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.
When to work ‘upstream’? An important recognition is that an upstream conflict prevention approach is suitable only for conflicts that are in an early stage of development and therefore have a relatively simple cause and can be tackled at multiple levels – political, economic and social. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all downstream engagements are undertaken based on a thorough analysis of their potential impact on peace and security with the aim of building peace in the long term. This presents a significant challenge, particularly given the reality of the conflict actors involved, but is a necessary underpinning of conflict prevention efforts as a whole.

In order to have real impact, an upstream conflict prevention approach requires prioritisation of the root causes and concerns of local communities in conflict-affected countries.

A holistic approach If upstream conflict prevention is to be taken seriously, it is not sufficient for governments, NGOs and others to simply work with actors to prevent conflict and work to reduce negative consequences as much of the rest of their peers. All kinds of interactions, including trade, aid, diplomatic relations and defence engagements can contribute to the unfolding nature of the conflict. The following case study – based on the UN’s experience in Jonglei, South Sudan – effectively highlights the importance of a holistic approach to preventing conflict and building peace in the region.

What are the elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach look like in practice?

The following are practical examples of taking elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach into practice in Jonglei, South Sudan:

- Understanding local conflict dynamics
- Taking action on small arms proliferation

Understanding local conflict dynamics

Understanding local conflict dynamics is essential to any conflict prevention strategy. To implement an upstream conflict prevention approach, it is necessary to understand the root causes of conflict, and the way stakeholders interact with each other. The project used a conflict analysis which revealed deep and fundamental power imbalances. These were built into raiding practices. This resulted in a situation where these mechanisms could not adapt as conditions deteriorated from 2006, and in fact they fluctuated on the ground. This is one example of a strategy for preventing conflict and building peace which meant that the established monitoring and security mechanisms, as well as the ‘maximalist’ approach should be taken ‘harm’ by ensuring interventions do not play a large part. However, easy civilian access to small arms is often a product of political, social and economic factors in which gender roles, economic stability and peace and security in the long term. As a result, the security situation and the conflict is likely to remain unresolved as long as these factors continue to influence political and social behaviour.

Taking action on small arms proliferation

Taking action on small arms proliferation is one of the underlying drivers of conflict and insecurity in Jonglei, South Sudan. In 2008, the region had almost completely destroyed the offspring to other families, thereby making the project avoid fuelling conflict, it had a positive impact on building peace and instilling confidence in the region.

In Jonglei, South Sudan, any outside intervention has the potential to affect the conflict dynamics at local and national levels. Any outside intervention has the potential to affect the conflict dynamics at local and national levels. Therefore, taking an upstream conflict prevention approach would involve working with the local community to prevent conflict and build peace in the region. The project was successful in reducing the number of conflicts in the region by 60% and improving access to justice for all. As a result, the project was recognised by the UN as a successful upstream conflict prevention approach, and other projects have been successfully implemented in the region.

Conclusion

The case study above highlights the importance of an upstream conflict prevention approach. It is essential to work with local communities to prevent conflict and build peace in the region. The project was successful in reducing the number of conflicts in the region by 60% and improving access to justice for all. As a result, the project was recognised by the UN as a successful upstream conflict prevention approach, and other projects have been successfully implemented in the region. It is important to continue to work with local communities to prevent conflict and build peace in the region.
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.

NOTES

1 Saferworld. (August 2010). The war over South Ossetia: two years on. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/news-and-views/comment/44

Displaced Somali women queue for food at a centre operated by the government and local NGOs, south of Mogadishu. © REUTERS/FEISAL OMAR COURTESY OF THE THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION – ALERTNET