



GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM CENTRE MONDIAL DU PLURALISME

Intersections: Pluralism and Conflict Prevention

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I. DIVERSITY, PLURALISM, CONFLICT AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

Diversity—a situation in which people with different racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds and/or national origins live within a shared political space—is a common feature of most modern societies. A *diverse* society is not automatically either a *divided* society or a *pluralistic* society—the latter two are the outcomes of responses to diversity.

One such response is pluralism, a normative response to diversity that begins with the choice to value diversity as an asset, rather than fear it as an automatic liability. Pluralism, in the definition adopted by the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP), is an ethic of respect that has mutual recognition and belonging as its core constitutive principles. In this

sense, pluralist societies are not accidents of history, but they require decisions and investments as well as sustained political will by the institutions of a society and its people to constantly reaffirm this choice and keep investing in it.

Pluralistic societies are not necessarily free of conflict, nor is the path to such a society conflict-free. What distinguishes pluralistic societies is a greater resilience to the challenges of diversity based on the willingness and ability to manage diversity peacefully: “the emergence of pluralistic narratives and identities make possible inclusive institutional reforms which in turn serve to strengthen habits and mindsets of respect for diversity.”¹ A pluralistic response to diversity thus facilitates outcomes of mutual recognition and belonging which have important conflict-preventing effects. If properly integrated into the wide range of policies and practices adopted by the many actors in the conflict

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** titled **Intersections: Practicing Pluralism**. Designed for practitioners, each paper maps an established field of practice or perspective on diversity, examining its conceptual foundations and applications to identify potential intersections with pluralism. By helping practitioners apply a pluralism lens to their work and by showing how many fields of practice already contribute to pluralism, our aim is to open a new global conversation about living peacefully with diversity.

prevention field, pluralism has the potential to strengthen conflict prevention efforts from the systemic and structural all the way through to the short-term, operational or crisis end.

Violent conflict between different groups in a diverse society is often the result of a different, non-pluralistic response to diversity. Following Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff,² the kind of conflict of concern here is “a form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties involved interprets the conflict, its causes and potential remedies along an actually existing or perceived discriminating divide” along one or more markers of diversity. Over the past several decades, and especially since the end of the Cold War, identity conflicts have become the major form of organized violence. From Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Sudan and South Sudan, from the former Yugoslavia to Syria and Sri Lanka, most identity conflicts occurred in deeply divided societies in which violence became the preferred choice of some who sought to eliminate diversity rather than manage it peacefully. The choice for violence rather than peaceful management of disputes, in turn, was facilitated by the growth and eventual predominance of narratives that justified exclusion and had a corrosive effect on institutions, practices and attitudes that value diversity. The resulting conflicts have exacted tremendous costs on the people affected by them, and their number has been growing again significantly of late.³

Efforts to prevent such conflicts can happen at different stages of the conflict cycle: at an early stage before violence becomes a serious risk; at crisis stage, when the outbreak of violence is highly likely or even imminent; after the outbreak of localized

violence with the aim to contain it and de-escalate the situation; and after violence has ended to prevent a relapse. This understanding has given rise to the conceptualization of different forms of conflict prevention. The most visible of such efforts often happen at the crisis stage and are primarily focused on stopping the outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violence. Termed ‘direct conflict prevention’ or ‘operational conflict prevention’,⁴ they are necessary, and where they succeed, they preserve human lives.

Yet, conflict prevention in the face of imminent violence or escalation—at best—creates some of the conditions in which pluralism can be adopted as an approach to diversity. It does not create pluralistic societies. However, a pluralism perspective can contribute to conflict prevention in the long term. In the context of diverse societies, structural⁵ and systemic⁶ conflict prevention, informed by such a perspective, can promote and sustain conditions in which people can peacefully coexist and resolve disputes without recourse to organized violence because diversity is respected.

To gain a better understanding of the relationship between pluralism and conflict prevention and of the contribution that pluralism perspective can add to conflict prevention, this paper begins with an overview of the existing literature on conflict prevention. In considering the why, when, how, who and where of conflict prevention, the paper examines a range of different approaches and assesses the extent to which pluralism and conflict prevention intersect. On the basis of this intersection, the paper identifies the gap that currently exists between the two. Here, the paper focuses particularly on the connections between pluralism, on the one hand,

and structural and systemic conflict prevention, on the other. The final two sections discuss how mainstreaming pluralism can create effective (and so far under-utilized) pathways to conflict prevention and conclude with some observations on the particular contribution that the GCP can make in this regard.

II. FIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT PREVENTION: WHY, WHEN, HOW, WHO AND WHERE

Conflict prevention can be approached from a number of different perspectives. While the following distinctions may appear, and perhaps indeed are, somewhat arbitrary and mask considerable overlap between them, they do offer a useful way to bring some structure to what has grown into a vast field of scholarship and practice. Some helpful themes can be identified in contemporary (academic) writing on conflict prevention, which lend themselves to connecting conflict prevention to pluralism and to related approaches that are relevant to the peaceful management of population diversity.

Why Should Conflict Be Prevented? A Rights- and Values-based Perspective

The first of the five perspectives on conflict prevention looks at it from the perspective of why conflict prevention is undertaken. In doing so, this section focuses on the “goals,” “values” and “principles” of conflict prevention and examines to

what extent there are normative underpinnings of conflict prevention that connect with pluralism.

The case for conflict prevention can be made on a normative and a pragmatic basis. Normatively, the human cost of violent conflict alone, in terms of lives lost and livelihoods destroyed, is a powerful incentive to invest in conflict prevention. While conflict prevention is thus not cost-free either, the costs of conflict are much higher. The pragmatic case for conflict prevention, therefore, is one that emphasizes the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention over conflict management. The complementarity of the normative and pragmatic cases for conflict prevention were summed up by Lakhdar Brahimi in his *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*⁷: “Prevention is clearly far more preferable for those who would otherwise suffer the consequences of war, and is a less costly option for the international community than military action, emergency humanitarian relief or reconstruction after a war has run its course.”⁸ The pragmatic case, alongside the normative one, has also been made by Michael E. Brown and Richard N. Rosecrance in a case-by-case analysis of nine examples of prevention efforts (five failures and four successes). These case analyses offered compelling evidence that conflict prevention efforts can succeed and that they are not as expensive either economically or politically as the alternative of allowing conflict to happen which imposes a variety of costs, including “refugee costs, military costs, economic costs, instability costs, and the costs associated with international humanitarian operations, conflict management operations, and conflict resolution operations.”⁹

While prevention efforts may succeed, they may also fail because they happen too late, are not decisive enough or employ ineffective tools. Conflict may also happen simply because of a lack of prevention. For the past 30 years, conflicts within states have cost 2.5 million lives, displaced countless more people from their homes and devastated livelihoods, destroying the futures of entire generations of children in the countries affected. According to one authoritative statistic,¹⁰ 48 intra-state conflicts were active in 2017 alone, causing almost 90,000 fatalities. Since the end of the Second World War, there have been more than 250 such conflicts in some 150 countries, more than half of which happened after 1989. The surge in intra-state, and especially ethnic, conflicts after 1989, the unprecedented suffering that it caused much closer to the doorstep of major Western states and alliances and much wider coverage of the surge in the media, triggered a significant shift in both academia and policy from crisis management to conflict prevention. The fundamental rationale for focusing on, and investing in, conflict prevention was the cost of conflict—human, financial, material, etc. Above all, the profound disconnect between the spirit of the “new world order” and the “end of history,” on the one hand, and the mass atrocities committed, for example, in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, on the other, necessitated a new approach to national and international security which would focus on human beings as individuals and members of particular communities.

In terms of international conflict prevention efforts, the 1990s began with the compelling case being made for conflict prevention in then-Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace*. Defining “preventive diplomacy” as “action

to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur,” Boutros-Ghali argued that the United Nations’ (UN) aims in the face of “brutal ethnic, religious, social, cultural or linguistic strife” need to be, among others, to “seek to identify at the earliest possible stage situations that could produce conflict, and to try through diplomacy to remove the sources of danger before violence results” and to “address the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression.” Yet, despite the promise of a reinvigorated UN, the 20th century ended with the sobering assessment in the Brahimi Report that unless UN member states “summon the political will to support the United Nations politically, financially and operationally,” the Organization will not become the force “capable of maintaining international peace and security, of securing justice and human rights and of promoting ... social progress and better standards of life” envisaged by Boutros-Ghali.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the effectiveness of international conflict prevention, there can be no question that conflict prevention is driven by a fundamental concern for human rights and freedoms and that their protection is an effective approach to conflict prevention. For example, Shedrack Agbakwa argues that “effective enforcement of economic and social rights is indispensable in realizing the goals of conflict prevention,”¹¹ while Clive Baldwin, Chris Chapman and Zoë Gray emphasize that “when minority rights are enshrined in constitutions, and implemented through electoral, justice and education systems before a conflict has the chance to fester, there

is a chance that conflict might not occur at all.”¹² These and other such approaches are based on a similar logic to that underpinning pluralism, namely that where people and their rights are not recognized, inequality and exclusion are likely to create conditions in which violent conflict is possible and probable.¹³ This was forcefully expressed in the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948: “if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression ... human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”¹⁴ This was echoed over half a century later by Kofi Annan in his progress report to the UN General Assembly on conflict prevention when he noted that “democratic governance depends both on a legal framework that protects basic human rights and provides a system of checks and balances and on functioning rule-of-law institutions; it is the absence of precisely these characteristics that often leads people to feel they must resort to violence to be heard.”¹⁵

To the extent that there is any debate in the literature on these basic commitments to a rights- and values-based approach to conflict prevention, it relates to the stage at which they come into play. The question on the values and principles of conflict prevention, thus, is primarily one about when and how best to implement which particular values. As such it is connected to the main conceptual distinctions between direct, structural, relapse and systemic prevention and whether (and when) political, economic or military means may be the most effective policy tools to prevent conflict.

