

# New perspectives on conflict prevention

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE May 2016

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Hunter, A. (2015) New perspectives on conflict prevention. Peacebuilding, volume 3 (3): 314-320.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2014.973665>

**Publisher statement:** This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Peacebuilding on 17 Nov 2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21647259.2014.973665> .

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## Review Article: New Perspectives on Conflict Prevention

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Anderson, Mary and Marshall Wallace. 2013. *Opting out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner ISBN: 978-1-58826-876-1 (Short title: *Opting out of War*)

Mine, Yōichi, Frances Stewart, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, and Thandika Mkandawire. 2013. *Preventing Violent Conflict in Africa: Inequalities, Perceptions and Institutions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

ISBN: 978-1-137-32969-1 (Short title: *Preventing Violent Conflict*)

World Bank *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. Washington: World Bank. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8213-8439-8 (Short title: *WDR 2011*)

### **1. Introduction**

This review article focuses on three recent publications – from academic, INGO, and institutional environments – which offer potential new insights for peacebuilding and preventing conflict violence. The rationale for preventive response to warnings of imminent conflict seems glaringly obvious. Effective early interventions might avert the humanitarian catastrophes of armed conflict, and should also cost far less in terms of development losses and political instability. However studies such as those by Matveeva (2006), Mehler (2005), and Wulf and Debiel (2009) all appear to puzzle: why does the practice of conflict prevention appear so weak compared to its promise? Beswick (2012) also shows how the EU turned out to be confused, random and re-active despite badging conflict prevention as a centre-piece of its foreign policy. International responses are plagued by inconsistency, lack of co-ordination, and political bias, aside from generally being reactive and ‘late’; they also tend to ignore local capacities and work with influential elites.

The three publications under review here mark a significant departure from 'orthodox' conflict prevention. They focus on long-term, non-military approaches; local capacities and institutional mechanisms; and a more modest tone about what international partners could contribute.

*Preventing Violent Conflict* is a complex, rewarding book. Although an edited volume with a dozen contributors, there is a sharp focus on a small number of key issues: these are elaborated in three theoretical chapters, and substantiated by original data collected for the book by fieldwork in ten Sub-Saharan African countries. The editorial team includes Frances Stewart, originator of the 'Horizontal Inequalities' (HI) discourse, and Yoichi Mine, one of Japan's leading Africanists. Other editors and contributors are specialists from various countries including Belgium, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and the US. This range of expertise doubtless helps to avoid the Euro-centrism, 'othering', and Afro-pessimism that can mar much writing on Africa. The aim of the book is 'to seek appropriate measures to prevent violent conflict in sub-Saharan African countries', which it tries to achieve first, by identifying 'a major part of the root causes of violent conflict' (252); and second, providing policy advice to African governments and their international partners. Original data concerning HI's, perceptions, and political mechanisms are reported in about 100 tables and figures in addition to analytical interpretations.

In academic and policy literature one finds numerous analyses of conflict causation, in Africa and elsewhere, including the well-worn 'greed or grievance' debates, the impact of 'bad neighbourhoods', youth demographics, availability of small arms, and others. This book's central thesis centres around three key ideas concerning HI's as underlying factors in conflicts. First, 'serious HI's, political, socioeconomic and cultural, do exist in African countries'. Economic growth may reduce absolute poverty for many, but still not address HI's. The second argument is that measurable or 'real' HI's are often less important than judgements about them. 'People take actions not because of objective data on structural inequalities but because of their subjective, sometimes emotional perceptions about such inequalities' (272). The third point is that perceptions of political exclusion often over-ride perceptions of socioeconomic inequality. In brief, subjective perceptions by ethnic or other identity groups of

political marginalisation is a leading (though the authors admit, far from the only) cause of violent conflict.

This analysis is complemented by studies on possible corrective measures. An important advantage of focus on political exclusion is that this diagnosis suggests a feasible treatment, namely constitutional engineering in favour of more balanced representation, to defuse perceptions of political marginalisation. The authors argue that since there is fluidity in African constitutions and electoral mechanisms, serious attention should be given to *political inclusion of identity groups as a major contribution to conflict prevention*. Compared to either military and security options; or long-term 'development' agendas; enhanced representation of formerly disempowered groups can in fact be achieved relatively quickly by African governments themselves, with or without international assistance. The book further analyses two main mechanisms for achieving outcomes: power-sharing and decentralisation. A combination of both is termed 'power-dispersing', which the book argues has been the key factor in achieving a non-violent political environment in many of the case-studies. However, the authors qualify this suggestion with two observations. First, informal local leaderships and institutions are often as important as formal, national processes: they can either strengthen or undermine the success of formal reforms. Second, there is no one 'power-dispersing' model. Rather each particular situation will demand its own creative solution 'taking fully into account idiosyncratic, historical traits of each society' (273).

