



Prevention Across Sectors and Institutions: What Pathways for Effective Implementation? Report of Geneva Peace Week 2017

This report aims to reflect the discussions during Geneva Peace Week 2017 with a specific emphasis on its guiding theme *Prevention Across Sectors and Institutions*. The report synthesises event write-ups and social media coverage, and incorporates a range of voices on cross-sectorial prevention practice. The report first considers the current state of reflections about the nature of 'preventing violent conflict', before taking stock on prevention practice, and zooming into the role of the UN. The report concludes by signposting several emerging issues. Given the breadth and depth of discussions, the report does not pretend to represent a comprehensive coverage of Geneva Peace Week; it merely highlights several themes and insights that seemed to stand out.

Geneva Peace Week 2017 involved 50 events organized by 100 partners and featured more than 150 speakers on a variety of cross-cutting topics on peace and security. It underlined that each and every person, actor and institution has a role to play in building peace and resolving conflict. This year, it invited a broad range of actors to reflect on the progress towards the prevention of violent conflicts and the future of prevention practice. It also offered an opportunity to connect across sectors and institutions and to expand the space for dialogue about building peace and resolving conflict in Geneva and beyond. By synchronizing events on different topics related to the promotion of peace during one week, Geneva Peace Week maximizes synergies between organizations in Geneva and their international partners, focused on the cross-cutting nature of peace.

Key takeaways

- The world may have never had such a wealth of tested instruments and early warning systems to effectively prevent violent conflict. Many organizations working in this field have matured over the last two decades and are ready to advance prevention at an operational level.
- The use or threat of armed force or violence remains an accepted policy instrument in many circles. The existence of powerful economic agendas and cultures of violence emphasize the importance and urgency for a new and proactive prevention agenda.
- Conflict prevention should focus on leveraging constructive political pressure for prevention in decision spaces, and on enabling field-level programming and initiatives. There should be a better balance between ad-hoc crises management and long-term crises prevention.
- Addressing cyber war and violence in cities; re-imagining a new role for the private sector; and focusing on water and natural resource management, are some of the key emerging issues for a preventing agenda highlighted during Geneva Peace Week 2017.
- There is opportunity for countries, regions or cities to step forward to lead as pilots for a new prevention and peacebuilding agenda.

SAVE THE DATE
Geneva Peace Week
5-9 November 2018

1. The 'prevention agenda'

In an address to Members of the UN Security Council on 10 January 2017, UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted that "Prevention is not merely a priority, but *the* priority. If we live up to our responsibilities, we will save lives, reduce suffering and give hope to millions." In his opening remarks of Geneva Peace Week, H.E. Mr. Miroslav Lajčák, President of the UN General Assembly (PGA), echoed this spirit by saying that

Prevention is not something the United Nations does. Rather, it is at the heart of what the United Nations *is*. In fact, for every one reference to war in the UN Charter, there are more than nine references to peace. The UN was therefore clearly intended to preserve peace, rather than respond to conflict. This gives us a compelling mandate to strengthen the UN's role in preventing conflict.

Current reflections within the UN suggest that a prevention agenda should especially focus on the prevention of 'crises' that all too often precede the outbreak or relapse of violent conflict.

Despite the current prioritization and a long record of practice, there is still much discussion about what a 'prevention agenda' entails. Recurring questions about 'what is prevention?' 'what to prevent?' or 'why focus on prevention?' emerged throughout Geneva Peace Week 2017.

Elements of prevention

A multitude of approaches to prevention exist in many different practice and expert communities. These include for instance preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, crime prevention, prevention of atrocities, prevention of serious and large-scale human rights violations, violence prevention, or the prevention of violent extremism. All approaches come with a

set of different policy instruments or theories of change, underlining the different roots of prevention across different sectors, including for instance, public health, peacebuilding, human rights, development, law enforcement, intelligence, or the security sector. Much of these prevention practices exist for decades. The recent surge of interest in a prevention agenda within the UN – as expressed by the Secretary General and the PGA above – may therefore be more about emphasizing the value of existing policies, programmes, and institutions within a rapidly changing world; rather than about the invention of anything fundamentally new.