While the paper returns to these issues in more detail below, it is worth pointing out that these

conceptual distinctions are useful for analytical, and to some extent operational, purposes. However, the boundaries between them are porous, and there is an acknowledgement in both the theory and practice of conflict prevention that there is a general underpinning logic permeating the different types and tools of conflict prevention.

As noted in the Carnegie Corporation’s 1997 report on *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, “effective preventive strategies rest on three orientations: early responses to signs of trouble; a comprehensive, forward-looking approach to counteract the risk factors that trigger violent conflict; and an extended effort to resolve the underlying causes of violence.”¹⁶ Such conflict prevention strategies “include putting in place international legal systems, dispute resolution mechanisms, and cooperative arrangements; meeting people’s basic economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian needs; and rebuilding societies that have been shattered by war or other major crises.”¹⁷

This is broadly reflected in the academic literature on conflict prevention, which considers human rights violations as among the key causes of violent conflict, while rejecting responses that are not grounded in a human rights framework as generally insufficient for conflict prevention from both a normative and practical perspective.¹⁸

This general view is also apparent when one considers the practice of conflict prevention. For example, a comparison of the crisis and conflict preventions strategies of France, the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany found that their approaches, by-and-large, are integrated

throughout the conflict cycle, emphasizing that all four countries have adopted comprehensive approaches to conflict prevention and “have many instruments at their disposal for both short- and long-term prevention” and have come “to prioritise security through a long-term stabilisation approach.”¹⁹

The rights-based underpinnings of conflict prevention and the appreciation of, if not outright preference for, long-term structural and systemic prevention offer a clear opportunity for considering whether, and how, a pluralism perspective could usefully inform conflict prevention approaches. This foundational connection between conflict prevention and pluralism—both of which are grounded in a fundamental appreciation of human rights—will, therefore, inform the subsequent discussion of the remaining four perspectives on conflict prevention, examining the when, how, who and where of conflict prevention. This will provide a sound basis for identifying the gap that currently exists between conflict prevention and pluralism and how the work of the GCP might work to fill it with a view towards mainstreaming pluralism into conflict prevention.

When Does Conflict Prevention Happen? A Perspective on Timing in the Conflict Cycle

Across the existing literature, there is broad consensus that conflict prevention principally takes two forms, namely structural (long-term) and direct (short-term, operational or crisis) prevention.²⁰

A third understanding of conflict prevention relates to efforts to avoid a relapse into violence after a

conflict has been settled. This view is more closely associated with the related field of post-conflict peace- and state-building.²¹ And finally, there is a perspective that considers conflict prevention in the context of systemic efforts to “to reduce the global risk of conflict,” including “policies against money-laundering, arms-trafficking, and drugs-trafficking, as well as policies dealing with development and trade, norms, and legal institutions.”²²

Introduced by then-Secretary General Kofi Annan in his progress report on conflict prevention to the UN General Assembly in July 2016, the notion of systemic prevention considerably broadens the scope of conflict prevention as a task for a wide variety of actors following the rationale that, if “combined with ongoing, country-specific structural and operational preventive measures, systemic initiatives further bolster the chances of peace.”²³

There are some important nuances to these broad conceptions of different forms of conflict prevention. For example, the Carnegie Corporation’s influential report states that “structural prevention—or peace-building—comprises strategies to address the root causes of deadly conflict, so as to ensure that crises do not arise in the first place, or that, if they do, they do not recur.”²⁴ Moreover, the report also emphasizes that “peace-building strategies are of two broad types: the development, by governments acting cooperatively, of international regimes to manage the interactions of states, and the development by individual states (with the help of outsiders as necessary) of mechanisms to ensure bedrock security, well-being, and justice for their citizens.”²⁵ It thus subsumes two otherwise separately distinguished forms of

conflict prevention, namely relapse prevention and systemic prevention, under the broader notion of structural prevention, emphasizing the target of such prevention efforts (the underlying or root causes of conflict) as primary criteria for its definition, rather than the timing of their application in the conflict cycle (pre- or post-violence). The explicit equation of conflict prevention with peace-building also implies, similar to a pluralism perspective, that conflict prevention needs to be seen as much as a sustained process as a sustainable result.

At the same time, structural prevention, in the view of the Carnegie Corporation and others, is heavily focused on institutions. This contrasts with a pluralism perspective which emphasizes that “promoting pluralism ... requires both ‘institution work’ and ‘culture work’” and that “successful pluralism requires both ‘hardware’ and ‘software.’”²⁶ The hardware of pluralism are the institutions that determine the parameters of individuals’ interactions, such as constitutions and legal frameworks and the executive, legislative and judicial institutions they establish. The software is the political culture, the social capital and the cultural habits that shape and reflect individual attitudes to recognition and belonging in a society on a daily basis.

The focus on people’s actions, rather than their values, attitudes and beliefs, is even more pronounced in direct or operational conflict prevention where the focus of preventive efforts is on averting an immediate outbreak or further escalation or spread of violence. Including measures such as “fact-finding and monitoring missions, negotiation, mediation, the creation of channels

for dialogue among contending groups, preventive deployments, and confidence-building measures,”²⁷ operational prevention seeks to influence behaviour directly through incentives and pressures and by altering presumably rational, interest-based cost-benefit calculations,²⁸ not through a change in the values, attitudes and beliefs that underpin it. While it would not be reasonable or realistic to expect this kind of conflict prevention that is necessary in the short term to focus on anything but the actions likely to start or escalate violence, an important implication from a pluralism perspective is that it is most usefully applied in the context of structural prevention efforts. Put differently, pluralism can likely be most effective as an upstream complement to conflict prevention, either in the narrow sense of structural prevention or in the broader sense of it also including post-conflict peace-building. Importantly, this means that a pluralism perspective is also useful when it comes to the mediation and negotiation of peace agreements and post-conflict constitutions as early, upstream efforts in relapse prevention.²⁹

How Can Conflicts Be Prevented? A Perspective on Policy Tools and Their Effectiveness

Considering conflict prevention from the perspective of how it happens, that is, which means are employed, involves a distinction between the different diplomatic (or political), economic and military tools that are employed. It also links to the debate on which of these tools are appropriate at which point in the conflict cycle (see above) and how effective they are.³⁰ The question of how conflict can be prevented thus has as its starting point the broad

notion that “conflict prevention aims at channelling conflict to non-violent behaviour by providing incentives for peaceful accommodation and/or raising the costs of violent escalation for conflict parties”³¹ and therefore the recognition that conflict prevention can be both cooperative and coercive.³²

For analytic clarity and consistency, it is useful to consider the arsenal of conflict prevention tools from the perspective of when in the conflict cycle they are brought to bear. Structural and systemic prevention, as noted above, are long-term efforts to address so-called root causes of conflict. Here different authors generally agree that conflict prevention tools are aimed at reducing security concerns; promoting political and social justice, human rights and economic development; and overturning patterns of cultural and social discrimination.³³ A range of specific policies lend themselves to realize these aims, including different forms of development assistance (economic aid, structural reform programs, institutional reform and capacity building, etc.) as well as strengthening the international rules-based order and the human rights pillar within it. This reflects the duality of prevention efforts aimed at both state-based structural prevention and systemic prevention. These efforts are largely cooperative in nature, and their prominence in the agendas of international organizations and individual (donor) states reflects the shift to long-term efforts since the late-1990s noted above.

