

# **When Aspiration Exceeds Capability: the UN and Conflict Prevention**

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For the United Nations but also for me, personally, as Secretary-General there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment, and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict ...

--Kofi Annan, 1998<sup>1</sup>

## ***Introduction***

Conflict prevention is enshrined in Paragraph 1, Article 1 of the UN Charter, which refers to the need for “effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace.” Article I says nothing about how prevention might be achieved, and in practice preventive policy can take many forms. While most commonly associated with the relatively traditional idea of “preventive diplomacy,” threats of physical or economic coercion may also be preventive instruments. Finally, there is what is sometimes called “early” or “structural” prevention--strategies that address the so-called “root causes” of armed conflicts. The latter is the focus of this chapter.

During the Cold War the East-West divide ensured that the Security Council, the UN body charged with the responsibility for maintaining the peace, paid little attention to conflict prevention. Throughout this period the rival superpowers and their allies sought security from each other primarily via deterrence and diplomacy. Conflict was seen as endemic in an international system riven by deep ideological difference. The veto system in the Council kept most conflicts off the UN’s agenda. Collective security, with its stress on the indivisibility of peace, was unthinkable during the Cold War years despite being the core principle of the UN

Charter. During this period the Council operated as little more than an arena of superpower competition.

Even in those civil wars in the developing world where superpower rivalry was not an issue, the UN showed no real interest in conflict prevention. The ostensible reason for this inaction was that the organization's security mandate dealt only with threats to international peace and security. Civil wars that did not threaten international peace were thus off limits to the UN. This legal proscription was not, however, a real barrier to pursuit of preventive policies--when it wanted to, the Council never had a problem constructing a rationale to legitimize intervention. The permanent five members of the Council simply did not care about small wars on the world's periphery unless their interests were engaged--and usually they were not. Little has changed in this respect.

Not until the end of the Cold War and the UN's liberation from the debilitating ideological constraints of superpower rivalry did other security issues become more salient. Only then did the concept of conflict prevention begin to be taken seriously.

### ***The Emergence of Conflict Prevention***

As the UN emerged from the stifling ideological glacial of the Cold War, its involvement in global security issues increased exponentially. The number of resolutions passed in the Council rose from an average of 15 a year from 1946 to 1989 to more than 60 a year during the 1990s.

The number of resolutions authorizing the use of force also increased dramatically.<sup>2</sup>

Peacekeeping operations grew rapidly in number and became far more complex and expensive.

With the publication of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace* in 1992, the idea of preventing--as against simply reacting to--conflicts became the focus of serious high-level official reflection for the first time. But Boutros-Ghali's approach to prevention was far more limited than that of today. *Agenda for Peace* presented prevention as a policy largely restricted to preventive diplomacy--a package of measures "to create confidence" that required "early warning based on information gathering and informal or formal fact-finding." In practice preventive diplomacy involved traditional diplomatic instruments like mediation, conciliation, and good offices but could also include more intrusive and novel policy options such as "preventive deployments and, in some situations, demilitarized zones".<sup>3</sup>

The "root causes" approach to prevention that was to become increasingly salient in the late 1990s was barely mentioned in *Agenda for Peace*. The importance of "economic despair, social injustice, and political oppression" as causes of armed conflict were noted but not discussed in any detail.<sup>4</sup> The Secretariat had long been reluctant to address these issues for fear of being accused of interfering in the internal affairs of member states. Postconflict peace-building practices, which were associated with the new comprehensive UN peace operations of the 1990s, were seen as a way of preventing the recurrence of warfare. However, preventing wars from arising in the first place by addressing their root causes was not yet on the UN's political agenda--and was only just beginning to be discussed within the Secretariat.

In 1995, Boutros-Ghali published the supplement to an *Agenda for Peace*, which used the term "peace-building" to refer to both pre- and postconflict measures. Like *Agenda for Peace*, the supplement focused overwhelmingly on preventive diplomacy on the one hand and postconflict peace-building on the other. The longer-term prevention mission was described in passing as the "creation of structures for the institutionalization of peace." What this might mean

in practice was not addressed. There were, as we will see, political reasons for the Secretariat's hesitancy to embrace prevention approaches focusing on "root causes."

