Pathfinders](#) found that there are in fact very few countries in the world that escape the reach of at least one crisis today—whether food or fuel shortage, inflation, debt distress, or extreme climate-related events—which if not addressed place societies at greater risk of unrest and violence, supporting the argument that no society is immune to violence and that prevention should be undertaken by all at all times.

## 7. What means does the strategy need to ensure that all public policies are violence sensitive?

**The prevention strategy is only strong if other policies are supporting rather than undermining it.** For instance, a prevention strategy can be undermined if a discriminatory law is adopted, and responses to external shocks—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—can inadvertently increase risk factors for violence.

A violence prevention strategy should, therefore, **have a means of advising the government** to make sure policies reinforce prevention efforts or at least avoid exacerbating existing risk factors for violence. For instance, the Malawi Peace Policy “[seeks to promote the formulation of policies \[...\] that are conflict sensitive to avoid \[...\] violent conflicts](#).” Regulatory frameworks should incentivize businesses to contribute to or at least not hinder efforts towards peace. This approach is often called “conflict sensitivity” or “do no harm.” It might be more accurately termed “violence” or “risk sensitivity.”

Prevention strategies seldom incorporate violence sensitivity mechanisms. The UN system can help, first by **making available resources on violence sensitivity for national actors**<sup>12</sup> and provide catalytic seed funding to train national actors<sup>13</sup> upon request. During a crisis, violence prevention efforts may be sidelined because there is a delay between when risk factors are increasing and when violence actually happens. The UN, including through intergovernmental bodies such as the PBC and the Security Council as well as at the country level through UN country teams, has an important role to play to [sound the alarm](#) when they see that risk factors for violence may increase due to crisis-driven external shocks. [The Open Debate of the Security Council on Pandemic and Challenges for Sustaining Peace](#) is one such example.

## Conclusion: Recommendations ahead of the Summit of the Future

The Summit of the Future is an opportunity for member states to recommit to prevention, making sure that national and local actors are in the lead and receive the support they need. To conclude, we make these following three recommendations:

- I. ***Member states should commit to adopting effective violence prevention strategies.*** Prevention of violent conflict needs to be nationally led to be effective. Only national actors—all segments of society, as acknowledged in the 2016 sustaining peace resolution—can strengthen their social contract and address deep-seated grievances before violent conflicts erupt. The Pact for the Future is an opportunity for the UN General Assembly to agree on principles for effective prevention strategies and request the UN to adapt its policies and procedures to better support national actors in the design and implementation of such strategies, upon request, in a way that meets their needs, and ensures national and local leadership and ownership. The crime prevention field has already develop such a guidelines in the [Annex of ECOSOC resolution 2002/13](#) (p. 2-9), which can be used as an example to build upon.
- II. ***Produce evidence-based guidelines for effective nationally led prevention strategies.*** In the year leading up to the Summit of the Future, experts—including through the [Academic Council on the United Nations System](#)—could support member states by developing a body of

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<sup>12</sup> However, UN tools for conflict sensitivity might need to be updated first. Despite the fact that violence prevention is a primary responsibility of national actors, all [the UN guidance tend to focus on conflict-sensitivity for the UN](#), rather than the role of national actors.

<sup>13</sup> In certain cases, UNCTs have drawn attention to the impact of national responses to COVID-19 on peace. In addition, the Joint Program provides catalytic seed funding (up to 50,000 USD) to PDAs to work with the Resident Coordinator, UNDP, and UNCT teams to support conflict prevention, that can include a training budget for national actors on conflict sensitivity.

key considerations for effective violence prevention approaches, based on research and experience. In addition, the UN can invest in documenting institutional learning on what has worked in supporting national violence prevention strategies, across different entities, funds, and programs (e.g., UNDPPA, UNDP, WHO, UNOCT, UNODC, UNICEF, etc.) as well as intergovernmental bodies, including the Peacebuilding Commission. The UN should also identify its gaps in terms of providing support on prevention and seek to increase its expertise when necessary, including on risk and protective factors for violence.

**III. *The UN should improve its support to member states for national prevention strategies based on the review of evidence.*** The review of evidence on effective support for national prevention strategy should shape the NAFP's promised tailor-made packages of support and expertise to member states seeking to establish or strengthen national infrastructures for peace. The support should be a whole-of-system package, to reflect that prevention is a system, rather than a set of isolated projects. In-country, the CCA can be used to analyze what parts of the prevention puzzle national actors already possess, and the UNSDCF to support and complement existing efforts. The review can also help the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) better support national strategies and donors align their support with national actors' needs.