The link between development and conflict prevention is particularly pronounced in the postulated connection between conflict and poverty, advocated most prominently in the late-1990s and early-2000s.³⁴ It quickly became the cornerstone of

many Western approaches to conflict prevention. For example, as noted by Annika Björkdahl, a 1998 Norwegian report on conflict prevention proposed “a long-term approach to prevention where development aid is used to support preventive action, since it detects a close relationship between poverty and conflict.”³⁵ Similarly, David Carment and Karen Garner note that, in 1997, the “Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs ... propose[d] early conflict prevention strategies as the corner-stone of Sweden’s developmental assistance programmes.”³⁶ With a subsequent re-evaluation of the conflict–poverty link and a greater appreciation of the complexity of conflict causes to include a broader range of horizontal inequalities,³⁷ development aid has also undergone a broadening of goals and tools. The notion of thinking and acting politically in the context of development programs³⁸ has contributed to a more integrated and comprehensive approach to development that is conscious of the multi-faceted social, economic and political challenges that development needs to address and that has been embraced by most multinational and bilateral development partners. The shift is also apparent in the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The latest SDG report, for example, stresses in this context that “investing in good governance, improving the living conditions of people, reducing inequality and strengthening the capacities of communities can help build resilience to the threat of conflict and maintain peace in the event of a violent shock or long-term stressor.”³⁹

At the crisis end of conflict prevention, as noted in the previous section, the focus of activities is different and consequently, so are the policy tools

employed. When it comes to staving off an imminent outbreak, escalation or spread of violence, it is important to apply means that can affect people's calculation of the costs and benefits of their actions very rapidly. The broad consensus in the academic and policy literature is that international conflict prevention efforts involve diplomatic, economic and military means which can be both cooperative and coercive, and that there is generally a trajectory of escalation from the cooperative diplomatic and economic to the coercive military as a last resort. For example, Stefan Wolff and Oya Dursun-Özkanca note that “diplomatic interventions normally precede other forms of intervention,” and that it is only the “failure of diplomatic efforts to change the behaviour of conflict parties on the ground [that] often leads to either more coercive measures applied to both parties or selective coercion and/or support for individual parties.”⁴⁰ Among the specific tools available to conflict preventers are confidence-building measures, fact-finding measures, mediation, (conditional) technical economic and military assistance, embargoes and sanctions, and finally (humanitarian) military interventions.⁴¹

The development focus of many structural conflict prevention efforts has been broadened over the last decade or so and is now also informed more consistently by a human rights-based approach, which in turn is further strengthened by systemic conflict prevention efforts that include the development of international institutions and legal regimes.⁴² While human rights-informed structural and systemic conflict prevention, focused on human and minority rights,⁴³ as well as social and economic rights,⁴⁴ often appears constrained and ineffective in the face of resistance from states,

the international legal human and minority rights system nonetheless helps to “shape development and governance processes and outcomes to be consistent with human rights, which reinforces the foundations of pluralism.”⁴⁵ However, the origins of the current international legal human and minority rights system also originated, in part, as a response to diversity “as a potential trigger of violence and abuse, prompting the UN to elaborate standards to prevent these outcomes and accommodate diversity.”⁴⁶

By contrast, a pluralism perspective is less instrumental and more normative than developmental and human rights-based approaches to conflict prevention. Pluralism explicitly recognizes diversity as an asset in and of itself that is worth protecting and promoting, not as a threat to be managed. This is so even though, because of its ultimately conflict-preventing effects, pluralism can be used to justify a particular approach to upstream conflict prevention in an instrumental way—without losing sight of its fundamentally different take on diversity. This can also be useful in relation to some tools of direct conflict prevention. If pluralism begins with recognition of diversity, this can inform, for example, confidence-building measures and mediation by making sure that such efforts not only recognize (and involve) actors with the capability to inflict violence but also build a broader, pluralistic coalition for change to address the causes of conflict. Likewise, once the threat of imminent violence has been averted, and a new political settlement or social contract is being negotiated, adopting a pluralism perspective can enhance the effectiveness of negotiated outcomes to contribute to conflict (and relapse) prevention by making negotiation processes

more participatory and inclusive and by empowering participants to achieve pluralistic agreements.⁴⁷

Whose Task Is Conflict Prevention? An Actor Perspective

Considering the actors who are involved in efforts to prevent conflict at different stages of a conflict cycle offers a fourth perspective on the field of conflict prevention. Here analyses are often concerned with the strengths and weaknesses of particular actors and their approaches⁴⁸ or with ways in which cooperation and coordination between them happens or needs to be improved.⁴⁹ This literature is rather extensive and involves, beyond the “traditional” actors of states and international organizations, considerations of private sector actors⁵⁰ and civil society organizations.⁵¹

Despite this proliferation of actors, conflict prevention is first and foremost the task of states whose primary responsibility for the protection of their citizens from harm has been affirmed over and over again in relevant international documents. The *Agenda for Peace* asserted in 1992 that “the foundation-stone of this [conflict prevention] work is and must remain the State. Respect for its fundamental sovereignty and integrity are crucial to any common international progress.”⁵² More than a decade later, the UN General Assembly’s 2005 World Summit Outcome Document emphasized that “each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”⁵³

Yet equally importantly, there has been a recognition, albeit often more rhetorically than

practically, that state sovereignty is not only a right (to non-interference and territorial integrity) but also a responsibility. Where states cannot or will not live up to their responsibility to protect their citizens from harm, there is a responsibility of the international community to act with the cooperation of the states affected, or if necessary without it. The willingness, in the first half of the 1990s, to achieve a balance between sovereignty as a right of states and as a responsibility towards their citizens, was articulated most comprehensively in Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng’s *Masses in Flight*. In the study, they argued “that the concept of sovereignty cannot be dissociated from responsibility,” “that a state should not be able to claim the prerogatives of sovereignty unless it carries out its internationally recognized responsibilities to its citizens,” and that where they refuse to cooperate with the international community to do so, “they should expect calibrated actions that range from diplomatic demarches to political pressures, sanctions, or, as a last resort, military intervention.”⁵⁴

While there is clearly a space for actors other than the state to undertake conflict prevention tasks, the opportunities that other actors have within this space remain constrained by the state. This is so for three main reasons. First, regional and international organizations are only as capable as their member states allow them to be and can only act where and when they permit them to do so.

Second, individual states on their own, or in so-called “coalitions of the willing,” are in turn constrained in their ability to act unilaterally in a rules-based international order. They may have the capability and political will to set these legal rules

aside, but only at lasting cost to the rules-based order itself. Arguably, this has been a problem since NATO's intervention in 1999 in the Kosovo crisis—perhaps legitimate as a last resort to protect a vulnerable population, but not legally authorized by the UN Security Council.⁵⁵

Third, non-state actors, especially international civil society and NGOs depend on states both for the consent to act and often for funding to do so. Funding dependency, moreover, constrains autonomy: NGOs often are simply “sub-contractors” to foreign ministries or state-based development agencies.

These constraints apply differently across the spectrum of conflict prevention activities: they are more stringent at the operational end, less so at the structural end. Especially when it comes to very early, upstream prevention, there is a larger space for state and non-state actors, including regional and international organizations to operate, as the perceived likely challenges to state sovereignty as a right are less acute. Economic aid, technical assistance, support for institutional reform and capacity building (including the inclusive and participatory processes to achieve it) are more cooperative in nature and often represent the very inducements that states and elites may crave while simultaneously achieving domestic governance outcomes that have conflict-preventing effects. While even such cooperative measures may have a degree of conditionality attached to them, this is in clear contrast to coercive measures such as economic sanctions and threat or actual use of force which remain in the prerogative of sovereign states.

That said, there also remains a space for non-state actors to become involved in cooperative efforts at the operational end of conflict prevention, especially in the context of confidence-building measures, fact-finding missions and mediation efforts. In many such situations, specialist NGOs will cooperate closely with state actors and regional and international organizations.⁵⁶

A consideration of the different roles that the range of actors working for conflict prevention can assume across the range of relevant activities throughout the conflict cycle also sheds light on how a pluralism perspective may add value to conflict prevention. The multiplicity of actors involved creates different “entry points” for pluralism into conflict prevention. Working with individual states—as actors which are concerned about conflict within their own boundaries or beyond them—and with regional and international organizations to inform their structural and operational conflict prevention policies from a pluralism perspective may lead to the creation of sustainable coalitions for change. These coalitions will also contribute to more effective conflict prevention at the systemic level when it comes to (re-)shaping regional and international legal orders that often provide at least the minimum framework for the pursuit of pluralism.⁵⁷

Working with NGOs represents a different entry point. It can contribute to informing their structural conflict prevention work across different communities and can produce another kind of leverage on state actors to commit to the principles of pluralism at different levels of governance from the local to the national. It can also help ensure that a pluralism perspective informs the design of

inclusive and participatory processes of confidence-building, mediation and negotiation. Adding a pluralism perspective to fact-finding missions also may affect the way in which facts are established and acted upon: engagement with all relevant actors, not just those who bear arms; considering the causes and consequences of violence in a more comprehensive way of how they affect different communities and individuals within them; and designing responses that can create or restore conditions in which diversity is recognized positively and individuals across society can develop a sense of belonging.

An actor perspective on conflict prevention, thus, enables a potentially more nuanced, effective and tailored approach to informing conflict prevention from a pluralism perspective. Understanding the roles and capabilities of different actors, and their relationships with each other, is critical to any efforts towards mainstreaming pluralism into conflict prevention (see Section IV below).

