



2 Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution

The more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war.

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Conflict may be a necessary – even formative – part of human existence, but violent conflict is not inevitable. So how and when is it possible to prevent a conflict from becoming violent? Or if it is too late for that, how can the devastating effects of violence be diminished?

Conflict prevention entails four pillars of short to medium-term activities: identifying situations that could result in violence, reducing manifest tensions, preventing existing tensions from escalating and removing sources of danger before violence occurs.

So the aim is not to deny the issues at stake, but to find non-violent ways of addressing them. For this reason, many practitioners prefer the terms “crisis prevention” or “violence prevention”. It is thus important to understand the many kinds of → violence and why they arise. While prevention activities should ideally be undertaken pro-actively, most are usually applied in a post-war setting, in order to prevent a renewed outbreak of fighting. Typical tools and methods include early warning, confidence- and security-building measures, preventive diplomacy and preventive peacekeeping, and peace education.

Conflict management focuses on how to control, handle and mitigate an open conflict and how to limit the potential damage caused by its escalation. Like prevention, it can include military and non-military components. It is mainly understood as trying to contain a conflict or, at best, reach a compromise, without necessarily resolving it. This means looking for ways to deal with conflict constructively and aiming to engage opposing sides in a cooperative process that can establish a workable system for managing their differences.

Conflict resolution focuses on the deep-rooted causes of conflict, including structural, behavioural and above all, attitudinal aspects. As with management, there are many different understandings of resolution, which practitioners and scholars have long been at pains to distinguish. It is often used as an umbrella term for the whole field, especially in Anglo-American literature. Generally speaking, conflict resolution aims to help parties explore, analyse, question and reframe their positions and interests as a way of transcending conflict. For many, the learning process entailed in resolving a conflict is just as important as the end state it hopes to achieve: the future is not seen as conflict-free, but as one where bonds and models exist that conflict parties can use to find further resolutions instead of resorting to violence.

Whose job is it?

All three concepts as presented here were developed not by conflict parties themselves, but by outsiders. All three propose some form of intervention, aiming to help key stakeholders within a conflict play a more de-escalating role. Building on established traditions of bilateral and international diplomacy, a wide range of structures has meanwhile developed under the auspices of the UN system. In recent years, regional organisations such as ASEAN, the AU and EU, and even military alliances, have taken the initiative in addressing the nexus between peace, human security and development. Amongst these different actors there is an urgent need for improved coordination and policy coherence as reflected, for example, in the European Council's comprehensive Gothenburg Programme.

Most interventions have deliberately addressed and been instigated by political leaders and societal elites. But focusing only on statesmen, military actors and foreign interventions fails to do justice to many other parallel strands of action. Providing good offices, safe spaces, independent monitoring or constructively engaging the media are just some of the roles being taken on by civil society organisations. An outstanding example of the latter is the "Peace Counts on Tour" project in which media reporters go to conflict zones to portray the work of successful peacebuilders. The resulting pictures and stories are brought back to the conflict zones in order to be spread as positive examples or models of how to build peace locally. There is also increasing recognition of the constructive impact that grass-roots movements, and even "spoilers", can have on sustaining peace. On an individual level, peace education, promoting empowerment and conflict sensitivity can be seen as relevant forms of prevention. In essence, everybody has a role to play.

Can that ever be enough?

It will always be easier to point to real casualties and damage caused by conflict than to name successful cases where they have been averted. Arguably, some of the largely peaceful transitions seen in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union can be attributed to successful prevention activities undertaken by the OSCE or the European Union. On the grass-roots level, smaller NGOs such as Berghof also contributed to prevention, for example by organising dialogue workshops during the fragile transition of post-Ceauşescu Romania. The UN's *Agenda for Peace* (1992) was a milestone reflecting a shift in focus from reactive towards more proactive measures. Sadly, of course, the world still faces many acute conflicts whose “bleeding” demands immediate attention.

Conflict management, born of the need to take quick and decisive action, is often criticised for merely “applying a band-aid” to cover deep wounds. Conflict resolution also has its limitations: urgency and expediency may result in root causes being overlooked or important stakeholders being excluded from negotiations. Moreover, one or more parties may refuse to cooperate. Lack of leverage or political will to seek a solution are commonly reported obstacles. Even if conflict parties would prefer peace to war, they may refuse to engage in talks because of risks to their security or fears of ending up worse off than before the resolution. Since peace accords are almost always concluded amongst armed parties, there is also a danger that conflict resolution will ultimately privilege these over other groups in society.

A frequent criticism leveled at both management and resolution approaches is that their objectives are not broad enough. Faced with the complexity, asymmetry and repeated manifestations of protracted conflicts, a number of scholars and practitioners have come to advocate a more comprehensive set of goals. They feel that this process of change is better captured in the concept of → conflict transformation.

Today's field may still be dominated by certain actors and their approaches that are designed and implemented based on a liberal thinking which is common in the West. However, after results that leave much to be desired there is a growing willingness to listen and learn from other ideas being put into practice around the world. From the South African *xotla*, to Japan's Fukuda doctrine, to the Colombian "peace village" of San José de Apartadó, there many people quietly "sweating" away at peacebuilding work, on all levels of society.

References and Further Reading

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Online Resources

- An Agenda for Peace**, www.un.org/Docs/SG/agpeace.html
- Gothenburg Programme**, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/122911.pdf
- Peace Counts on Tour**, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnFpdU-5BPI [in German]

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