



16 Preventing Violence

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“The more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war.”

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Violence prevention has become an integral element of almost every peacebuilding document, placing it high on the international agenda. In the context of conflict transformation, violence includes much more than the use of physical force by persons to commit destructive acts against others’ physical or psychological integrity or property. Structural conditions such as unjust and oppressive political systems, social inequality or malnutrition, as well as their cultural or ideological justifications, are further, often overlooked, major sources of violence and war (see also → Addressing Social Grievances). Since violence is caused by multiple factors, prevention measures should not focus

VIOLENCE PREVENTION | acknowledges the issues at stake in conflict, yet implements short-term to long-term measures offering alternatives to direct, structural and cultural violence and limiting the use of force, often in places seen as particularly vulnerable. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding strive to integrate a preventative mindset already in the early stages of conflicts and highlight the important role of educating for non-violence.

merely on the perpetrator and the victim of violence but involve the whole environment affecting them – the relevant causes and drivers, the systemic connections as well as the sometimes hidden implications.

Dimensions of violence prevention: an array of approaches

Conflict may be a necessary – even formative – part of human existence, but we can avoid conflict turning into violence. With violence understood in a broad sense, the task of violence prevention necessarily becomes multi-faceted, involving many fields and actors. While prevention should ideally be undertaken proactively and early on, attention often only focuses on a conflict after violence has occurred. For example, peacebuilding efforts in post-war settings often prioritise prevention, in order to counter or pre-empt a renewed outbreak of fighting, or to safeguard sensitive de-escalation processes during transition phases. Typical tools and methods include early warning, confidence- and security-building measures, preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping, and peace education.

The prevention of violence is a key responsibility of any nation-state, for it bears the exclusive right to the legitimate use of force within its borders. It is the responsibility of states and their authorities to provide all necessary legislation, institutions and strategies to prevent violent attacks on any of their citizens.

States also need to deal with root causes of violence (such as discrimination and other grievances). However, state action alone is rarely enough. Often, a state's citizens or (international) social movements must become active in raising public awareness and advocating a need for change. One example is the anti-gun protests after the Florida school massacre in 2018: #Neveragain, #Onemillionmarch. State authorities remain slow to act on more restrictive gun laws in the US, however.

Preventing direct violence (domestic and international)

≡ *(Legitimate) law enforcement* describes the basic role, usually of police and other security personnel, in preventing (further) violence. Yet this strand of prevention carries a risk of excessively heavy-handed tactics and responses, especially in repressive regimes, which counter-productively may cause further grievances and even violence. In every case, a community needs to strike a balance between its need for security and the rights of its citizens.

≡ *Curbing the means of violence*: Research suggests that more guns do not contribute to more security and peace, but may lead to more fatal incidents and increase the risks of violent conflict. Locally, there are movements to restrict private gun use. Nationally, there are campaigns aiming to reduce the availability of small arms. Globally, there are efforts to strengthen international organisations and regimes to prevent further arms races, proliferation and weapons transfers to conflict zones.

Background knowledge ...

Prevention happens at different stages. Primary violence or conflict prevention targets anybody, whereas secondary prevention strategies focus on conflict and violence potential within a particular group or individual. Tertiary prevention targets people who are radicalised or who have been involved in violent actions (→ Working on Conflict Dynamics).

≡ *Strengthening legislation:* Most acts of violence are crimes that are liable to prosecution as retribution and deterrence. Much progress has been made under domestic and international framework conventions (e.g. concerning children's rights, increasing criminalisation of sexual violence, and in the burgeoning area of → Dealing with the Past and Transitional Justice). Yet many acts of violence are still legal under international humanitarian law (e.g. the killing of combatants) and the protection of civilians in modern warfare remains inadequate.

Preventing structural and cultural violence

Beyond dealing with the symptoms, it is important to address the root causes that may lead to violent behaviour. Improving socio-economic conditions, fostering human rights and partici-

For example ...