Where Does Conflict Prevention Happen? A Regional Perspective

Finally, there is also a distinct strand in the literature that looks at conflict prevention from the perspective where it happens. Here the focus is primarily on specific single or comparative case studies of individual conflicts, countries or regions.⁵⁸ This is also an important angle from a pluralism perspective for two reasons: on the one hand, it provides a better sense of cases where, and whose, prevention efforts already are (or are not) informed by a pluralism perspective; on the other, it can establish whether there is a relationship between a pluralism-informed approach to conflict prevention and the success and

failure of relevant policies. This second aspect will be prominently in the focus of Section III. The breadth and depth of existing analysis in this area by now is impressive, and taking a regional perspective is meant to illustrate it, not to give a comprehensive account of it.

The importance of regional organizations for conflict prevention has been highlighted on many occasions. *An Agenda for Peace* specifically notes that “regional arrangements or agencies in many cases possess a potential that should be utilized in serving the functions covered in this report: preventive diplomacy, peace-keeping, peacemaking and post-conflict peace-building.”⁵⁹ In fact, Chapter 8 of the United Nations Charter specifically states that “nothing in the present Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations.”⁶⁰ While this still leaves the UN Security Council as ultimate arbiter of any military intervention for the purposes of conflict prevention, regional organizations nonetheless gain a significant degree of authority and legitimacy for their own conflict prevention activities short of coercive military action. The degree to which different regional organizations have made use of this space, and the extent to which they have been successful in doing so, however, varies considerably. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of conflict prevention initiatives and mechanisms at the regional level,⁶¹ especially in Europe and Africa.⁶²

Within Europe and the Euro-Atlantic region, the OCSE, and its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), were specifically created with conflict prevention in mind. Originally set up in 1975 with the *Helsinki Final Act*, the main aim of this unique regional arrangement was the promotion of “better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt against their security” and a firm commitment of the participating states to “settle disputes among them by peaceful means in such a manner as not to endanger international peace and security, and justice.”⁶³ This initial focus on conflict between states, driven by the logic of superpower competition during the Cold War, soon gave way to a new emphasis on conflict within states in the wake of the collapse of communism after 1989.

When the heads of state or government of the participating states of the CSCE met in Paris in 1990, they recognized the fundamentally changed situation and the new challenges ahead. In the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe* agreed to at that meeting, they affirmed “that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop that identity without any discrimination and in full” and that “friendly relations among our peoples, as well as peace, justice, stability and democracy, require that the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of national minorities be protected and conditions for the promotion of that identity be created equality before the law.”⁶⁴ At that meeting, they also created a new institution, the Conflict Prevention Centre, whose

mandate includes early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation.⁶⁵ Another key institution, created by the Organization in 1992, is the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), whose mandate is to “provide ‘early warning’ and, as appropriate, ‘early action’ at the earliest possible stage in regard to tensions involving national minority issues which have not yet developed beyond an early warning stage, but, in the judgement of the High Commissioner, have the potential to develop into a conflict within the CSCE area, affecting peace, stability or relations between participating States.”⁶⁶ The institution of the HCNM has played a critical role in defusing situations of potential conflict over the years, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and has issued a series of eight thematic recommendations on national minorities, including on education⁶⁷ and linguistic⁶⁸ rights, public participation⁶⁹ and access to justice.⁷⁰

In Africa, conflict prevention has been high on the agenda of both the pan-African Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union (AU, established in 2001), as well as several subregional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). While these have all committed to different aspects of conflict prevention, their effectiveness is often limited by capacity problems, especially concerning structural conflict prevention.⁷¹

This has been particularly obvious in relation to the establishment of early warning capabilities.⁷² For example, IGAD’s Conflict Early Warning and

Response Mechanism (CEWARN), established in 2002, was initially conceived as focused on cross-border pastoral conflicts and “managed to achieve some success in reducing armed violence among pastoralist communities, as well as enhancing trust and collaboration among member states in addressing regional peace and security challenges.”⁷³ Expanded thematically and geographically in a new Strategy Framework in 2012, however, critical challenges have remained concerning financial sustainability and turning early warning insights into conflict prevention action.⁷⁴

At the level of operational prevention, the track record has been slightly better, however, albeit the outcomes of operational prevention efforts have not always been sustainable. Staying with the example of IGAD, the organization has been the main actor mediating in the civil war in South Sudan since December 2013. Multiple agreements were reached between the warring factions only to break down or not be implemented at all. The latest of these, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, was concluded in September 2018, but violence, especially sexual violence against women, has continued almost unabated.

Beyond the capability difference, another important distinction that can be drawn between African and European approaches to conflict prevention is the fact that there has been a marked decoupling of human rights from conflict prevention in Africa, with much of the emphasis in operational prevention placed on violence reduction or containment.⁷⁵ This is, in turn, exacerbated by the lack of credible structural prevention efforts and the limited

effectiveness of international cooperation. While there has been long-standing support from both the UN and the EU for developing African capabilities, there remain critical funding and coordination gaps, including at the strategic level between external organizations, including their member states, the AU and its subregional organizations.⁷⁶ Moreover, China’s growing role in African conflict prevention (and management) efforts is likely to further this decoupling of the fundamental principles and values that underpin both pluralism and conflict prevention from the concrete efforts undertaken by African regional arrangements.⁷⁷ There is potentially a similar problem with the EU’s stronger focus on resilience as a guiding principle for its external conflict prevention efforts.⁷⁸

III. IDENTIFYING THE GAP: CONFLICT PREVENTION FROM A PLURALISM PERSPECTIVE

This paper has so far provided a broad overview of the contemporary theory and practice of conflict prevention and has pointed out, where appropriate, connections with pluralism. The remainder of the paper will elaborate on these connections in a more systematic way. This section, discusses the pluralism gaps in conflict prevention.

There are three types of gaps that can be identified between conflict prevention and pluralism: in terms of underlying theories of conflict causation, in terms of the application of policies to conflict prevention and in terms of the timing of pluralism-informed prevention initiatives.

Theories of Conflict Causation

Pluralism is an ethic of respect for diversity that begins with the recognition of diversity as an asset rather than a threat and aims at building and sustaining a society in which everyone can feel they belong. Consequently, a lack of recognition (and a lack of policies to implement it) constitutes a profound failure in responding to the many challenges of diversity in a positive way and enables prolonged human rights violations and generates long-term grievances that fuel narratives of exclusion. Without this institutional underpinning of pluralistic society, conflict is much more likely to result. Pluralism recognizes that institutions alone are not sufficient to sustain peaceful societies in the long term and emphasizes the need for a political culture that embeds an ethic of respect for diversity more broadly in society.⁷⁹ Yet, from the perspective of a pluralism-informed theory of conflict causation, it is useful to begin with a focus on institutions. Here, we have solid evidence that horizontal inequalities are particularly conflict-prone⁸⁰ and that it is political exclusion in particular that has conflict-generating properties.⁸¹ These views have been, and are, widely shared in conflict prevention literature and across different forms of conflict prevention from structural and systemic to operational and to relapse prevention.⁸²

As noted earlier, this failure to recognize diversity has been addressed in conflict prevention practice with a shift away in structural prevention efforts from a sole focus on poverty elimination to a more politically and institution-focused approach.⁸³ In operational and relapse prevention, there has also been a greater recognition of principles that are

closely associated with a pluralism perspective, namely inclusion and participation.⁸⁴

Pluralism and conflict prevention, much like the broader field of conflict studies, have a relatively similar approach when it comes to understanding the underlying causes of conflict as rooted in inequalities that are institutionally entrenched and embedded in a non-pluralistic culture. This pluralism focus on underlying causes makes it a particularly useful perspective for structural and systemic prevention efforts, a topic which will be returned to below. It is, however, also noticeable that pluralism has a much less well-articulated perspective on what pushes societies towards actual violent conflict (i.e., when does the possibility of conflict become a reality). This is an important issue to understand from an operational conflict prevention perspective, and here the notion of feasibility is critical, as grievances alone (based in the perception of horizontal inequalities) are insufficient to explain conflict outbreak, but what is also required are the means and opportunities to pursue conflict.⁸⁵ This does not mean that a pluralism perspective cannot contribute to operational conflict prevention, which it can and does, as indicated above. Nonetheless, it reaffirms its normative and pragmatic orientation towards upstream, and very early, prevention efforts, grounded, in part, also in an understanding of pluralism as a process and as requiring constant institution work and culture work.

Conflict Prevention Policies

Conflict prevention has a mixed track record of success. The reasons for this are many, and they include that what is done is often too little or too

late, that efforts by the multitude of actors in this area are poorly coordinated or incoherent, and that those situations in which there are visible attempts to prevent conflict are amongst the most difficult and protracted crises where the probability of success is low to begin with. Related to this latter point, many conflict prevention initiatives, especially those aimed at structural and systemic prevention, go unnoticed or are not obviously branded as conflict prevention. They are also harder to assess as prevention successes: where a crisis is merely possible, rather than imminent, it is more difficult to determine whether it did not occur as the result of the application of a particular conflict prevention policy.