*Opting Out of War* equally departs from the 'early warning early response' project. The authors are Mary Anderson, pioneer of the 'Do no harm' paradigm; and fellow CDA worker Marshall Wallace. CDA has for more than two decades promoted the agenda of 'local capacities for peace', and has a rich collection of case-studies from which the authors argue that 'local capacities ... are more effective and more sustainable as the basis for policies and practices.' The core argument of the present book is quite radical in its implications and articulates a perhaps unique approach to conflict prevention. It is based on long-term fieldwork in what the authors call 'nonwar communities':

A closer examination of areas of conflict reveals that, in the midst of war, some communities – sometimes quite sizable and significant – develop

strategies by which to exempt themselves from participation in surrounding violence. ... living in circumstances where all the forces and incentives that surrounded them seemingly should have pushed them into conflict [they] somehow, as a group, decided not to fight.' (2-3)

The authors note that almost all conflict prevention paradigms are based on the notion of 'bringing something new to conflict-prone environments' and 'most observers conclude that new systems need to be imagined and created'. While external interventions may occasionally be helpful, the authors also argue that such 'helpful' intervention is most often predicated on a lack of acknowledgement that 'systems and skills to prevent overt violence between groups already exist in every society. In fact, violence is regularly prevented even in conflict-prone areas. Local people have structures and connections that they use to maintain peace day by day in their own space.'

The research agenda is therefore radically different from those of the international political/military bureaucracies. It also produced some surprises for the researchers, who found significant communities remarkably successful in avoiding war engagements. 'Normal people leading normal lives have the option to say no to war. Normal leaders in systems that already exist can respond to and support people in nonengagement' (12). This claim sets the scene for five case study reports, supported by others which are not included in the book but available on the internet.

Some key findings are that nonwar communities were almost all based on pragmatic considerations, and they 'explicitly eschewed' ideologies. I.e. they were not pacifists, nor antiwar activists, nor religious communitarians, nor seeking a particular solution or political change. They did not wish to promote any 'universal values' or ideological purity. So one conclusion is that 'attempts to maintain ideological purity in a complex world can, and too often, do, either result in irrelevance or, much worse, produce a chain of misunderstanding, intolerance, exclusion and dominance'. (173).

Second, responsive and skilful community leadership was key to all the successful nonwar communities, but it was hardly ever framed in 'good governance' or 'democracy' or 'citizenship' models. Community members felt their strategic decision-making was consultative and inclusive; but seldom 'democratic' or

contentious. Rather, each successful community's decision-making was based, firstly, on indigenous traditions, but secondly on improvisation where, often in response to new challenges, the people themselves had updated their decision-making strategies without reference to Western models.

Third, most often, people reported that international influences had 'fed into their disunity and subsequent intergroup violence' and that international meddling was a root of their conflict (81); a limited number had received appropriate international support they considered helpful.

In terms of critique of standard early warning/conflict prevention, the lessons the authors draw briefly is that we could be much more attentive to 'existing systems that work', rather than to warnings of negative factors and flashpoints. 'Many of our analytic systems emphasize weaknesses without concomitant care for identifying what is working (176).

The book leaves open many questions that the authors are reluctant to address. The tentative suggestions at the end of the book seem to be that such communities can at least provide very useful lessons and resources for mediators; they provide options and alternatives for other communities; outsiders should avoid counter-productive investments in military responses, and the default international position should be to not meddle; 'they teach us that communities of people have the agency to shape things, even in face of seemingly awful odds'. (176)

The *WDR 2011* is available both as a full 400-page report, and as a 70-page overview. The report shows exemplary technical expertise and clarity. Its focus on violence prevention is perhaps surprising; a note explains that its aim is to improve the effectiveness of development interventions in places threatened or affected by large-scale violence, although 'some of the ground that the Report covers falls outside the World Bank's traditional development mandate'. (iv) The WDR's starting point is the concept of protracted violence, acknowledging that despite successes in reducing interstate war, 'the remaining forms of conflict and violence do not fit neatly either into 'war' or 'peace' or into 'criminal violence' or 'political violence' .... Many countries and subnational areas now face cycles of *repeated* violence, weak governance, and instability' (2).

