

5 Lessons on Conflict Prevention

Prepared by Lisa Schirch, Director of Human Security, Alliance for Peacebuilding
September 10, 2013
Congressional Briefing
540-383-4859 or lisas@allianceforpeacebuilding.org

Conflict prevention includes a wide range of efforts by diverse actors in government and civil society to address both the immediate and root causes of potentially violent conflicts. Conflict prevention can take place at the local, regional, or national levels before conflict becomes violent. These preventive diplomatic, economic, social, legal, and security sector reform programs address potential sources of instability and violence. Like an immunization, they build up resilience and resistance to the viral spread of violence.

In Somalia, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) facilitate the formation of local water management boards that help competing tribes manage scarce water supplies to help prevent violent clashes. In Kenya, the National Council of Churches uses a strategic communication campaign on billboards and radio shows before an election to urge voters to refrain from electoral violence. In countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, and the US, local Christian and Muslim religious leaders hold public dialogues to build relationships and commitment that these leaders would join together to make public statements condemning inter-religious violence in the event of a crisis.

Intentional programs to prevent violent conflict over the past two to three decades are beginning to produce initial lessons learned. Many of these programs were “pilot” or exploratory. As with stabilization and other complex operations efforts with similarly short histories, there are few comprehensive research efforts that establish quantitative and qualitative descriptions of conflict prevention impacts. This chapter provides a short summary of five lessons on conflict prevention from global efforts.

1. Whole of Society and Comprehensive Approach to Conflict Prevention

Most of the conflict prevention efforts over the past three decades were one-off programs lacking coordination of different efforts over time. Conflict prevention requires a diverse set of government, military, and civil society stakeholders to harmonize their efforts by building infrastructure for communication and coordination. The U.S. and other countries invest in building institutional capacity for interagency coordination for a more coherent whole-of-government approach. Yet a truly comprehensive approach would require an infrastructure to enable “whole of society” conflict-prevention efforts.

2. Conflict Assessment for Conflict Prevention

Tensions between operational and structural approaches to conflict prevention stem from divergent conflict assessments. Conflict assessment shapes all conflict prevention strategy. Mistakes or untested assumptions about what is driving conflict lead to ineffective conflict prevention efforts. Creating a successful conflict-prevention effort, program, or policy requires thorough assessment of the context, the conflict, needs on the ground, and the capacity that exists locally and internationally to address the challenges.

Mainstream media often provide simple “cause-effect” analyses of conflicts with “good guys” trying to kill the “bad guys” to stop the conflict. A more complex “systems approach” recognizes that a simple identification and removal of an “enemy” is unlikely to change the dynamics of a conflict if underlying driving factors still remain. Rather, a systems approach to conflict looks at interrelated causes and effects and the interplay between groups.

3. Operational versus Structural Approaches to Conflict Prevention

Examples of successful whole of society conflict prevention are few and far between. Far more frequently, civil society and governments are in conflict over their basic understanding of the factors driving conflict. There are tensions and differences between CSOs and the U.S. government including the military that center on how they define and pursue security. Although civil society organizations and governments all see the need for stability and security, their definitions and approaches differ. When asked “conflict prevention for whom and for what purpose?” their perceptions diverge. A whole-of-society comprehensive approach requires first getting agreement on the goals of conflict prevention and stability missions. Civil society groups more often view conflict prevention as requiring long-term structural changes while governments tend to view conflict-prevention as a matter of mere short-term operational programming that can produce immediate results on specific drivers of conflict.

For example, in Kenya, where electoral violence threatens to destabilize the country and region, civil society groups are more likely than government actors to call for radical redistribution of land and government restructuring to reduce corruption and ethnic favoritism. But donor governments are more likely to see the problem of ethnic and electoral violence in Kenya as a law-and-order problem resulting from a youth bulge or ethnic tensions. Government programs then may target young men with job creation or educational opportunities or fund inter-ethnic tribal dialogues.

4. Specialized Negotiation & Mediation Skills for Conflict Prevention

U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced in December 2010 with the Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy Review that conflict prevention would become a central focus of U.S. policy. Yet decades worth of research on principled and interest-based negotiation have not yet made it into the skill sets of most career diplomats who are not required to update their training with this type of research-based skill. Conflict prevention is not just normal diplomacy. Too many failed diplomatic efforts rely on mid-level diplomats without comparative experience in successful preventive diplomacy. Too often, diplomats use coercive bargaining to battle and seek compromises on the positions of armed groups or foreign governments. Conflict prevention requires highly specialized skill sets to identify underlying interests of all stakeholders and facilitate processes for addressing legitimate grievances through preventive diplomacy.

5. Integrated Program Design and Conflict-Prevention Funding Pools

Both governments and civil society recognize that conflict prevention works best when it integrates programming building bridges between sectoral silos to address conflict drivers. Conflict prevention requires innovative design of programs to ensure that education, health, development, agriculture, and other sectors integrate conflict sensitivity and prevention into their planning. The U.S. so-called section 1207 funds incentivize interagency collaboration and shared assessment to jointly plan and implement conflict-prevention and stabilization activities. Make organizational cultures and planning processes made interagency efforts difficult and stymie true collaboration. Integrated planning is possible and can, in fact, save money by building in a conflict-sensitive approach to current programming, doubling the impact of a programming dollar. Lessons to better incentivize and plan integrated programming require more research.