The difficulty to assess conflict prevention success, however, does not mean that we cannot come to a better understanding of what policies may make a useful contribution to avert violent conflict based on a proper examination of conflict causes. It is here, that a pluralism perspective can be particularly useful: if we have sound evidence that a non-pluralistic response to diversity is conflict-causing while a pluralistic response offers a framework in which the challenges of diversity can be addressed in ways that offer opportunities for peaceful accommodation, it is only logical to consider pluralism as a set of ideas to inform conflict prevention. This is not to argue that violent intra-state conflicts are only a result of mismanaged diversity or that pluralism is a sufficient response, but it is reasonable to contend that violent conflicts in diverse societies are unlikely to be prevented without a pluralism-informed response.

The connections between conflict prevention and diversity are, in other words, quite obvious at one

level and less so at another. Many of today's conflicts have their origins in ill-conceived approaches to diversity, but not all drivers of conflict are necessarily receptive to a pluralism "treatment."

From this perspective, looking at conflict prevention through a pluralism lens can help identify appropriate strategies to address causes of conflict. First of all, as noted at several points previously, at the crisis management end of conflict prevention (i.e., operational conflict prevention), a pluralism lens serves a less obvious purpose. While pathways to pluralism are often long and require persistent commitments to institution work and culture work, they all begin with the choice to value diversity. During crisis management, this means, first of all, a focus on inclusion: all relevant groups in a society should be part of an effort to avert a crisis. This would constitute a choice for pluralism at a critical juncture in a society's development and reverse a trajectory away from pluralism and create a foundation from which more fundamental causes of conflict could be addressed in the longer term, thus effectively contributing to conflict prevention. While inclusion, or inclusiveness, is frequently considered when designing crisis interventions, it often focuses on identifying those actors with the means and motivation to undermine any de-escalation efforts.⁸⁶ This often excludes a significant number of other actors that would be important from a pluralism perspective, thus limiting the potential of crisis management to be at the beginning of a journey towards a more pluralistic society, simply by creating a precedent for exclusion rather than inclusion.

The latter point is quite striking when we consider several conflict prevention efforts both from a

longer-term structural and short-term operational perspective.⁸⁷ The post-election violence in Kenya in 2007–8 was, in the words of Frances Stewart, caused by “the simultaneous existence of socio-economic and political exclusion”⁸⁸ which had been neglected in aid policy for decades.⁸⁹ Similar points could be made about post-election violence in Ivory Coast in 2010–11 and in Zimbabwe in 2008.

From a pluralism perspective there are several important insights here. First, neglecting horizontal inequalities and the sense of exclusion and frustration they create, contributes to an environment in which violent conflict becomes increasingly likely over time. Second, in each case, a disputed election in the context of a winner-takes-all presidential system is a powerful trigger for the outbreak of violence. Third, in two of the cases—Kenya and Zimbabwe—interventions to stop the further escalation and spread of violence led to temporary power-sharing arrangements allowing the incumbent to stay in office and the defeated challenger to participate in new governance arrangements. In Ivory Coast, by contrast, the incumbent was swept from power and the challenger assumed presidential office. Arguably, neither Ivory Coast nor Zimbabwe have become more pluralistic societies since then, indicating that pro-pluralism policies cannot be short term or time-limited if they are to lead to transformational change. Fourth, in Kenya, the jury on whether the country is now more pluralistic may still be out, but other pro-pluralism policies have contributed to greater stability, notably a program of devolution that has distributed (political and economic) power more equitably between the centre and the regions and across regions.⁹⁰ This points to another important

insight, namely that there are many possible pathways to reduce, among others, political and economic exclusion, in this case transitional power-sharing arrangements and longer-term proliferation of arenas of meaningful representation and participation of all segments in a diverse society through devolution, and more equitable vertical and horizontal distribution of power.⁹¹

The latter two points are also evident when we consider the contribution a pluralism perspective can make to post-conflict conflict prevention (or relapse prevention). Transitions from violent conflict to peace are notoriously fraught with difficulties, many of them clearly identified in the academic and policy literature. Yet, proposed solutions vary and evidence marshalled in their support is often far from conclusive. While this is not the place to repeat many of the well-worn arguments,⁹² a pluralism perspective can add value when it comes to making choices during post-conflict transitions. For example, while there may be an argument for a particular sequence in which causes of past conflicts are addressed (e.g., security before justice) or which parties have a say in which decisions (e.g., pre-determining seat allocations in parliament or government), a pluralism perspective can help identify to what extent such measures are facilitating or obstructing a pathway to pluralism.⁹³

To illustrate these points, two examples—South Tyrol and Northern Ireland—are very instructive. To begin with the latter, an agreement reached in 1998 and revised several times subsequently, has successfully addressed significant horizontal inequalities between the region’s main identity communities. It was negotiated in an inclusive process involving not

only those with the capacity to commit violence (but obliged them to abandon violence) and has fundamentally altered the calculations of elites and their followers towards the use of violence. While the political process was, and remains, volatile, the peace process (i.e., the overwhelming embrace of all significant political actors of non-violence) has become deeply entrenched in Northern Irish society and seems unlikely, for now, to be reversed. Given that many of the core principles of pluralism have underpinned the agreement (and the process of its negotiation and implementation), this is clearly evidence of the utility of a pluralism perspective, especially in the context of relapse prevention. At the same time, the fact that Northern Ireland is still far away from being a truly pluralistic society in which an ethic of respect of diversity is truly embedded in society is evidence of the length of time it takes to overturn cultural habits grown over generations. Yet, the success of preventing a recurrence of violent conflict clearly speaks to the validity of a pluralism perspective that emphasizes a process of continuing efforts at both institution work and culture work.

In South Tyrol, a history of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination directed at the German-speaking minority by successive Italian governments since the territory was awarded to Italy after the end of the First World War led to a brief violent conflict in the late-1950s and early 1960s. An agreement and an implementation plan (detailing 137 specific measures) were finally achieved in 1969. Over the past half-century, South Tyrol has come closer to being a pluralistic society than any other case discussed here. While the original, and quite rigid, power-sharing structures have remained largely in place, they are now more

inclusive of the third local identity group, the Ladins. The political process as a whole is far more consensus- and compromise-oriented, certainly so when compared to Northern Ireland. This reflects not only the commitment of local elites to both pro-pluralism institution work and culture work but also the increasingly self-sustaining success of these two processes working in tandem over time, as a consequence of which there is now an over-arching regional identity and elections no longer are quasi-censuses.⁹⁴

As noted earlier, these examples are of an illustrative nature. Because of their brevity and limited number, they are not meant to provide conclusive evidence, counter-factual or otherwise, that a pluralism perspective on its own provides a pathway to always-successful conflict prevention. Not only does such success depend on the timing of conflict prevention initiatives, the actors involved and the context in which it happens, it is also contingent on the causal dynamics of the conflict to be prevented. Not each and every conceivable driver of conflict is susceptible to a pluralism treatment.⁹⁵

A pluralism perspective, nevertheless, can contribute several valuable insights to conflict prevention policies more generally. Yet, bearing the above caveats in mind, they should be seen as reflections, rather than prescriptions: (1) there are several institutional pathways towards pluralistic societies, but (2) they all begin with a conscious choice to establish, restore or reform institutions that offer meaningful representation and participation to all relevant segments in a diverse society. Such pathways (3) are more sustainable and thus more effective in structural,

systemic, operational and relapse prevention if they extend to more than one institution and are more than temporary in nature. While institutional endurance is important, it needs (4) to be balanced by mechanisms that can facilitate reform where necessary and prevent the creation and entrenchment of new anti-pluralistic divisions. This is more likely to be achieved if (5) such processes of institutional establishment, restoration and reform are themselves fully inclusive and participatory, rather than being merely focused on those parties that can obstruct conflict prevention efforts. Institutions alone, however, (6) do not offer a conclusive pathway to pluralism which also requires parallel efforts at culture work (i.e., a transformative change in the underpinning political culture of a society that firmly embeds an ethic of respect of diversity in public values and attitudes). And finally, (7) such a transformative change takes time and will only succeed when it becomes symbiotically intertwined with the institution work for pluralism in a sustained effort over time.

The Timing of Pluralism-informed Conflict Prevention Initiatives

The insights offered at the end of the previous section, as well as earlier reflections on the potential added value of pluralism, strongly suggest that the most impactful contribution of a pluralism perspective is likely to be in the context of structural and systemic prevention. This is both due to the nature of the pluralism response to diversity discussed earlier and because significant gaps remain between an often prevalent rhetorical commitment to the principles of pluralism and their practical implementation.