### ***'Structural' Prevention Makes Its First Appearance***

In 1995 the UN's Geneva-based Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) published a provocative report entitled *Strengthening of the United Nations System Capacity for Conflict Prevention*.<sup>5</sup> The JIU report picked up where *Agenda for Peace* left off, arguing not only for an enhancement of the UN's preventive diplomacy capacity but also for what it called a "comprehensive conflict prevention strategy," which foreshadowed many of the ideas that were to become official conventional wisdom by the end of the decade. What made the "comprehensive strategy" a radical departure from past practice was the JIU's embrace of "preventive peace-building" or "structural prevention"--an umbrella term for policies that addressed the so-called "root causes" of armed conflict. The "comprehensive strategy" integrated preventive peace-building with preventive diplomacy and postconflict peace-building policies.

The JIU inspectors identified poverty and underdevelopment as key "root causes." The key to averting conflicts, they argued, was "a long, quiet process of sustainable human development. . . an integrated approach to human security."<sup>6</sup> This would require the UN to play a more active role in helping countries choose "appropriate development strategies."<sup>7</sup> The report went on to argue that many UN agencies--UNCTAD, UNDP, UNEP, WFP, and UNESCO--as well as the World Bank and regional organizations were already addressing the "root causes" of conflict. What was needed was better coordination between them--a recurrent theme in UN reports. In today's UN, the JIU's report would appear unremarkable; in the mid-1990s it was quite controversial.

In June 1997 Secretary-General Kofi Annan sent detailed comments on the report to the General Assembly. Annan's comments derived from a discussion of the report by members of the high-level interagency Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), which had been wrestling with the often-confused concept of peace-building at its June meeting in Geneva. The ACC's cumbersome definition of peace-building was not dissimilar to that of the JIU Report. "Peace-building," according to the ACC, is "a broad-based approach to crisis prevention and resolution [that] should comprise integrated and coordinated actions aimed at addressing any combination of political, military, humanitarian, human rights, environmental, economic, social, cultural, and demographic factors so as to ensure that conflict was prevented or resolved..."<sup>8</sup>

While the ACC endorsed the idea of a comprehensive approach to peace-building in principle, Annan's note to the Assembly had some pointed criticisms of the JIU report. There was, he argued, a fundamental difference between preventive development which is not directed specifically at the prevention of conflict, and 'peace-building', which is carried out under a political mandate specifically to prevent the eruption or resumption of conflict.<sup>9</sup> At first glance this argument makes little sense. If development programs are designed to reduce the risk of conflict, why should they not be described as "peace-building" as the ACC defines it? The answer has more to do with UN politics than logic.

A "political mandate" could mean one of two things. Either the Secretariat had authorization from the Council (or possibly just the Assembly) to pursue preventive measures, or preventive measures had been authorized by the Secretary-General "with, of course, the agreement of the government concerned."<sup>10</sup> Absent such authorization the pursuit of prevention strategies by the secretariat could be seen as political interference in the internal affairs of member states--an issue of major concern among members of the G-77. The tension between the

need to act effectively on the prevention front and the need to respect sovereignty has long bedeviled UN policymakers. As early as 1992 Boutros-Ghali argued in *Agenda for Peace* that the “time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty . . . has passed.” Yet in the same report he also argued that in “situations of internal crisis the United Nations will need to respect the sovereignty of the State; to do otherwise would not be in accordance with the understandings of Member States in accepting the principles of the Charter.” The latter statement completely negates the former but such contradiction is unsurprising. It is typical of UN reports to try to speak to as many constituencies as possible--often sacrificing consistency and logic in so doing.

