



Human security and conflict prevention

HUMAN SECURITY RESEARCH AND OUTREACH PROGRAM



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Preface

This Fast Talk Team report draws upon the findings of an expert consultative process conducted by the Human Security Research and Outreach Program, supported by the Human Security Policy Division (GHS), and the Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Group (IRC) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). The Fast Talk Team concept was developed to provide DFAIT with a timely and flexible means to access high quality policy-relevant research with the objective of:

- generating perspectives on new or emerging issues;
- refreshing thinking on existing issues; or
- enhancing the effectiveness of conferences and workshops by developing a pre-conference dialogue which helps to frame issues, focus discussion, and build expert consensus.

Fast Talk Teams bring together officials seeking policy development input with prominent Canadian and international experts through a three-stage consultation process that can be completed in a time frame as short as 1-2 weeks. First, 4-6 experts are identified and asked to provide short 3-5 page written responses by e-mail to specific policy questions developed by DFAIT officials. Secondly, the officials and experts review the responses and participate in a 2-3 hour conference call to discuss them. Finally, a report summarizing the key findings of the written submissions and the conference call discussion is provided to all Fast Talk Team members for final comment and then circulated to officials.

The purpose of Fast Talk Teams is to generate policy-relevant research. They do not attempt to establish new policies for DFAIT or the Government of Canada. **Thus, the views and positions provided by this paper are solely those of the contributors to this research project and are not intended to reflect the views and positions of DFAIT or the Government of Canada.**

The Human Security Policy Division would like to thank the Fast Talk Team leader, Frédéric M-Deschênes, DFAIT colleagues, and the expert participants for their contributions to this Fast Talk Team effort.

Expert participants

Five experts and one organization participated in the March 2006 Fast Talk:

Mary Kaldor

Director, Centre for the Study of Global Governance
London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)

Tim Murithi

Senior Researcher, Policy Development and Research
Centre for Conflict Resolution (South Africa)

John Packer

Principal Investigator and Project Coordinator
Initiative on Conflict Prevention through Quiet Diplomacy (Canada)

David Petrsek

Policy Director
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Switzerland)

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Senior Research Fellow
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Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee

Conflict Prevention Working Group (Canada)

Executive summary

The Human Security Policy Division (GHS) and the Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Group (IRC) at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) conducted a Fast Talk in March 2006 asking experts to provide insights into current thinking about approaches to conflict prevention, emerging issues, and knowledge gaps in the field.

Conflict prevention entails proactive measures intended to forestall the emergence (or re-emergence) of conflict, aimed at both the immediate and structural causes of violence within divided societies and fragile states. Since the mid-1990s, the theme has become an increasingly urgent priority for the international community, particularly in multilateral fora such as the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and more recently the Francophonie (OIF).

Canada was actively involved in facilitating the negotiations on the 2003 UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution on Conflict Prevention, as one of 10 countries invited by the UNGA President to play this role. Conflict prevention was also a priority during Canada's 1999-2000 term on the UN Security Council. Canada is now co-chairing a Ministerial-level process to explore the inclusion of human security and conflict prevention within the framework of the Francophonie, building on the organization's 2000 Bamako Declaration.

Fast Talk results

On **theory vs. practice**, respondents noted that a focus on escalating situations or early prevention is still not a reality within the international community. However, the assumption of a significant gap between the international community's aspirations and reality may not be that obvious. The challenge may be to refine the application of the tools the international community possesses and ensure they are applied more systematically. The international community may also be lacking a sufficient normative framework to assess the legality or even legitimacy of intra-state conflict.

On **good offices and mediation**, experts welcomed Canada's upcoming involvement. Canada should get involved in opportunities where its presence would be welcomed and where it could feasibly provide the most

value-added. Early involvement, before disputes escalate and when the parties are likely to be more receptive, is highly desirable.