Prevention is a concept that accommodates a wide variety of practice. During Geneva Peace Week, descriptions about the 'essence' of the prevention of violent conflict included a broad range of views.

- Prevention has been frequently associated to the use of diplomatic channels, capital and partnerships to mitigate and diffuse imminent political crises so that these do not become violent. From this perspective, the essence of prevention within the UN is about facilitating constructive peer pressure between states so that these address their differences without the use or threat of armed force.
- Prevention is about politics and managing political processes for which there is a growing arsenal of instruments and channels of communications to relevant actors – no matter how these are labelled by conflict parties. The last two decades have seen the evolution of an architecture for outreach to non-state armed groups, especially through private diplomacy organizations.
- Prevention occurs as close as possible to the source of tension or conflict as possible. This can involve a range of

local state and non-state actors, or so called 'insider mediators' that are working to diffuse tension and violence within specific contexts.

- Prevention is about immediate responses to the issues, actors and relationships involved in conflict that is about to escalate ('late' prevention), and about the long term approaches that address the systems or conditions fostering conflict and violence ('early' prevention).
- Prevention is holistic and draws on a broad range of local, regional, or international knowledge networks, and clusters of instruments from different sectors and institutions. The UN, but also the wider UN system and non-UN international organizations, can play an important role in shaping holistic prevention policies, as evidenced in the fields of crime prevention and public health approaches to violence prevention.
- Prevention occurs in multiple spaces. These spaces can include for instance diplomatic fora such as the UN, but they mostly relate to specific political and economic dynamics in specific contexts

What to prevent? What to enable?

The target of prevention tends to be characterised as 'violence' or 'violent' conflict. In other words, prevention policy

aims at the extraction of the use or threat of armed force or violence from the conduct of politics at global, national or local levels. It is about addressing or resolving conflict through dialogue and negotiation. Prevention policy is therefore *not* about limiting change, or about stabilizing a specific status quo.

Violence can be merely a symptom of deeper systemic problems and prevention must go further than an exclusive focus on the violent manifestations of conflict. From this perspective, prevention also entails stemming broader systemic trends that are shaping the risk of conflict and violence in specific settings. Key systemic risk factors include, for instance climate change, urbanization, social inequality, political exclusion, cultures of violence, large-scale investment or development projects, criminal markets, or war economies.

A 'prevention' and 'enabling' agenda are two sides of the same coin. An enabling agenda emphasizes local leadership and ownership of prevention efforts – not exclusively by governments but all relevant stakeholders. It also underlines the investments into societies and political systems so these can develop their own capacities and processes to manage political crises on their own.

Box 1: Geneva Peace Week 2017 in figures

- 50 events organized by 100 partners featured more than 150 speakers.
- Total event attendance of 5,000 people, spread across different sectors including NGOs (35%), academia (25%), international organizations (20%), diplomatic missions (13%), and business (7%).
- Geneva Peace Week trended on Twitter within the top 5 in Switzerland from 7-9 November 2017, and was the lead trend in Geneva on 7 November.
- 91% had a positive experience of Geneva Peace Week and 97% noted they would recommend it, a participant survey revealed.
- Respondents highlighted the top 5 distinguishing features of Geneva Peace Week to be about networking opportunities, the quality of speakers, the variety of perspectives, stimulation of new ideas, and access to peacebuilding professionals.

Why focus on prevention?

The focus on prevention occurs at a moment of intense change at many levels. Geneva Peace Week reveals a widely shared perception that problems and challenges are growing faster than solutions for them, and that the world has entered a period of systemic change with heightened risk of violent conflict. The era where wars are 'declared', 'fought', and 'won' or 'lost' are over. Violent conflicts evolve more frequently from 'slow-onset emergencies' where different factors combine to create crises until they reach a tipping point. There is also a profound crisis of trust between people and their political leaders. An ever-growing cohort of young people becomes ever more estranged from national projects or incumbent elites. These changing strategic landscapes are placing a premium on effective capacities to accommodate calls for political change and address political crises through dialogue and negotiation.

