



INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

**FILLING GAPS AND MOVING FORWARD: IDENTIFYING
PRIORITIES FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY**

An Informal Experts Roundtable

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The EastWest Institute (EWI) organized an informal roundtable discussion with the goal of presenting the Conflict Prevention Program's flagship project, the International Task Force on Preventive Diplomacy (ITFPD) to the international community based in Brussels. The roundtable also aimed to engage the Brussels community in a brainstorming exercise that would generate constructive feedback on the project. The roundtable convened 15 participants from NGOs based in Brussels, European institutions and foreign governments – all of whom attended in their personal capacities as specialists in the fields of conflict prevention and/or preventive diplomacy.

The objectives of the roundtable were to:

- Discuss the ITFPD project and related initiatives with experts;
- Critically examine how the ITFPD project can fill existing gaps and move forward by identifying priorities for effective preventive diplomacy; and
- Explore possibilities for cooperation on the Task Force and related initiatives.

Ambassador Ortwin Hennig, EWI Vice President and Head of the Conflict Prevention Program, welcomed the participants and Marina Peunova, ITFPD Policy and Research Officer, introduced the Task Force project by outlining its underlying objective:

To devise practical mechanisms to generate domestic and international political will to shorten the time between early warning and effective response to violent conflict.

Ms. Peunova discussed the project's approach and its "operationalization" before posing a set of questions to the participants and opening the floor for discussion.

The brainstorming session that followed helped to identify and clarify many issues that are vital to the operational and theoretical aspects of the Task Force. The issues presented included:

Notional Aspects and Mainstreaming

An NGO representative highlighted the need to define *conflict prevention* and the importance of clarifying the concepts being used. As this participant noted, the Task Force project must take into account the advancements that have been made in the field of conflict prevention in the last 15 years. This speaker pointed out the importance of a needs assessment.

An EU representative discussed the need to mainstream conflict prevention (defined here as a set of activities spanning from diplomatic to development aspects). It is important to take into account the developments that have been made in the field of conflict prevention including small arms control as well as the Kimberly Process (also how only a very small percentage of conflict diamonds currently fuel actual conflicts). Institutional constraints should also be taken into consideration. The fact that many aspects are being mainstreamed creates competition among them and subsequently leads to institutional

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infighting. As seen from the example of the Democratic Republic of Congo, many different activities are happening in parallel, pointing to a real challenge of coordination on the ground. Hence, cooperation among different actors is needed, as well as the coordination of their efforts in short-term crisis management and in their long-term goals (including humanitarian assistance). A key obstacle to this is the competition that exists among NGOs for funding.

An EU representative reiterated the need to mainstream conflict prevention and referenced the progress made in this area, citing the recent successes in linking relief with development. The representative pointed out the need to make conflict prevention an appealing issue.

An NGO representative also raised the need for a concrete definition of *conflict prevention* and highlighted the need to identify at what stage the Task Force would intervene and what role it would play should preventive diplomacy measures fail and violence erupts. The Task Force must also consider its possible involvement in longer-term peace building. However, if this is not to be the goal of the Task Force it must justify its decision to not take a longer-term approach. Another participant reiterated the importance of the main goal, political mobilization, as was laid out by the Task Force.

An EWI representative clarified that the realistic role of the Task Force would essentially be conflict prevention.

The Use of Concrete Examples

A representative from a European think-tank mentioned the need to breakdown conflict prevention into something more manageable, for example, by comparing Aceh with Macedonia, or examining the political issue of water in the Middle East, or how trade policy affects conflict prevention. An NGO representative noted the need to link conflict prevention to specific conflicts in order to engage people more concretely. A representative from a European think-tank suggested tackling more contentious issues, for example, history and religion, which are “sensitive topics.”

An EU representative noted that when using concrete examples there is the risk of confusing conflict prevention with conflict management. The individual indicated that it is necessary to describe candidly the differences between the two.

An EWI representative noted that the goal of the Task Force is not to partake in solving actual problems, but to raise awareness among key decision makers and the broader public.

Another EWI representative discussed the possibility of involving Darfur, by bringing in those people who are affected by the conflict directly and asking them how we, “the international community”, have failed to prevent the crisis.