However, in developing a niche, Canada should be aware of the risk that mediation among people attempting to construct exclusivist political positions can feed into and exacerbate conflict. It is also crucial that Canada be aware of the basic conditions of involvement in such a political activity. These include the need for clear, strong, and sustained buy-in at the Ministerial or executive levels, and cross-party support; confidentiality; the need for generous and flexible resources; and, continued parallel support of multilateral institutions.

On **normative gaps**, the foremost issues that Canada should address are those of constructive engagement and cooperation among non-state, state, and intergovernmental actors. With some parties to conflict continuing to shrug off international pressure, and with some conflicts seemingly impervious to negotiated solutions, there might also be a need for a new template and tools to replace those of the UN in dealing with conflicts where the organization is unlikely to be permitted a role.

On **new conflict actors**, respondents identified non-state actors as being inappropriately overlooked. Experts called for reflection on how the international community can engage with non-state actors, and the effects of global social and economic development and the lack of institutions constituting recourses for grievances on their contribution to conflict prevention.

The growing importance of **China** and **India** as global actors and how to best encourage their engagement to prevent or resolve conflict was also mentioned.

Finally, on **civil society**, participants agreed that it can play a central role in monitoring, advocating, and developing thinking relating to conflict prevention. As such, civil society linkages to regional and sub-regional intergovernmental mechanisms for conflict prevention should be made possible by means of institutional arrangements that go beyond *ad hoc* consultations.

Final report

This final report is the summary of the key ideas raised both in the written submissions of the expert participants, and in the subsequent conference call.

Theory vs. practice in the prevention of conflict

Given that there remains a significant distance between theory and practice in the prevention of conflict – between the norms adopted by various states and organizations and the realities faced within and between particular states – what are some of the critical steps needed at this stage to enhance national and regional capacity to prevent conflict?

Efforts to prevent and end armed conflict have had considerable success over the past several years. The current number of armed conflicts is, by some counts, at its lowest point in years. Hence, the assumption of a significant gap between the international community's aspirations and reality may not be that obvious. The challenge may be to refine the application of the tools the international community possesses and ensure they are applied more systematically. Refining these tools means, among other things, tailoring them to specific situations, and addressing concerns by states, especially in the South, through more acceptable cooperative and assistance-oriented approaches. Nevertheless, it may also be argued that the war on terror is taking the international community backward in this regard.

The premise that there exist norms for conflict prevention can also be questioned. There are few international rules governing the resort to force by sovereign states within their own territory or by insurgents against their own state. While human rights rules, including guarantees of minority rights and self-determination, do exist, the international community may actually be lacking a sufficient normative framework to assess the legality or even legitimacy of intra-state conflict beyond the right to resist racist regimes. Nevertheless, as one expert commented:

At the normative level, the UN Charter regime and, more so, the post-Cold War era, have featured a continually thickening corpus of international law and other norms (notably political commitments to democratic governance) both at the international level and at the level of incorporation into domestic law and practice.

If one accepts that, indeed, there remains a significant gap between conflict prevention theory and practice, several such shortcomings come to mind, including the capacity of regional and sub-regional organizations for early warning (i.e. good and impartial analysis) and response, negotiation, and mediation; the need for research on root and structural causes of conflict and the means to their alleviation; the lack of political will and the need for clear, coherent, and consistent political engagement; and, the need to clarify and implement the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norms that were endorsed at the 2005 UN World Summit. This latter gap could be partially addressed by strengthening follow-up and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance to internationally-agreed instruments and UN Security Council resolutions.

Another central requirement is addressing international policy coherence (or the lack thereof) and cooperation between non-state, state, and inter-state institutions and actors, or, as one expert put it:

... the challenge of ensuring that humanitarian efforts are not undercut by political negotiations, that development policy is not at odds with human rights efforts, and that all are not made irrelevant by trade and economic agendas.