The report includes diagnosis and proposals for remedial action. The theory of conflict causation is, briefly, that the 'risk of conflict and violence in any society (national or regional) is the *combination* of the exposure to *internal and external stresses* and the ... social capability for coping with stress embodied in *legitimate institutions*' (7). While admitting numerous local factors and deviations, the analysis identifies three key stress points: security, employment, and access to justice. The central argument is that these stresses may be managed peacefully in societies with stable institutions, but they degenerate into armed conflict especially rapidly when the territory has a deficit of institutions perceived as legitimate (7). The report explicitly takes a broad view of the term 'institution':

Institutions are defined in the WDR as the formal and informal "rules of the game," which include formal rules, written laws, organizations, informal norms of behavior, and shared beliefs—as well as the organizational forms that exist to implement and enforce these norms (both state and nonstate organizations). Institutions shape the interests, incentives, and behaviors that can facilitate violence. Unlike elite pacts, institutions are impersonal—they continue to function irrespective of the presence of particular leaders, and therefore provide greater guarantees of sustained resilience to violence. (41)

The report also emphasises that conflict prevention and violence reduction is a long-term process that must involve a deep transformation of government, society and institutions: models might be the progress of countries like Chile, Ghana, and South Korea over several decades, not the quick fixes of military intervention. Based on case-study precedents, the report advocates a 'top 5' recommendations focusing on urgent priorities in security, employment and justice while working towards the longer-term structural improvements. They include community-based programmes for violence prevention and access to local justice; job-creation programmes; the involvement of women in security, justice, and economic empowerment programs; focused anti-corruption initiatives. Potential roles for international partners, or donors, in this version of 'conflict prevention' are summarised as: specialized assistance in the core areas of citizen security, justice and jobs; acting on external stresses; and co-ordinating support from traditional with new donors such as middle-income

countries. The notion of a 'security-development nexus' is long-established, and often critiqued. In figure 3.2 the report implies an extension into a 'security-development-diplomatic-humanitarian' nexus, a shift from early warning to continuous risk assessment, and in short 'a new way of doing business' (29).

## **2. A new way of doing business?**

None of the books reviewed argues against high-level preventive diplomacy to avert inter-state wars, or military protection of threatened vulnerable communities. However it seems to me they reflect a consensus of the need for a deep re-think of conventional EWER or conflict prevention models. All three books propose a much stronger focus on local institutions, in the broad sense, as the central pillar of conflict prevention. Some areas highlighted in the books, and discussed below, are: local/international relations and the issue of meddling; long-term resilience rather than short-term 'response'; constitutional engineering as a pragmatic and feasible structural measure alongside support for institutions (widely defined), jobs, security and justice; and violence reduction rather than conflict prevention.

When I interviewed Mine, editor of *Preventing Violent Conflict*, he made the point that while his book was written with full academic independence, it was commissioned by the Japanese government's official aid agency the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA), which is one of the largest in the world. 'So the message including its policy recommendations reflects the value and implicit knowledge of JICA, which I tried to accommodate. We don't really feel that JICA is a 'Northern' organization, even though it can never be a 'Southern' organization. Well, this is all about the ambiguous position of this region in the world order. It was an excellent idea to also review the World Bank report, and that particular report in fact reflects the growing influence of China in the World Bank and as a donor. With the growing wealth of China, I wonder if there will emerge some 'East Asian' modes of development support and engagement with conflict-affected societies?' So perhaps we are starting to see an evolution in conflict prevention as in other areas, to reflect the increasing importance of East Asia in world affairs.

### *Local/international*

Relationships between the 'local' and the 'international' have dominated many debates in peacebuilding, with critiques of 'liberal peacebuilding' and proposals for hybridity and local ownership. The studies of conflict prevention seem to lead in the same direction.

Weaknesses inherent in the orthodox model have become clear. Invoking the 'Responsibility to Protect' agenda in the UN under certain specific conditions, the Security Council might indeed authorise a competent preventive intervention, with military support if necessary. Most likely, the conditions would be: consensus, with no veto, among Security Council members; a very severe emergency such as genocide or ethnic cleansing; and operational feasibility. Realistically, it might also depend on what other military actions were current at the time.

However, for a threatened population to invoke international support in other circumstances seems fraught with difficulties. For one thing, given the 'strategic marginalization' of many territories countries by the North, leverage would be small; while interventions in states which may be strategically critical (Somalia or Syria for example) may be not operationally feasible. In either case, the decision on intervention is likely to be highly complex, involving many bureaucratic actors, and ultimately depending more on the political interests of the intervening powers than on the gravity or urgency of the actual threat. Another level of complexity is that intervening forces would likely become embroiled in national politics, perhaps finding it difficult to avoid favouring one faction of elites.

My reading of the books under review is that, perhaps with some rare exceptions, the authors would certainly welcome preventive diplomacy and, where appropriate mediations and peace conferences. However, there would be a strong presumption against the effectiveness of a 'warning-response' model if it is taken to mean armed response. Practical considerations mean that the warnings could well be ignored, with disappointment following false expectations. Or, armed interventions even when intended to 'prevent' could easily 'meddle' and create more problems than they solve.