## Annex: Addressing legitimate concerns

### *Why is investment in prevention important when the risk of violent conflict is low?*

A change in narrative on prevention is required to remove the perceived stigma. First, an overwhelming [majority of violent deaths occurs outside of conflict zones](#). No society is immune to violence. Even in highly stable countries with overall low violence rates, the violence that does occur can still have tangible [costs of billions of dollars](#). [Effective prevention is integral to any healthy society](#). The susceptibility to exogenous shocks (e.g., the knock-on effects of the COVID-19 crisis or of the war in Ukraine), for example, can bring to the surface issues that pose risk to violence in all countries. [A recent report from the Pathfinders](#) found that there are in fact very few countries in the world that escape the reach of at least one crisis today—whether food or fuel shortage, inflation, debt distress, or extreme climate-related events—which if not addressed place societies at greater risk of unrest and violence.

### *How can prevention be made cost effective?*

An important bottleneck to making progress in prevention is the stubborn belief that a counterfactual cannot be proven. But prevention strategies do not necessarily need to be measured against their effect on violence; evaluations can also focus on the evolution of risk factors for violence and explain through a theory of change the impact on peace. Rather than monitoring the increase or decrease in terrorist acts, the prevention system can monitor the trend in negative experience with the security sector and in size of a systematically excluded group. In addition, developing a methodology to help countries and cities measure the cost effectiveness of their prevention strategy—building on P4P business case for prevention—is critical.

### *How to invest in prevention when resources are scarce?*

Because prevention draws from different fields (e.g., reducing inequalities, reinforcing access to justice), it is often possible to find links between existing priorities and risk factors for violence (e.g., use service delivery as a trust building mechanism). Additional cost of prevention is minimal because it almost always is linked to other sectoral issues with positive effects. Another opportunity would be to emphasize the most cost-effective investments. For example, institutional reform and expansion of formal justice institutions are expensive no matter the context, but investing in [local community-based](#) justice initiatives that focus on dispute resolution and legal aid to mediate familial or intra-community disputes requires fewer resources. Finally, the most effective prevention strategies enlist actors from across government, private sector, etc. and thereby bring additional resources to the table.

### *How can the pressure of delivering quick results be addressed?*

Risk factors may take decades to address. Review of successful practices suggest that it is important to [combine quick wins with long term change](#) (structural changes). Interviewees also highlighted the importance of showing the potential negative effects of quick fixes, such as using militarization as prevention mean. Indeed, researchers have found that “[d]espite the superficial appeal of punitive populism, or “war on crime” rhetoric and policies, evidence indicates that the [militarization of policing in fact increases violence and further erodes public trust.](#)” This also underscores the importance of communication and building political will for prevention discussed earlier in this paper.

### *How can the sensitivity of acknowledging mistakes be dealt with?*

All societies—even the healthiest ones—have risk factors for violence. A sensitive aspect to prevention is that it often entails acknowledging contributing to these risk factors. This is also true for the government, which willingly or unwillingly is likely to be contributing to risk factors for violence (e.g., actions that undermine the trust of citizens) and will need to acknowledge and redress these actions. Opportunities to address this challenge should be



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discussed. One of them is, for instance, to address these problems upstream, by creating conditions that will ensure that the government will strengthen protective factors deliberately.<sup>14</sup> Another opportunity, as highlighted in Pathways for Peace, is to use transitions. For instance, the transitional justice process in the Gambia, after 22-year of dictatorship, led to the conclusion that responsibility for the widespread violations of human rights did not rest only with individuals, but with the whole system. The transitional justice process was committed to addressing these issues. Another approach is to use data to highlight the negative consequences that a government might face if they do not address the risk factors<sup>15</sup>. In other contexts, the prevention strategy—for instance an infrastructure for peace—might be independent from the government, similar to a guarantor institution.

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**Center on International  
Cooperation**  
777 United Nations Plaza, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10017

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, the [Prevention Project](#)—which focuses on preventing massive human rights abuses—proposes a framework that identifies a menu of actions to ensure the conditions conducive to the respect of human rights. This can help preventing violence, as respect for human rights is a protective factor for violence.

<sup>15</sup> An approach taken by for instance by ECOWAS and its related National Early Warning and Response Mechanism Coordination Centers.