The international community should also sustain efforts with respect to "mainstreaming prevention in non-governmental, governmental and intergovernmental decision making and policy making processes, and project and program planning work." In this regard, Canada could show the way by prioritizing early responses within its conflict prevention policy. As such, Canada should establish "a Conflict Prevention Task Force parallel to the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) to focus on pre-conflict situations." Focus on escalating situations or early prevention is still not a reality within the international community, or as one expert underlined:

There remains in all of contemporary international relations a sole institution dedicated (only) to the prevention of conflict – the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities.

Another area of concern is the North-South divide on the issue of prevention. Genuine partnerships and support for programs at Southern research institutions and universities and the establishment of global monitoring mechanisms that would facilitate, among other things, inter-state cooperation in early warning and prevention are desirable.

Good offices and mediation

If Canadian engagement were to focus more of its efforts on good offices and developing an indigenous international mediation capacity, what kinds of engagement on Canada's part would be most useful (including principles and criteria for decision making)? Where do you see Canada as potentially having some comparative advantage or value-added role to play?

It is suitable for Canada to get involved in mediation. Canada can engage as an honest, impartial, reliable, credible, and trustworthy actor. Its bilingualism and "rich social capital", including its diaspora communities, are definitive assets.

Canada should get involved in opportunities where its presence would be welcomed and where it could do the most. This would allow Canada to build its credibility. It should particularly engage in building the capacities of parties in negotiation, dialogue and mediation, process development and related research, and "quiet diplomacy." It could also work to enhance international indigenous mediation capacities. Early involvement, before disputes escalate and when the parties are likely to be more receptive, is highly desirable.

The other (nonexclusive) option for Canada is to involve itself in the operationalization of the proposed Mediation Support Unit and the appointment of a Special Representative for Mediation within the UN, hence, strengthening multilateral capacity to mediate conflict.

What are the key issues/elements we should be aware of in developing a Canadian niche in this respect, and how should Canada define and develop its capacities in this area?

While developing a niche, Canada should be aware of the changing nature of conflicts and not presuppose an old-fashioned view of conflict where, as one participant put it:

... there are two sides who disagree or who have conflicts of interest and these need to be resolved in order to prevent violence. In fact, disagreement, conflicts of interest, or divisive sectarian identities are often constructed through conflict as a way of gaining access to power or wealth, or both, in societies characterized by weak institutions, joblessness, criminality, and gender inequality ... There is a risk that mediation among people attempting to construct exclusivist political positions can feed into and exacerbate conflict.

Nonetheless, mediation remains a useful tool in the conflict prevention toolbox due to its ability to stimulate dialogue between groups and serve as a potential breeding ground for new ways to resolve a conflict.

It is also advisable to recognize that any agreement reached is a temporary political settlement. This process needs to be inclusive and involve diverse groups, especially civil society actors and women, in order to achieve simple, workable agreements which avoid entrenching the interests of the conflictual parties, and builds an inclusive political culture. As one participant put it, "strengthening those constituencies in societies who refuse exclusive identities and offer alternative political ideas." The promotion of inclusive peace processes is another area where Canada could get involved.

Canada needs to consult other countries interested in building such a capacity, or which have experience in the field, and cooperate with them. One expert suggested that Canada lead a process or campaign calling for:

All countries that are searching for similar niches [...] to sit together, analyze, and fully comprehend the global needs for good offices and international mediation; make a sincere assessment of each other's capacities and comparative advantages; and then divide up the labour accordingly.

It is also crucial that Canada be aware of the basic conditions of involvement in such a political activity. These include the need for clear, strong, and sustained buy-in at the Ministerial or executive levels, and cross-party support; confidentiality; the need for generous and flexible resources; and, continued parallel support of multilateral institutions.

Normative gaps in the conflict prevention framework

Are there particular thematic, cross-cutting issues that Canada could address which would help to fill important normative gaps in the conflict prevention framework?