In recent years, an additional area of violence prevention has been discussed widely: **preventing violent extremism**. Violent extremism describes a current form of seemingly uncompromising political violence. Although it is today usually associated with certain religious groups, it is by no means confined to one group, religion or region, and it is certainly not new. Those now justifying violence 'in the name of ...' as legitimate action see themselves as oppressed by structural/cultural violence (e.g. military interventions, political-cultural-economic dominance of 'the West' or 'the impertinence' of liberal societies). In that ideological rhetoric, fighting 'evil' without compromise is the only way, even if this may involve brutal acts against civilians. In several research projects, teams at the Berghof Foundation are currently exploring whether and how (more) effective prevention of violent extremism can be achieved by focusing on local experiences and group processes of mobilisation and demobilisation (see also → Working on Conflict Dynamics).

pation, development and livelihood are the baseline for violence prevention (→ Fostering Human Security). However, attitudes and values also need to change.

≡ *Diminishing acceptance of violence and promoting a 'culture of peace'*: In many settings, violence is encouraged by the silence of the majority or unquestioned norms. For example, 'school yard violence', such as bullying, is often present in a social setting where perpetrators feel unchallenged in inflicting harm on someone they consider weaker and not worthy of being part of a core group. Besides the perpetrator(s) and a victim, there are other pupils and maybe even teachers who do not intervene. Due to their behaviour, their lack of action, the situation may continue. In such a setting, peace education can be a relevant form of prevention, especially if raising awareness is combined with pointing out alternative actions.

≡ *Promoting 'good examples' of nonviolent action*: On an individual and collective level, highlighting alternative ways of protest and resistance for change is essential (there are many more examples than Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King). "Peace Counts on Tour", for instance, is an exhibition supported by the Berghof Foundation in cooperation with media reporters who go to conflict zones to highlight the work of successful contemporary peacebuilders. The pictures and stories collected are used to spread positive examples or models of how to build peace and prevent or counteract violence locally.

≡ *Resilience and mobilisation against the 'logic of violence'*: In an environment of escalating conflict, there may be a fierce struggle between violence-promoting 'extremists' and those insisting on peaceful strategies. However, the logic of violent struggle can also be challenged from within a community. As violent groups often claim to act on behalf of marginalised communities, they rely on the acceptance of their actions by (at least sections of) their community. The dissolution of the Basque ETA and its disarmament by civil society actors in 2017 show that groups that

used to rely on violent tactics may eventually adapt their strategy due to a loss of public support, moving instead to non-violent action. The #MeToo movement highlights another area in which social mobilisation openly challenged long-ingrained patterns of (socially tolerated) sexual violence.

Strengthening norms and institutions

Another important aim for successful prevention of violence is to strengthen norms, mobilise political support for prevention and develop institutional capacities.

≡ *Operationalising norms:* Public debate influences the perception of norms, which may change over time. Public awareness of sexual violence, for example, has increased tremendously over recent years. While rape has been used as a weapon and war tactic for centuries, UN Resolution 1820, codifying a normative shift, finally recognised this practice as a war crime in 2016.

≡ *Developing structures and capacities:* Effective structures of violence prevention have to involve all actors (potential perpetrators, victims and bystanders), persons of influence (informal or formal) and relevant institutions. As violence is often the result of dysfunctional power relations, prevention strategies may first have to improve the flexibility of the (political) system so it is more able to cope with demands and grievances and accommodate change. In a war-torn society, this may involve political reforms to enhance power sharing, participation and inclusion (→ Mediation and Mediation Support; → Participation and Inclusivity), as well as initiating necessary social or economic reforms.

Violence prevention as a joint effort in need of mobilisation

In sum, prevention of violence is a political responsibility as well as a social challenge. Rules and regulations can help to set normative frameworks and create pressure, but social mobilisation remains necessary to control the use of power, whether in political, cultural or social settings. The prevention of violence depends on social awareness, capacity building, adoption of new

norms and attitudes, including incentivising non-violence from an early age, and calling attention to system(at)ic violent abuse. It also continues to depend on the willingness and capacity of actors at all levels to close the gap between early warning and action.

References and Further Reading

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