A stronger focus on prevention is also important because the current humanitarian and development architectures are overstretched by the multiplication of concurrent crises and

new wars; while existing wars and situations of chronic violence persist. The focus on prevention, therefore, shifts the attention to addressing the causes of violent conflicts, rather than focusing on symptoms. International aid and development assistance will sooner or later become paralysed, unless the international community goes beyond reactive approaches, and towards embracing a more comprehensive prevention agenda.

The current focus on prevention may also be part of a tactic to advance reforms of the UN system. Over the last three years the UN underwent a period of intensive review. This period shaped a set of norms, concepts and agendas, and called for the reform of UN institutions and agencies. Through this reform lens, the concept of 'prevention' may serve the purpose to facilitate the process of institutional reform and the repositioning of the UN within changing strategic landscapes. There may be a risk of disillusionment with the prevention agenda if it is conceived primarily as a tool for institutional reform without necessarily developing a strong operational agenda.



Geneva launch of the UN-World Bank Report on the Prevention of Violent Conflict (Source: GPP)

2. Stock-taking

The guiding theme on prevention enabled the development of a spectrum of perspectives about what works in preventing violent conflicts, on the challenges at hand, and on the role of the UN in preventive action. The prevention theme was also developed through various events focusing on a specific context with case examples covering for instance the Sahel region and the Middle East, as well as Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, The Gambia, Liberia, Philippines, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine.

What works?

The world may have never had such a range of tested prevention instruments and early warning systems. The discussions painted the picture of mature organizations working in this field to prevent conflict and violence in its many forms. An array of best practice documents summarize practical experiences on, for instance, preventive diplomacy, national capacities for conflict prevention, national dialogue processes, mediation, architectures for peace, municipal violence and urban safety prevention programmes, or youth engagement initiatives. Among practitioners, the workings of such policy instruments are well understood and they are applied in a wide variety of contexts for many years.

This prevention infrastructure may have come a long way, but may not have gone far enough given the current strategic landscapes of conflict and violence. Many actors are absorbed in ad-hoc responses to immediate crises situations and do not have the necessary funding or capacities to act on long term prevention at the same time.

What is 'effective' conflict prevention is relatively well known in expert cycles. Key ingredients can involve the following:

- Exerting leverage for prevention in decision spaces: Preventive action is political and access to, and relationships with, perpetrators of violent conflict and violence is of primary importance for prevention practice.
- Prevention is inherently a multi-stakeholder effort: All actors – state, religious representatives, business, academia, and other stakeholders – have a role to play if they can exert leverage in decision spaces or can shape conflict environments.
- Working as close as possible to the sources of conflict and violence: These place-based characteristics of prevention connect to ever growing awareness and importance about the micro dynamics of violent conflict.
- The primacy of integrated approaches: Prevention needs to address conflict systems involving agents (perpetrators of violence), instruments (armament and weapons), institutions (formal and informal norms, rules and practices), and people (victims of violence).

An array of non-state actors at the local level plays a crucial role in the prevention of violent conflict. Such local actors have the de-facto entry-points, capacities and insight to act preventively. They are often referred to as 'insider mediators' – which are individuals with perceived legitimacy, capacities and leverage to prevent crises from emerging. The transnational connectedness of these actors represents an evolution of prevention practice outside, yet frequently connected to, UN or government led initiatives. Such transnational initiatives can generate more effective buy-in and ownership of any

prevention agenda at municipal, sub-national or national levels.

The role of institutions is a central ingredient for prevention. Institutions refer to both formal institutions of governance, and informal, traditional or cultural norms rules and practices. Both formal and informal institutions enable or limit a prevention agenda. Formal institutions can limit a prevention agenda if unable or unwilling to deliver services (e.g. health, education, or safety). Especially on the national and sub-national levels, strengthened institutions can serve to support existing prevention activities, and generate cross-institutional cooperation. In many such contexts, formal, traditional and cultural institutions co-exist and can work hand-in-hand to mitigate conflict risk and prevent violent conflict.

The role of data collection in the prevention agenda is pivotal, especially in relation to monitoring prevention initiatives and programmes and associated baseline data. It remains difficult to prove the prevention of an event, but nevertheless

the collection of disaggregated and longitudinal data can provide important insight into the diffusion or mitigation of conflict risk. The availability of 'big data' and ever more sophisticated means to make sense of them through novel algorithms, as well as the ability to compare such insight with qualitative conflict assessments, offer new practical opportunities for early warning and early action.