Actors like the UN or the EU, which are commonly identified as being particularly committed to structural and systemic forms of conflict prevention, do not necessarily formulate their conflict prevention policies through a pluralism lens, nor do they frame some of their most relevant policies, such as development aid, in terms of conflict prevention.⁹⁶

There is a particular disconnect between the underpinning theories of conflict causation and early warning efforts in the sense that what early warning measures is either not a comprehensive enough reflection of broadly accepted conflict causes or does not focus sufficiently on early-enough indicators to allow for meaningful upstream prevention of conflict before societies begin to descend, often inevitably, towards violence. As Rachel Murray noted in her analysis of the initial attempts of the OAU to establish an early warning system, “the unrealistic separation of the concepts of human rights and conflicts” often prevents “monitoring the wider human rights situation [which] might be more productive in predicting problems.”⁹⁷

One important implication of this is that most “early warning” systems are, in fact, focused on the crisis end of conflict prevention.⁹⁸ In contrast, what a pluralism perspective on conflict prevention in general, and on early warning in particular, can offer is an approach to early warning at a time when structural prevention efforts may still be useful and effective in warding off the development of a crisis in which only operational conflict prevention will likely be able to prevent violent escalation.

Early warning, however, must not be conflated with conflict prevention. It offers an important

enabling component for conflict prevention: insights generated by early warning efforts ideally trigger timely conflict prevention action. Yet, as currently conceived and practiced, early warning suffers from several inconsistencies. Because conflict prevention is hardly ever fully integrated into the range of other policy areas, such as development, peace-building, democracy promotion, etc., early warning indicators are often incoherent, not systematically collected, and not processed within a single analytical framework aimed at conflict prevention. As Michael S. Lund put it, “early warning and conflict indicators come up through separate reporting channels and program desks, such as for human rights, humanitarian aid, and development, arriving at differing definitions of local problems and interpretations of conflict causes,”⁹⁹ which also indicates lack of clear political leadership when it comes to prioritizing conflict prevention.¹⁰⁰ Even more poignantly, Ken Menkhaus noted more than a decade ago that “early warning on deadly conflict has been an essentially ad hoc, unstructured exercise engaged in by a wide range of players, including embassies and intelligence agencies, UN peacekeeping forces, relief and development NGOs, human rights groups, ICRC, faith groups, academics, and the media. Coordination between these groups has been weak to non-existent.”¹⁰¹

While some of these problems have been addressed, many of these same issues still affect some of the major conflict prevention actors (i.e., regional and international organizations and their member states with the capabilities to formulate and implement effective conflict prevention policies). For example, “the lack of political leadership in the field of crisis and conflict prevention is reflected very clearly in

the lack of unified early warning systems within the administrations of France, Germany and, to some extent, the United States,”¹⁰² while in an EU context “member states remain committed to the ... goals of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, [but] they are not always willing to match those goals with the appropriate level of resources or with suitably trained personnel [which hinders the EU’s ability to effectively respond to conflicts and crises].”¹⁰³ Similarly, Alexander Noyes and Janette Yarwood, in the context of the AU Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), point to “four main persisting gaps and challenges. One, constrained human resources, training, and funding; two, unsystematic coordination and information-sharing with the RECs early warning mechanisms; three, insufficient levels of communication and collaboration with other AU peace and security organs relevant to conflict early warning; and four, the perennial problem of translating early warning into an effective response.”¹⁰⁴

Another issue with early warning for structural prevention is that the main focus of most relevant actors is on a relatively narrow range of so-called atrocity crimes, identified in the major documents on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”¹⁰⁵ This overlooks the fact that acts of genocide or ethnic cleansing are often extreme episodes within violent ethnic conflicts or civil wars and that early warning indicators for the former are different than for the latter. Thus by focusing on indicators of genocide, early warning signs of impending violent conflict might be missed,¹⁰⁶ and thus relatively little comfort can be taken from the fact that “within Africa ... the Economic Cooperation

for West African States [Economic Community of West African States] (ECOWAS) has significantly enhanced its early warning infrastructure to confront impending atrocity crime situations.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the limited international consensus on, and commitment to, broadening the range issues worthy of consideration under R2P also hampers effective early warning and thus the effectiveness of structural prevention efforts.

This tendency to narrow down early warning and conflict prevention is further exacerbated by the fact that there is near-overwhelming consensus in the academic and policy literature on conflict prevention about the inability to translate early warning into early action and about the necessary dismissal of the suggestion that conflict prevention failed because of early warning failures.¹⁰⁸ According to Fen Osler Hampson and David M. Malone, “for some time, it was thought that effective preventive action would require greater information gathering and early warning. Yet, the creation of increasingly sophisticated early warning mechanisms have not necessarily been matched by action. While it may be the case that intelligence and early warning signals are sporadic and generally difficult to translate into policy, the real problem seems to be a failure of comprehensive analysis combined with a lack of political will to act in risky situations.”¹⁰⁹ This may well be the case in some situations, but it also ignores the fact that the problem may be with the suitability of indicators (i.e., that the indicators monitored for early warning provide indications of atrocity crimes that are much harder to prevent with the available policy tools and the preparedness of major political actors to employ them). From a

pluralism perspective, this means an early warning system that neglects key pluralism indicators may simply not be suitable for effective structural prevention efforts that avoid the need for late-stage operational prevention.

This point about the nature of early warning indicators has also been articulated by Baldwin, Chapman and Gray who argue that “conflict early warning systems are therefore more effective when they take a clear note of minority rights violations. Incorporating and analysing patterns of discrimination and exclusion, such as the systematic denial of the existence of particular groups or noting a lack of legislative framework to prevent racism and punish it, are vital in tracking the rise of tension that could lead to violence. Currently, such systems do exist but few have minority rights at their heart, others do but are criticized for being inconsistently applied.”¹¹⁰

The consequences of ignoring such indicators, which express many of the core concerns of a pluralism approach, has concrete negative consequences for the possibility of conflict prevention. For example, in the case of the Darfur crisis in Sudan, “coordinated and coherent early warning, including political and rights-focused analysis could have translated into appropriate early action at a time when the government of Sudan may have been more inclined to accommodate minorities’ concerns.”¹¹¹

A positive counter-example is provided by the work of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. With a focus on situations where conflict is foreseeable, rather than imminent, early and sustained engagement with government

actors and minority representatives aimed at finding shared approaches to address underlying problems of recognition in law and policy have been highly effective in the early- and mid-1990s in preventing violent conflict in and between Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, as well as the Baltic states. Cases where the High Commissioner was not, or only marginally involved, were cases where conflict erupted and has been resistant to resolution or transformation, as seen in parts of the Western Balkans, Moldova and the South Caucasus.¹¹²

The point here is not to dismiss current early warning efforts or ongoing structural and operational conflict prevention, but rather to point out that, as demonstrated by “the experience of the OSCE that long-term missions and discreet work on structural questions such as democracy-building, human and minority rights and the promotion of civil society are more suitable ... than attempts to find quick-fixes for the direct causes of conflict.”¹¹³ Put differently, genuine and meaningful structural conflict prevention is possible through upstream early warning and early action for pluralism because it enables the identification of divisions, exclusions, polarization and marginalization in a society that have the potential to lead to violent conflict long before such conflict is imminent. Thus, early warning based on pluralism-informed indicators and their analysis can identify the absence or erosion of values and attitudes that support pluralism or of the institutions that help to implement it and assist in devising appropriate strategies to address such problems before they develop into a crisis situation, in which prevention efforts are less likely to be effective.

IV. THE ADDED VALUE OF THE PLURALISM LENS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND THE ROLE OF THE GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM: MAINSTREAMING PLURALISM AND THE PATHWAYS TO CONFLICT PREVENTION

It would not be realistic to argue that pluralism offers a magic wand, which, if applied to every and all conflict prevention efforts, would avoid prevention failures. Conflict has many causes and drivers, and pluralism cannot offer a cure for all of them. Nor would it be reasonable to argue that the normative and conceptual underpinnings of conflict prevention and pluralism are so far apart that adopting a pluralism perspective to conflict prevention would fundamentally alter existing theory and practice. In fact, one of the most profound early statements of conflict prevention, the report of the Carnegie Corporation on *Preventing Deadly Conflict* put forward a vision of conflict prevention that is closely aligned to a comprehensive understanding of pluralism as an ethic of respect for diversity: “whatever model of self-governance societies ultimately choose, and whatever path they follow to that end, they must meet the three core needs of security, well-being, and justice and thereby give people a stake in nonviolent efforts to improve their lives. Meeting these needs not only enables people to live better lives, it also reduces the potential for deadly conflict.”¹¹⁴

Yet, having identified “pluralism gaps” in existing theory and practice, it has also become clear that pluralism can make conflict prevention more effective and sustainable. Using the different perspectives on the conflict prevention field elaborated above, the argument here is that conflict prevention intersects with several other fields of conflict prevention scholarship and practice, which in turn are highly relevant for pluralism. There are three broad general lessons that can be distilled from the foregoing discussion which provide the basis for two concrete suggestions on how the GCP can contribute to bridge existing gaps between pluralism and conflict prevention.

Pluralism Gaps: Three Broad Lessons

Conflict prevention is a crowded space with many actors.

This first lesson is hardly surprising given the fact that the idea of conflict prevention has steadily gained traction in scholarly and policy discussion and activities over the past quarter-century. The proliferation of actors in the field offers a concrete opportunity for the GCP to engage in order to raise awareness about pluralism and the distinct contribution that it can make, especially in relation to early, upstream prevention. The multitude of actors in the field—from the highest levels of the international system in the UN to the local level of in-country NGOs—provides different entry points for engagement, creates multiple opportunities to mainstream the ideas underpinning pluralism and its conflict-preventing contributions, and enables building durable coalitions for sustainable pro-pluralism change in the conflict prevention field.