### *Resilience/response*

The corollary is to focus more on community resilience and local capacity-building for conflict emergencies, based on the assumption that interventions from outside agencies are likely to be too little, too late; and that in most cases the rhetoric of the EU, NATO and other 'conflict prevention' actors is likely to remain irrelevant to the daily concerns of people living in violence-prone environments. (Barrs 2006)

Reducing harm from violence may have much to learn from work in the prediction of and preparedness for natural disasters. The scientific community has been far more pro-active in using technologies such as crowd-sourcing and 'big data' in its work with natural disasters, for effective communication within and between local communities, and work has started on possibly applying some of these skills to conflict-affected regions (Mancini 2013 reports some early initiatives).

How is resilience best developed? If one is generally sceptical of outsider competence, would workshops on 'democracy' or 'human rights' be of any use to communities trying to negotiate pragmatically between armed groups? Is there any reason for international visitors to offer technical assistance, or is it likely to disrupt already-effective networks of cell-phone users? The evidence from CDA is far from systematic or conclusive, but perhaps a minimalist support with networking and information might be helpful on occasion. And reflecting back a 'do no harm', non-meddling message to all outsiders might also be appropriate.

### *Power-dispersal and institutional capacity*

While acknowledging the *Opting Out of War* insights, conflict prevention could be enhanced at levels higher than local communities, still stopping short of armed responses. The work on HIs and on institutional capacity provide many concrete suggestions. Mine (2013) ends with ten policy recommendations directed at all actors with an interest in defusing conflict, whether they be political leaders, INGOs, or inter-governmental agencies. To summarise:

1/ The work of all government departments, aid agencies, development investments etc should be carefully reviewed to alleviate existing HIs, and especially not to exacerbate them.

2/ Since perceptions can be as, or more, important than measurable outcomes, communication of equal treatment to all sectors of society should be prioritised. Different identity groups should be included in the planning and implementation of all development projects.

3/ Conflicting parties should be encouraged to make power-sharing arrangements, and power-dispersal should be undertaken strategically. As leadership quality is of prime importance, there should be good educational opportunities and mutual learning for young leaders. (273-4)

The 'top 5' recommendations of the WDR were reported above. Although less focused than Mine's, they tend in a similar direction: improving local institutions with a very broad definition, that could also include nonwar community structures; reducing inequalities; and addressing grievances. Both sets of recommendations aim at structural, long-term changes, sustained by being integrated in national political and administrative systems, formal and informal. However, they do not ignore the need to sometimes act urgently: in Mine's suggestions, power-sharing for example after contested elections, though this may sometimes risk becoming an unsustainable 'elite pact'; focus on job-creation and security for the WDR. The roles of outsiders could be down-sized, especially for traditional donor or former colonial powers as the emphasis is on local institutional improvements.

### *Security and violence reduction*

Organised, political violence has until recently been centre-stage of almost all academic, practitioner and policy debates: perhaps because Northern leaders felt potential threats from 'terrorists' based in unstable areas; because local elites were protected by international backers; or because public or political opinion occasionally demands action to halt particularly repugnant and visible conflicts. More recently we can discern a shift of attention to violence prevention or violence reduction: among the most prominent have been initiatives on citizen security, mainly in Latin America. There has been an alarming escalation of homicide in Latin and South America, little of it connected to traditional political conflicts; rather, revolving around narcotics and

gang 'wars'. Elsewhere, long after formal settlement of organised armed conflicts, a culture of violence became endemic: the failure of governments and their international partners to deliver legitimacy, justice, or jobs may generate societal violence on a massive scale without it quite passing a threshold into collective insurgency. Other factors may well be the availability of arms, violent ideologies, high status of gang membership and so on.

Third, the phrase 'persistent conflict' (apparently coined by the US military but following Azar's 'protracted social conflict') notes that most conflicts do not end neatly: rather, they morph into complex combinations and recombinations of combatants with their own financial mechanisms. It is probably high time to move on from the bell-shaped models that used to neatly depict 'conflict phases', in favour of acknowledging non-linear, messy, unpredictable mutations of dysfunctional and lethal social behaviours. How could 'early warning' and 'conflict prevention' operate in contexts of persistent, but not necessarily politicized, violence of the kind discussed by Rangelov and Kaldor (2012)? The 'human security' agenda touches on this, and 'citizen security' proposals encompass community-based initiatives, in cooperation with more responsive and accountable local security agencies. This agenda gives more scope for consideration of gender and age issues, as women and young people are deeply affected by 'cultures of violence', while more young men are drawn into gang roles.

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#### List of Abbreviations

ASEAN Association of South East Asian Nations  
AU African Union

CDA Collaborative for Development Action

CEWARN Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism

EU European Union

EWER Early Warning Early Response

GPPAC Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict

JICA Japan International Co-operation Agency

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

UK United Kingdom

UN United Nations

UNSG United Nations Secretary General

US United States