Cost-benefit calculations for early action are well developed at general levels but needs to become more targeted to stick with actors driving conflict dynamics. Global estimates about the benefits of prevention generate significant policy attention but have little practical value for operations in specific context. To be more persuasive at an operational level, cost-benefit calculations for prevention need to more fully engage with the cost-benefit calculation of fear, conflict and violence, and the distribution of costs and benefits from war and peace, that are shaping political crises in many contexts.

Box 2: Twitter snapshots from the Geneva Peace Week

- In order to prevent extreme violence, we need state and non-state actors to coordinate efforts in peace and security, ensure inclusion of marginalized groups and enhance accountability of public institutions.
- Women must be given the opportunity to play a greater part in peacebuilding. There can be no peace without equality.
- How do we build prevention into our peace systems? Just do it! Start small, keep trying, recognize failure, adapt. That's real scalability.
- Unemployment, lack of hope and stability leads to a lost generation, which revert to extremism. The role of the private sector and its support to NGOs is crucial.
- Conflict prevention is cost effective; it requires the inclusion of youth, women and marginalised, and must support local actors at the grass roots level.
- Siloed approaches to conflict prevention don't work, inclusivity is key.
- There is no peace without food security and no food security without peace.
- A global prevention policy requires early and sustained focus on risks and stronger partnerships at all levels.
- It is time for the private sector to become people-centred, trust-based and transformational rather than transactional.

Challenges for preventive action

The use or threat of armed force or violence remains an accepted policy instrument in many circles. Armed force and violence is a widely used instrument by many states and in many societies to advance political, economic or social interest and goals. Many societies exhibit deep cultures of violence and glorify the use of armed force. Economic agendas in armed conflict and violence are shaping dynamics of never ending wars as illustrated by the self-financing civil wars through natural resources, and the maintenance of anti-terror or anti-drug wars. The cultures of violence and their economic agendas represent a major challenge for the prevention of violent conflict.

In operational terms, there has been a trend away from conflict prevention towards the use of security instruments. This has been especially the case in relation to regional conflicts in the Middle East that escalated to conventional warfare. At the city level, many mayors or politicians have prioritized 'hard' security policies in their fight against crime or terror drawing on a portfolio of security services and instruments, frequently in collaboration with private security providers. This trend is especially visible in the resource allocation by national governments that emphasize the application of offensive and defensive military instruments, over investments in peace diplomacy, peacebuilding and development. In many regions, it is well documented that securitized strategies have fanned conflict and violence, and have promoted polarization and exclusion. This situation emphasizes the need for more policy coherence especially in cases where the application of security instruments stands to limit the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Early action and up-front investments in early prevention remain a key challenge. An armada of different analysts produce early warning of conflict situations all over the world on a regular basis. What is more, evidence for the benefit of prevention for societies and people is well developed. Yet, there remains a significant gap between early warning and early action, and the investments necessary to shape actors and environments in a way to prevent violent conflict. This gap is not new and has been flagged repeatedly in over five decades of discussion on conflict prevention.

Many actors are overwhelmed by the tasks of managing many crises simultaneously. Government departments as well as international or non-governmental organizations are stretched in their capacities to address multiple crises or wars at the same time. They have little – if any – free capacity for early prevention, and are trapped within day-to-day crisis management. Institutions need to change their mind-set from reaction to prevention and create dedicated institutional resources, departments or capacities that focus their energies on early prevention.

Institutions tend to reward 'crises managers' over 'conflict preventers' in terms of professional advancement. In order to prioritize prevention, human resource departments must find new ways of working to prioritize prevention, change incentive structures for staff and professional advancement, and dedicate human, financial and institutional resources for long term prevention. Shaping incentives may also involve more clearly articulating in human resource management practices the consequences or sanctions for failed prevention.