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Mobilizing Political Will

A European foundation representative highlighted the need to address these mechanisms at the national and international levels from the very beginning. Another participant noted that national mechanisms are very specific so there needs to be a case-by-case assessment. A representative from an embassy in Brussels expressed caution on the extent to which generic political will can be mobilized at the national level. He highlighted how the definition of *political will* would change from country to country, as well as the incentives for such a mechanism. He cautioned that political will cannot be separated from government capabilities; that conflict zones compete for donors; and governments often lack financial resources to act. He also alluded to the many potential conflicts competing for assistance and the simple lack of resources available for governments to mobilize. A representative from an organization that deals with relations between Europe and Asia mentioned the need to consider the differences between recipient and host countries, and noted that the Task Force project might be skewed towards recipient countries which, he added, all have different capacities. The individual referred to the South East Asian culture of non-interference, using as an example the case of Thailand's failed attempt to intervene in East Timor on behalf of ASEAN.

A representative from a European think-tank suggested that 'champion' countries, such as Canada or Japan, be identified and linked with the Task Force.

A peace building NGO representative insisted on the need to have an exceptional network of 'champions' who have a good understanding of conflict prevention plus the ability to reach appropriate constituencies. In this regard, he questioned the range of the Task Force's list of participants.

Another NGO representative pointed to the limited timeframe that national governments have between early warning and effective response and the need to convince them of the cost savings.

Operational Considerations

A representative from the EU questioned the amount of time that members of the Task Force should commit in order to effectively carry out their duties, as well as the practical mechanisms of their outreach. The individual suggested involving Task Force members in direct advocacy to make it more personal. The individual also raised the idea of local ownership by citing Somalia, where some of the most innovative measures have been taken on the ground. The individual suggested that, because it is a domestic process, initiatives must always have a domestic context. There is a crucial need to involve local stakeholders and actors, including experts from missions and desk officers who carry out the actual work and are involved in early assessment/warning, and ask them how the Task Force project can support them.

Another NGO representative countered this point by citing the case of Rwanda and the need for preventive diplomacy at the higher levels. This individual cautioned against

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following the general rule that local processes should come first. However, these two perspectives are not necessarily contradictory since both must focus on building civil society, while simultaneously taking a top-down approach.

An EWI representative drew participants' attention to the Institute's successful track record in South Eastern and Eastern Europe, and how the Task Force was taking EWI's modus operandi to a global level.

Another participant mentioned the contradiction in preventive diplomacy, for example, there is sometimes a strong belief in coercive diplomacy. He highlighted that preventive diplomacy is not always benign – but suggested that both types were necessary.

Media Strategy

An EU representative suggested a media strategy through which Task Force members would be asked to write articles for different types of magazines. The individual cautioned against being too ambitious at this early stage and not realistic and strategic enough. Another participant suggested that the Task Force project consider breaking down its main goal into very concrete mechanisms. Another participant recommended using low-key pre-conflict situations and citing situations that have generated media coverage. This individual noted that the media must be presented with concrete examples and real cost-benefit analyses. The problem lies in the Task Force's key mandate to advocate systematic things – something that generally does not generate media interest.

An NGO representative stressed the importance of targeting specific audiences and corresponding media outlets. Another representative suggested coinciding the Task Force events with important regional events in order to render EWI's work more visible and significant.

A representative of an Embassy in Brussels proposed the innovative idea of involving more skeptical (and therefore, more realistic) people in the Task Force at a very early stage of the project.

Conclusions

This EWI Task Force organizational roundtable meeting was convened to generate feedback from NGOs and governments and to obtain their views and insights on this project. The roundtable provided the EWI Task Force Secretariat with very useful comments and issues to be taken into consideration when formulating the Task Force's first policy paper to be published in anticipation of the Task Force's Inaugural meeting which will be held in Brussels on May 22, 2007.

While participants appreciated the added value of the Task Force, they also questioned whether this project might be too ambitious. In the weeks leading up to the first meeting of the Task Force, its Secretariat will tackle and incorporate the roundtable participants'

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suggestions for the previous needs assessments and for arriving at clear definitions of conflict prevention. The Secretariat will also address:

- The ambitious nature of the project;
- The balance between short-term management and longer-term peace building;
- The coordination of different actors involved in conflict prevention;
- The issue of using case studies as presented by specific conflicts;
- The examination of the sources of conflicts including history, religion, nationalism and national identity;
- The different levels of diplomatic involvement and coercive vs. preventive approaches;
- The use of development cooperation as a conflict prevention tool;
- The identification of actors at the national and international levels that we should approach (i.e., on the national level, not just foreign ministries, but also defense and treasury/finance departments);
- The advocacy of systemic approaches on national and international levels

Currently, the Secretariat is devising a clear media strategy that would make conflict prevention a reality through targeted publicity and by providing very clear 'selling points' and methods to the international community that address the need for a solidly institutionalized conflict prevention effort that utilizes the strengths and expertise of Task Force members and EWI.