The concept of ‘upstream conflict prevention’ has gained increasing currency among the development, diplomatic and defence communities. Yet for many there remains a lack of clarity as to what the term means and how to put it into practice. This briefing therefore seeks to provide an overview of ‘upstream’ conflict prevention and illustrate how this approach can be put into practice.

Preventing violent conflict might at times take the form of last-minute diplomatic interventions to stop disputes from turning violent or military action to prevent escalation. However, moments of crisis are usually symptoms of long-standing tensions within or between societies. These tensions may be a result of, for example, political exclusion, lack of jobs, or inadequate access to basic services such as security and justice, health or education. By identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict, societies have the greatest chance of becoming more cohesive, resilient and able to manage tensions without resorting to violence.

The UK Government has made upstream conflict prevention a key pillar of its cross-departmental Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS). The BSOS represents a commitment to developing a coherent, comprehensive, and long-term approach to conflict prevention which involves supporting “political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all.” It suggests that this type of “structural stability” is “built on the consent of the population, resilient and flexible in the face of shocks, and can evolve over time as the context changes”. The BSOS sets out the UK Government’s ambition to co-ordinate its development, defence and diplomatic capabilities to pursue this vision. This is an important step forward.

The following briefing outlines the elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach, followed by selected case studies that illustrate what applying elements of this approach looks like in practice. It concludes with recommendations on how government, parliamentarians, and development and humanitarian actors can put this approach into action.
WHAT DOES TAKING AN UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION APPROACH LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

TAKING ACTION ON SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION IN JONGIL, SOUTH SUDAN

A 2004 security assessment identified a serious challenge in many conflict-affected countries and regions: the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). In Jongil, South Sudan, an upstream conflict prevention approach was used to address this issue.

The local, conflict-affected population was central to identifying the threat and to designing a response. The project aimed to address the root causes of conflict, including access to small arms and light weapons, by working at the local level to reduce the number and diversity of different weapons in circulation.

The approach involved a detailed conflict analysis to understand the dynamics of weapon proliferation in the region. This analysis highlighted the importance of controlling the movement of weapons, particularly through illegal trade and sharing of weapons among families.

The project then worked with local communities to develop a strategy for monitoring the influx of weapons and the sharing of arms. This included establishing a system for tracking the movement of weapons and ensuring that community members were trained to report any violations of the weapons control measures.

The project also worked with local authorities to develop a plan for the safe storage and disposal of weapons. This included the establishment of a secure facility for the storage of weapons and the implementation of a system for regular monitoring of the facility.

The project’s success was measured in terms of its impact on reducing the number of weapons in circulation and the reduction in the number of armed conflicts.

Elements of upstream conflict prevention

All kinds of interactions, including trade, dyads, and diplomatic relations and defence engagements can have positive or negative impacts on conflict dynamics.

A holistic approach

If upstream conflict prevention is to be taken seriously, it is not enough for governments, NGOs and others to act on their own. It is also important to consider the role of international politics, and to ensure that conflict prevention activities are not isolated from each other.

For example, leading up to the 2008 war in South Ossetia, international conflict prevention missions were霞

The following are practical examples of taking elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach into practice. In each of these contexts, Upstream conflict prevention has been carried out in collaboration with affected communities.

1. Sudan

In Sudan, the practice of cattle raiding has become increasingly violent due to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The project identified the potential for conflict to arise from the increasing number of weapons in circulation.

The project worked with local communities to establish a system for monitoring and security mechanisms, as well as promoting the responsible regulation of arms transfers globally, such as through the implementation of a robust International Trade in Arms (ITAR) framework.

2. Yemen

Yemen's transition faces many challenges and upstream conflict prevention will require reform of key institutions. For example, recent experiences of militancy highlighted that local, even by an intermediary to new governance and decision-making processes, can play a crucial role in preventing the unfolding nature of conflict. The project also encouraged the implementation of a robust international arms trade control framework.

3. Pakistan

The project also identified the potential for the project to support Yemen's aspirations for their political demands to be addressed, including issues of human rights, transitional justice, and conflict resolution.

4. South Ossetia

In South Ossetia, the project worked with local communities to establish a system for monitoring and security mechanisms, as well as promoting the responsible regulation of arms transfers globally, such as through the implementation of a robust international arms trade control framework.

5. Yemen

Yemen's transition faces many challenges and upstream conflict prevention will require reform of key institutions. For example, recent experiences of militancy highlighted that local, even by an intermediary to new governance and decision-making processes, can play a crucial role in preventing the unfolding nature of conflict. The project also encouraged the implementation of a robust international arms trade control framework.
While challenging, implementing an upstream approach to conflict prevention has the potential to secure real and long-term gains in promoting a more peaceful and stable environment for all.

PUTTING UPSTREAM CONFLICT PREVENTION INTO ACTION

For UK Government
The UK Government must invest time and resources in putting the bold vision set out in the BSOS into practice, including:

- ensuring awareness of and buy in for the progressive vision of stability laid out in the BSOS throughout Whitehall and country offices
- working to translate this progressive vision of stability into context-specific implementation plans
- incentivising officials to prioritise shared BSOS objectives over those of individual departments
- ensuring all interactions, including trade, aid and diplomacy are seen through the lens of conflict prevention, not only those activities specifically targeted at conflict prevention
- ensuring that engagement to protect UK national security interests is consistent with efforts to promote the security and development needs of ordinary people living in conflict-affected states
- when carrying out a conflict analysis and programme design, ensure that the perspectives of the people affected by conflict and insecurity, including the most marginalised groups such as youth and women, are taken into account
- promoting the principles of responsible, legitimate and transparent governance in all interactions with other states.

For Parliamentarians
Parliamentarians can play a key role in ensuring that the government is held to account on conflict prevention work by increasing parliamentary scrutiny of conflict prevention activities, for example by:

- finding an effective way of providing formal parliamentary scrutiny of cross-departmental BSOS implementation
- tabling an annual parliamentary debate on conflict prevention and posing parliamentary questions targeted at BSOS implementation, as well as on departmental activities in conflict-affected states
- ensuring attention in Parliament is given to longer term conflict prevention activities that are focused on improving the lives of those who are affected by conflict and instability, resisting the temptation to only focus on the crisis of the day
- working with parliamentarians in other countries to promote the principles of accountable and inclusive politics.

For the development and humanitarian communities
Development, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors all have an important role to play in upstream conflict prevention, for example:

- taking a ‘do no harm’ approach to delivering humanitarian assistance based on a thorough analysis of conflict dynamics
- ensuring that, wherever possible, development programming takes a maximalist approach to conflict sensitivity by addressing the root causes of conflict
- when consulting communities on their development needs, include questions on their security and justice concerns
- ensuring that development interventions also address security and access to justice where these are community concerns, as the ability to live peaceful, secure lives and to seek redress against injustice is a basic need on a par with health care and education.

While challenging, implementing an upstream approach to conflict prevention has the potential to secure real and long-term gains in promoting a more peaceful and stable environment for all.
Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in over 17 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe. All our publications are available for download from our website. We can provide hard copies of specific publications upon request.

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