Digital technology has important positive and negative implications for conflict prevention. It can have positive impact through e-commerce, gaming, and emerging technologies such as big data, or geographic information systems, all of which can collectively contribute to enhanced and rapid information gathering, advance economic empowerment, and provide training opportunities to build practical competencies. It may be worth highlighting that satellite data and data analysis is the oldest form of working with big data and has been used to inform peace efforts for decades. But there are also limitations and risk, including the data used for conflict prevention needs to be properly protected, as it often concerns most vulnerable groups in society or matters of high political sensitivity. In addition, institutions might lack the capacity to adequately manage constantly and quickly evolving technological innovation.

The role of the UN in prevention

Prevention practice within the UN has a long history and exists for at least five decades. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld coined the term 'preventive diplomacy' and his successors engaged in such diplomacy, frequently under the 'good offices' mandate of the Secretary-General. The task of 'prevention' also builds on the very reason of the UN's existence, which the UN Charter asserts to be about saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and about reaffirming "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

The UN has an important role to play in prevention. The UN can have a

comparative advantage for prevention given its values, legitimacy and presence in many countries, and its ability to act as a catalyst, convenor and partnership broker. As a member state body, the UN also has a comparative advantage to facilitate peer pressure on governments for the peaceful resolution of disputes between states. The UN has significant human resources dedicated to prevention, drawing on a pool of Special Representatives, Peace and Development Advisors, or mediation experts. It also has major technical capability as in the analysis of satellite imagery or programmatic interventions on, for instance, urban safety, citizen security, peacebuilding, or natural resource management. The UN is well positioned to disseminate and give legitimacy to knowledge on best practices, as illustrated by the joint UN-World Bank Study on the prevention of violent conflict.

The UN also has limits to advance prevention effectively. For instance, it is less able to facilitate dialogue with non-state armed actors, to access grass-roots organizations, and to leverage its comparative advantage in territories where it is perceived to lack political neutrality. Its hands are frequently tied in great power confrontations and if these tensions affect the working of the Security Council or other UN organs. Overall, the UN cannot prevent violent conflict and crises on its own and requires partnerships with a range of state and non-state actors to operationalize both early and late prevention. The UN should do less and enable more.

The issue of sovereignty remains the most significant challenge for the UN with respect to a prevention agenda. Many governments are concerned about other governments, NGOs or the UN meddling with their domestic political dynamics

under the guise of 'conflict prevention' or 'crisis management'. Governments can have defensive attitudes to prevention, especially when this agenda interferes with their own partisan interests and the associated policy or security instruments deployed to reach them. As a member state body in which some states wield significant influence over the way the UN works at headquarters and in country settings, sovereignty remains a key to understanding the opportunities and constraints of the UN's prevention agenda.

The wider UN system plays an essential role in the prevention agenda. Many of the specialized international organizations cover long-term policy areas (e.g. functioning health and labour market, rule of law etc.) that are crucial in the prevention agenda. Combined with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Human Rights pillar, the wider UN system can provide critical support to local and national actors to enhance prevention.



Discussions during the World Café Reception at the *Maison de la Paix* (Source: GPP)

3. Emerging issues

From the many discussions of Geneva Peace Week, this report places its spotlight on several emerging issues for the prevention agenda.

ACTION: The UN-World Bank Report on the Prevention of Violent Conflict; three forthcoming Secretary-General's reports on conflict prevention, on reforms of the peace and security pillar, and on sustaining peace; as well as the High-level Event of the President of the General Assembly on Sustaining Peace are creating a momentum to advance conflict prevention and peacebuilding practice. Geneva Peace Week revealed that many actors are ready to jump on this momentum and translate the policy discussions into action and associated programme development. Given the multitude of instruments, approaches and initiatives, there is an opportunity to develop a much more 'hands-on' narrative about how prevention and peacebuilding works, what it entails practically, and what its limits and prospects of its workings are. There is opportunity for countries, regions or cities to step forward to lead as pilots for a new prevention and peacebuilding agenda.