The foremost issues that Canada should address are those of constructive engagement and cooperation among non-state, state and intergovernmental actors. It is also important to tackle the problem of commitment and sustainable political interest, notably, by outlining and better understanding processes that influence and generate policy. Furthermore, Canada could be influential in promoting human security and a

common set of norms around the concept, as well as implementing its principles.

At the UN, efforts are required to strengthen the *Inter-Department Framework for Coordination on Early Warning and Preventive Action*, and to establish a relevant Peacebuilding Commission, especially to do preventive work. Interestingly, there remain a number of conflicts with parties shrugging off international pressure, and impervious to negotiated solutions, which might also create the need for a new template and tools to replace those of the UN in dealing with conflicts where the organization is unlikely to be permitted a role (e.g. developing the role of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)).

Several other pressing issues require attention, such as "suffering and life-threatening vulnerabilities"; HIV/AIDS as an instrument of war; the need for R2P use-of-force criteria; inter-ethnic relations; migration; organized crime; and, "restless young men." Specific exploration is needed regarding the place of impartiality in peace and conflict management and the challenges arising from working with – and within – fragile states, a highly controversial category.

The approach to development also needs to be re-conceptualized in a more bottom-up fashion, "that focuses on institution building, sustainable job creation, and gender equality," and that is sensitive to conflict (e.g. with respect to governance).

New conflict actors

Are there new conflict actors to which Canada and others should be paying particular attention? Are the actions of non-state and trans-national actors sufficiently addressed by current approaches to conflict prevention?

The role of non-state actors and their corollaries, such as the linkage between crime and conflict, are inappropriately overlooked. These actors are of growing importance in conflict situations and it is urgent to reflect on how the international community can engage with them. The potential use of diplomatic and economic tools now used to influence state actors should be studied, as well as the strategic and tactical directions of these groups, and differences in internal organizations.

However, non-state actors should not only be understood as conflict actors. It is worthwhile to explore the effects of global social and economic development on their needs as political actors, and how the lack of institutions constituting recourse for grievances can influence how they contribute to conflict prevention (including in terms of transitional justice). Also, civil society institutions like universities have an important, and often overlooked, role to play in their community, such as mapping and reporting on human security regionally and locally, and developing and researching conflict indicators.

Growing global actors China and India are also overlooked in the context of conflict prevention. Their growing power and investments worldwide might represent an opportunity. The clout and influence they carry with regard to certain conflicts could potentially be influential in bringing parties to the table and moderating their positions.

The role of civil society in preventing conflict

What role does civil society have to play in preventing conflict? What types of mechanisms and structures of interaction can best ensure communication between civil society organizations (CSOs) and decision makers, particularly those in regional and international organizations?

Civil society can play a central role in monitoring, advocating, developing thinking, and identifying geographic areas relevant to conflict prevention. CSO networks at the global, regional, sub-regional, and domestic levels, such as the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, are useful sources for interlocutors and channels for dissemination, reflection (and generation) of fairly genuine public perceptions.

CSOs need to be strengthened, especially in times of democratic transition. Civic and peace education should be provided in order to empower civilians to protect themselves and to work to prevent conflict. Political space is important to allow civil society's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and resolution processes. As one expert noted:

The problem of space creation is endemic to conflicts... Non-existent or inadequate structures for dialogue are a principal cause or perpetuator of conflict.

As such, civil society linkages to regional and sub-regional intergovernmental mechanisms for conflict prevention should be made possible by means of

institutional arrangements that go beyond *ad hoc* consultations. Access to decision making can notably help empower, legitimize, and stimulate civil society.

Nonetheless, CSOs might sometimes play unconstructive roles. For instance, religious and ethnically-based NGOs may seize upon ideologies, or international NGOs may crowd out local initiatives that may be beneficial for peace. The roles and conflict management capacities of faith-based organizations/communities should be developed. More effective regulation, or a clear code of conduct and transparency in CSOs' interactions with war-torn societies, would be desirable.