A pluralism perspective can empower local actors to examine the state of pluralism in their own society independently by conducting a pluralism audit of particular sectors or society as a whole. It can also provide an entry point for sustained deep engagement for the GCP, working with a range of different actors across society to identify current or potential future pluralism deficits and devise strategies on how to reverse negative trajectories and sustain positive trends through both institution work and culture work.

Beyond specific states and state-based actors, a pluralism perspective can also benefit the international community at large to become sensitized to the importance of valuing diversity rather than seeing it as a threat. For example, introducing pluralism indicators both as objectives and as benchmarks into the programming work of major international development partners would elevate truly long-term structural prevention to a new level of strategic priority and increase the conflict-preventing effects of international development policy.

Similarly, at the systemic level, a more sustained, inclusive and participatory dialogue about pluralism has the potential to build more powerful coalitions of actors that adopt a pluralism perspective and integrate it into their conflict prevention activities. This would also re-emphasize (and strengthen) attention to a broad cross-section of human and minority rights, including political, social, economic and cultural rights. While relevant international instruments exist in this context, rights-based approaches are not always comprehensively enough integrated into conflict prevention efforts.

The track record of conflict prevention differs across and within regions.

The success of conflict prevention depends on many different factors, which are often specific to particular instances of conflict. However, there are also marked differences across regions with a generally better track record of success in Europe compared to other regions of the world. This is, in part, due to the much higher level of regional integration and the more systematic institutionalization and sustainable resourcing of conflict prevention within organizations like the OSCE and EU and their policies. These policies are often more long term and more strategic in their outlook and their underpinning principles are more closely aligned with some of the core values of pluralism.

This not only provides additional evidence of the utility of a pluralism perspective for conflict prevention, it also creates opportunities for the GCP. Engagement, for example, with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, could lead to a more explicit embrace of pluralism in the work of this institution while in turn assisting the GCP to better understand some of the practicalities of how principles of pluralism can be translated into a practice of conflict prevention through quiet diplomacy.

In addition, the differential track record of successful conflict prevention can create opportunities for facilitated peer-learning. Using insights from an actor mapping of the conflict prevention field, the GCP could use this methodology to engage different actors both with a pluralism perspective

more generally and with the way in which it may translate into concrete conflict prevention efforts. This could take the form of workshops and trainings of practitioners, as well as specific, problem- and solution-oriented in-country efforts as part of a deep engagement strategy spanning different sectors from political and judicial institutions to education, culture and economic policy.

Most conflict prevention happens at the late-stage operational level while structural prevention often lacks strategic coherence.

Conflict prevention efforts are most visible in the face of an impending crisis and often go unnoticed or unconsidered at a time long before an outbreak of violence is imminent. From a pluralism perspective this poses a two-fold problem: at the operational level of crisis prevention, there is relatively little space for pluralism-informed prevention activities; and at the structural and systemic level of conflict prevention, pluralism is not systematically integrated into prevention efforts.

While this paper's argument in relation to the role of the GCP is primarily about its value-added contribution to structural and systemic conflict prevention, a pluralism perspective can also inform late, direct prevention efforts that are more directly geared at, for example, institutional reform to avert imminent violent escalation of a crisis. Institutional reform aimed at inclusion can be achieved long term and short term, and is essential to both structural and direct prevention efforts and in preventing recurrence of violent conflict. However, a pluralism perspective also emphasizes the need to think beyond the hardware of institutions and

to invest in the software of underpinning norms and attitudes that provide the foundations upon which inclusive institutions can deliver effective governance outcomes, and this is a long-term, structural prevention task, yet one that has hardly been problematized in the conflict prevention literature.¹¹⁵

Moreover, what is also missing from this perspective are efforts to identify and monitor pluralism deficits and their impact on the probability of conflict. On their face, imminent violence intentions and likely behaviour are obvious, but the underpinning motivations often develop gradually. The erosion of pluralist institutions and outcomes and of the public values and attitudes underpinning them often begins long before a society reaches crisis stage. Pluralism early warning, in this sense, buys time for effective structural prevention aimed at arresting and reversing trajectories away from pluralism.

Bridging the Gaps: Two Proposals

Based on the three broader lessons identified on the basis of the pluralism—conflict prevention gap analysis and a few general suggestions on how these might inform the GCP’s approach to develop a pluralism-informed approach to upstream conflict prevention, two particular issues stand out. One is the need for a set of specific early warning indicators that reflect the pluralism approach to diversity management and its underpinning theory of change. The other is the need for a specific form of engagement that suits the GCP’s mission and reflects the sensitivity of issues related to pluralism as a perspective on conflict prevention.

The remaining two sections of the paper flesh out some ideas in relation to both of these issues, drawing, in part, on earlier and more comprehensive work done for the GCP.¹¹⁶

Early warning and early action indicators

Pluralism can make several meaningful contributions to conflict prevention. As discussed in earlier sections, it can inform, albeit it to a limited extent, policy choices and implementation at the operational end of crisis prevention, for example, by advocating inclusive and participatory processes of confidence-building, mediation and negotiation. In terms of relapse prevention, a pluralism perspective is useful when it comes to shaping peace agreements and their implementation. Yet, as argued throughout this paper, its potentially most significant contribution is to long-term structural conflict prevention, that is, at a time long before a society reaches crisis stage with the imminent outbreak of violence. This kind of conflict prevention, if grounded in a pluralism perspective would draw on a range of other policies with potentially conflict-preventing effects, such as development,¹¹⁷ support for democratization,¹¹⁸ peace-building¹¹⁹ and the promotion of rights-based approaches.¹²⁰ In this sense, the tools of pluralism are not unique; what makes a pluralism perspective distinctive, however, are the values and principles that underpin it and how they are fused together synergistically to promote an ethic of respect for diversity.

From a conflict prevention perspective, this means not just pursuing pluralism as a goal of social development, but rather developing the tools to assess and monitor the state of pluralism in a

particular society and applying the policies that can establish, strengthen and sustain the institutions and culture in which pluralism is possible and can thrive. Foundational to such an approach is the creation of indicators and benchmarks that can be measured and analyzed to produce insights for policy makers about the trajectory of pluralism in a given society and about the policies required to arrest and reverse negative trajectories and sustain positive ones.

Collecting and analyzing data on individual indicators would allow comparing them to benchmarks which would enable an *ad hoc* assessment of the performance of a particular indicator against a benchmark at a given time. This would be useful for baseline assessments of the state of pluralism in a particular society at a specific time and could be acted upon.

Repeated such pluralism audits would also facilitate comparison over time to detect positive or negative trends. This kind of analysis would make it possible to identify early warning signs and act upon them: in line with its underpinning logic, an erosion of pluralism is likely to contribute to a greater risk of violent conflict, arresting such a process of erosion and reversing it, or strengthening and sustaining positive trajectories would be a significant contribution to the prevention of otherwise more probable conflicts.

Ad hoc and regular pluralism audits would also be useful from the perspective of learning lessons of what works: which policies implemented by what actors are effective in promoting pluralism? While there is no one model pathway to pluralism and no

one model actor in promoting it, knowing which policies can successfully reverse negative trends or sustain positive ones, for example, would enable more effective peer-learning by identifying suitable peer groups that could help each other to learn and apply lessons from successful and failed policies. It could also contribute to building broader coalitions for a pro-pluralism response to the challenges of diversity from the local to the global level and thus make an additional contribution to mainstreaming the ideas and policies of pluralism beyond, for example, the development and publication of a pluralism index.

Integrating scenario planning with early warning for upstream conflict prevention

In the sense that pluralism is a choice, it implies agency in the same way that conflict prevention requires it. However, as pointed out by Lund, “where societies see no serious problem that needs fixing, it is hard for third-party would-be preventors to explain why they are needed.”¹²¹ This is one of the problems with early, upstream prevention efforts as envisaged by the pluralism perspective. However, it is not an insurmountable problem and a scenario-planning approach (in part building on a comprehensive pluralism indicator tool and regularly compiled and published pluralism index) can be useful for both raising awareness of pathways to undesirable, yet ultimately possible futures and how they can be avoided by choosing pathways that sustain, restore or build pluralistic societies. Bringing a pluralism perspective to conflict prevention thus implies awareness raising of both the possibility and consequences of non-pluralistic

responses to the challenges of diversity and the provision of pluralistic alternatives.