CYBER: The world is entering a new era of peace diplomacy where corporate technology titans seek partnerships to prevent cyber conflicts. Threats and weapons of war are changing, and cyber-conflict is becoming an ever-greater risk. Powerful cyber weapons have made cyber space a new theatre for war. As societies increasingly depend on digital technology, cyber weapons could be used against industrial, health and transport infrastructure, with a great risk of de-stabilising societies and causing significant humanitarian consequences. Yet most multi-lateral organizations, governments and NGOs are ill equipped to act preventively in cyber space, especially compared to the quick pace of technological innovation. In the absence of effective international regulation, some technology firms have presented proposals for more systematic international engagement in the prevention of cyber conflict, such as a Digital Geneva Convention and other multilateral conventions against cyber conflict and weaponry (see Box 3).

Box 3: Towards a 'Digital Geneva Convention'?

The prospect of cyber conflict started new discussions around the need for a convention to produce norms and regulations, restricting the misuse of technology and establishing a normative framework within which not only states but also non-state actors and the private sector are included. In order to respond to, and eliminate, cyber threats, a cyber convention must be equipped to address vulnerabilities and externalities within the system, and find ways to overcome threats that can arise as a result of new technologies. Creating a strong, multi-stakeholder and prevention-oriented cyber convention can provide the stepping stone for the future of responsible technology and contribute to the achievement of agenda 2030. But the pathways towards a new convention are not without controversy with some stakeholders pointing to existing legal regimes that in their view represent a sufficient legal base to regulate cyber conflict.

CITIES: Cities are where most people now live, and where they suffer most from war and violence. Addressing the urban dimension of war and violence also receives increasing traction through the combined efforts of UN Habitat's New Urban Agenda, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (in particular SDGs 11 and 16), and many cross-sectoral initiatives on smart, resilient, or safer cities. Combined, these initiatives emphasize the need to reflect further on the dynamics of conflict and non-conflict violence in settings of rapid urbanization, and the specific programming modalities of urban safety and security sector governance in the city. Of note is the plethora of security providers active in urban settings, ranging from public enforcement agencies and private security companies, to informal actors including benign neighborhood watch patrols and far more problematic forms of vigilantism. Fostering peaceful and inclusive urban environments is a topic of increasing concern to donors and implementing agencies, and will be an important component of a prevention agenda in the coming years.

BUSINESS: New research on business engagement in violence prevention and peacebuilding underlines that business should leverage its comparative advantages within broader multi-stakeholder coalitions, especially in terms of its ability to influence political leaders, entry-points for informal dialogue to diffuse crises, and capital to support prevention or peacebuilding. Such approach, however, requires to re-imagine the role of the private sector in broader prevention partnerships beyond a human rights and

corporate social responsibility approaches that are currently framing understandings on business and peacebuilding.

WATER: Water sources and other natural resources can be targets during conflicts or be used as a weapon to oppress or marginalize already vulnerable populations. Such targeting has systemic consequences affecting people and economic sectors with sometimes significant humanitarian knock-on effects. This is why water sources and management infrastructures should become a special focus for preventive diplomacy. In many circumstances, water has sparked cooperation across divided communities or states, and is a strategic resource for survival, food security and agricultural and other industries. Integrating water into a broader natural resource management and prevention agenda could therefore provide practical entry-points for confidence building between divided communities and states, and reduce human suffering in crises situations and wartime.

OUTLOOK: Geneva Peace Week 2018 Geneva Peace Week is gradually becoming a more important component of the global peacebuilding calendar. It provides a new space in which a wide variety of actors can connect and exchange to form new partnerships around opportunities for preventing conflict and building peace. As part of the preparations for Geneva Peace Week 2018, the facilitators will launch a public call for event applications by March 2018. Geneva Peace Week 2018 will take place from 5-9 November 2018.

About this report

Geneva Peace Week is a collective action initiative facilitated by the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies, and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform in collaboration with the Swiss Confederation. Dr. Achim Wennmann from the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform served as the lead editor of this report with support from Dr. Oliver Jütersonke and Janine Bressmer from the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP). Barbara Rosen Jacobson from the Geneva Internet Platform contributed on technology themes; Dr. Mara Tignino from the Geneva Water Hub contributed on water issues. Thanks also go to the co-facilitating organizations and the members of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform's Management Committee for comments. All views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of UNOG, the Graduate Institute, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, or the Swiss Confederation.



Event participants at the *Palais des Nations* during Geneva Peace Week (Source: GPP)