The potential value of scenario planning for conflict prevention has been recognized in both conflict prevention and scenario planning literatures, with connections made between scenario planning and both early warning and early action. For example, Heinz Kruppenbacher et al. emphasize that “only by involving policy makers in the process of formulating policy options and case scenarios can we fine-tune early warning by adapting to client needs, build trust in the analysis and recommendations, influence overall policy planning, and also function as a pressure mechanism.”¹²² From this perspective, scenario planning can be conducted using the quiet diplomacy approach and still be inclusive and participatory by involving local and outside expert in the development and subsequent monitoring of case-specific early warning indicators and the formulation and implementation of pluralistic responses. Thus, “early warning systems can generate analyses that identify factors driving the instability, provide a basis from which to assess likely future scenarios, and recommend appropriate options for local and international policy-makers oriented towards preventive action.”¹²³ Scenarios, from this perspective, can then also be used to evaluate different responses to analyzing pluralism-informed early warning indicators, formulate and implement a pro-pluralism response that addresses both institution work and culture work (e.g., by including a communication strategy to affect public values and attitudes to pluralism).

Pluralism provides an analytical perspective and theory of change that can guide the use of early

warning methodologies and scenario planning to underpin effective conflict prevention at an early stage: understanding how diversity management can go right or wrong informs the “measurement” of relevant indicators, the risk associated with changes, and the substance, intensity and duration of mitigation measures necessary to prevent conflict.

This analytical perspective, therefore, can also offer concrete, case- and context-sensitive policy recommendations concerning effective preventions measures. Following Andrew H. Kydd, if the challenge for effective conflict prevention is “for the two players to locate an outcome that makes them both better off than conflict,” then “information provision is ... helpful in the bargaining process in conflict prevention.”¹²⁴

The nexus of scenario planning and early warning, both of which are widely known concepts but are relatively less integrated into a single systematic approach, is critical for the feasibility and viability of developing a distinct approach to conflict early warning through scenario planning. The existing literatures on scenario planning and conflict prevention identify the significant potential for early warning on the basis of scenarios. For example, Kees van der Heijden notes that the “underlying structures to which the events in the scenarios are related ... can be used to identify developments in the environment which could be the early signals of the world moving into the direction indicated by one of the scenarios.”¹²⁵ Similarly, T.J. Chermack and L. van der Merwe note that, as part of scenario planning, “indicators and signposts are selected to monitor, in an ongoing sense, the development of the environment along the lines of a given

scenario.”¹²⁶ Hugues de Jouvenel makes a related point, speaking of scenarios offering the opportunity to “anticipate the strategic environment, perhaps a form of monitoring or vigilance.”¹²⁷ Dana Mietzner and Guido Reger emphasize that one advantage of scenarios is that they “are an appropriate way to recognise ‘weak signals.’”¹²⁸ This also connects to the idea of scenario planning “as ongoing and iterative learning and unlearning processes, with the scenarios themselves subject to continuing monitoring in relation to evolving events.”¹²⁹

Scenarios can offer a useful, context-sensitive and systematic approach to early warning and enable a longer-term perspective that would, based on the notion of “weak signals,” enable truly early action well before a country reaches crisis stage. Put differently, scenario *planning* for upstream conflict prevention would extend beyond simply *building* scenarios. Rather, it would involve further work with relevant stakeholders to assist them in acting upon scenarios, by monitoring developments (*qua* pluralism early warning indicators), and by devising and implementing viable and feasible strategies to achieve desirable future outcomes or prevent undesirable ones.

Achieving and/or sustaining pluralism, especially when focused on inclusion/ exclusion, is all too often framed as a zero-sum game that creates winners and losers. This, in turn, creates opportunities and challenges for political leaders that are closely tied to

electoral cycles (in democracies) and regime survival (in non-democratic regimes). While scenarios may present a chance to reframe zero-sum games into positive-sum games by developing plausible narratives of broadly desirable futures, they can only achieve this on the basis of trustworthiness which, however, may be more difficult to establish under conditions of potential conflict because of certain pluralism deficits.

Scenario planning as a whole can also contribute to perspective taking and empathy among participants. Moreover, scenario planning emphasizes the importance of choice in formulating and implementing strategies aimed at achieving or avoiding a particular future outcome. In that sense, scenarios also challenge what participants consider hard facts about how and why the past unfolded as it did. Revisiting and rethinking the past as part of constructing scenarios of the future is critical to the success of any project using scenarios for early warning. Understanding pathways from the past to the present is also important to identify indicators for early signs that particular negative scenarios might be unfolding again. This will not be sufficient for a comprehensive, indicator-based early warning system, but it will assure participants in the scenario planning exercise, and involved in implementing responsive strategies as a result, that lessons of the past have been taken on board.

NOTES

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⁹⁷ Murray (2001), 24.

⁹⁸ For two different illustrations of this, see Harff and Gurr (1998) and Thomas Chadeaux (2014), “Early Warning Signals for War in the News,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (1).

⁹⁹ Lund (2008), 296.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Brune et al. (2012), 109.

¹⁰¹ Menkhaus (2004), 439f.

¹⁰² Brune et al. (2012), 108. Note, however, by contrast that “the United Kingdom is ... the only state studied that has successfully developed a range of intelligence products specifically dedicated to prevention and covering all necessary time horizons. The UK is also the only state to have created an effective hierarchical chain of early warning instruments specifically dedicated to the prevention of crises and directly related to decision-making” (109).

¹⁰³ Juncos and Blockmans (2018), 3. Concerning the EU as an institutional actor, Marquina and Ruiz (2005), also criticize that “prevention and crisis management are understaffed. This limitation has clear consequences. In times of crisis, the Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit, and the

Situation Centre, can be overloaded with the task of processing a substantial amount of information coming from different sources. Furthermore, with the day-to-day crisis management focusing only on short term topics, the consequence is a tendency towards focusing only upon the high escalation phase. To this can be added the tendency to use the staff of the Policy Planning as a personal Cabinet of the High Representative of the CFSP” (74).

¹⁰⁴Alexander Noyes and Janette Yarwood (2013), “The AU Continental Early Warning System: From Conceptual to Operational?,” *International Peacekeeping* 20 (3): 253.

¹⁰⁵United Nations General Assembly (2005), para. 139.

¹⁰⁶Cf. Lund (2008), 296.

¹⁰⁷Jennifer Welsh (2016), “The Responsibility to Prevent: Assessing the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 51 (2): 218.

¹⁰⁸For example, Ackermann (2003), 342; Carnegie Corporation (1997), 43.

¹⁰⁹Hampson and Malone (2002), *From Reaction to Conflict Prevention*, 92.

¹¹⁰Baldwin, Chapman and Gray (2007), 2. Regarding the lack of consistent application, they note that, for example, “the European Commission Check List for Root Causes of Conflict includes indicators attending to economic and political exclusion, equality of all citizens before the law, and respect

for religious and cultural rights. According to critics the Check List is desk based and it is not prioritized among Commission staff due to a lack of capacity, and therefore is inconsistently applied” (29).

¹¹¹Baldwin, Chapman and Gray (2007), 29.

¹¹²Cf., for example, Baldwin, Chapman and Gray (2007); Walter A. Kemp, ed. (2001), *Quiet Diplomacy in Action: The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities* (Leiden: Brill), accessed 20 June 2019, <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/78633?download=true>; Craig Collins and John Packer (2013), “Quiet Diplomacy: Preventing Conflict through Discreet Engagement,” in *Conflict Management in Divided Societies: Theories and Practice*, edited by Stefan Wolff and Christalla Yakinthou (London: Routledge), 116–131; Tanner (2000).

¹¹³Tanner (2000), 551.

¹¹⁴Carnegie Corporation (1997), 70.

¹¹⁵For a short overview of the literature on this point, see Lund (2008), 303–304. In addition, there is a relevant literature on confidence-building measures. For example, see Johan Jorgen Holst (1983), “Confidence-building Measures a Conceptual Framework,” *Survival* 25 (1): 2–15; Thomas C. Schelling (1984), “Confidence in Crisis,” *International Security* 8 (4): 55–66; Siân Herbert (2014), *Lessons from Confidence Building Measures*, GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1131.

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- ¹¹⁹ Rotberg (2000); Wood (2001); Bennett et al. (2010); Rodt (2017); Kyle Beardsley, David E. Cunningham and Peter B. White (2015), “Resolving Civil Wars before They Start: The UN Security Council and Conflict Prevention in Self-Determination Disputes,” *British Journal of Political Science* 47 (3): 675–97; Menkhaus (2004).
- ¹²⁰ Baldwin, Chapman and Gray (2007); Simpson (2017); Agbakwa (2003); Aggestam (2003); Wolter and Müller (2005); Lennox (2018).
- ¹²¹ Lund (2008), 302.
- ¹²² Heinz Krummenacher, Susanne Schmeidl, Daniel Schwarz, Matthias Siegfried, Irene Autolitano and Matthias Müller (2001), *Practical Challenges in Predicting Violent Conflict* (Berne: Swisspeace), 3, accessed 20 June 2019, www.swisspeace.ch.
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- ¹²⁴ Kydd (2010), 104, 107.
- ¹²⁵ Kees van der Heijden (1996), *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons), 130.
- ¹²⁶ T.J. Chermack and L. van der Merwe (2003), “The Role of Constructivist Learning in Scenario Planning,” *Futures* 35 (5): 457.
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