### ***Sovereignty and Politics***

One of Annan’s main criticisms of the JIU’s proposals for improving prevention policy was that they had underestimated member state concerns about sovereignty. In support of his case he pointed to the resistance by a majority of states to Boutros-Ghali’s proposal to create integrated UN offices in some developing countries on the grounds that such a move was intended to “obtain political reporting on Member States’ internal affairs.”<sup>11</sup> Few outside the UN system realize that UN agencies are “precluded by their mandates from reporting on political matters.”<sup>12</sup> This proscription has little basis in logic given that politics are an integral part of the development, health, environment, and other issues that these agencies address and given the reality that they do report on political matters--albeit circumspectly.

However, this proscription is yet another indicator of the deep-seated resistance to what many developing countries see as spying on their internal affairs. This developing-country concern even applies to preventive diplomacy. A case in point noted by Annan is the ridiculous demand by the Assembly that preventive diplomacy missions be “transparent” as well as

“confidential”--a practical as well as logical nonsense. G-77 objections have long prevented the Secretariat from creating any serious intelligence and analytic capacity that could be used for early-warning purposes and to create more effective prevention policies.

Annan also criticized the JIU stress on the importance of development policies in preventive peace-building. Such policies, he said, could only be described as preventive development “if they had a specific political purpose, also agreed by the government [of the country in question], of contributing to the prevention of the outbreak of a new conflict or the recrudescence of an old one.”<sup>13</sup> The assertion that conflict prevention was an “essentially political” activity suited the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), whose mandate was political and whose officials knew very little about economic development. (Annan’s comment was almost certainly written by DPA officials.)

The UN Development Program, unsurprisingly, preferred to conceive prevention in more developmental terms. In 2000 UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown said, “When we talk prevention we mean using existing, acknowledged tools [of development policy] in transparent, accepted ways: for example, helping developing countries make use of . . . poverty action plans to identify and respond to potential social problems such as growing inequality.”<sup>14</sup> Malloch Brown’s position was the obverse of the Annan / DPA line. For UNDP prevention does not have to be “essentially political.” It is a natural outgrowth of good development policy, but the difference between UNDP’s position and that of DPA has less to do with analytic conviction than bureaucratic “turf” interests.

While the political concerns that lie behind this argument are obvious enough, it makes little substantive sense. We know that in most societies as the level of development rises, the risk of political violence declines--though why this should be the case remains a contested issue.

Countries with a per capita income of 600 U.S. dollars have half the risk of being involved in an armed conflict within five years of countries with a per capita income of \$250. When incomes rise to \$1200, the risk halves again. Policies that promote equitable development are conflict prevention policies regardless of whether or not they have a “specific political purpose.”

***“Structural” Prevention Becomes Policy--At Least Rhetorically***

Despite the concerns that Annan had expressed in 1997 and that reflected the views of many in the Department of Political Affairs, support for “root causes” approaches to prevention continued to broaden in the Secretariat as the decade moved to a close. This shift in mood was due less to increased confidence in the viability of prevention policies than to growing pessimism within the Secretariat about the viability of some of the UN’s peace operations as they were then constituted and run.

In 1998 two major reports had documented the organization’s catastrophic failures in Rwanda (where the genocide had followed shortly after the UN’s debacle in Somalia) and Srebrenica. As the Brahimi Report on peacekeeping was to point out in 2001, many of the problems that had caused these failures were endemic to the UN system.<sup>15</sup> Security Council mission mandates were often inappropriate with lightly armed peacekeepers being sent into war zones, and with many peace operations being woefully under funded. Most of the responsibility for this could be attributed to the Council and to member states more generally. As Secretary-General Annan’s own devastating 1998 report on the massacre at Srebrenica noted concerning the Council’s responsibility: “None of the conditions for the deployment of peacekeepers had been met: there was no peace agreement--not even a functioning ceasefire--there was no clear will to peace and there was no clear consent by the belligerents. Nevertheless, *faute de mieux*,

the Security Council decided that a United Nations peacekeeping force would be deployed. Lightly armed, highly visible in their white vehicles, scattered across the country in numerous indefensible observation posts, they were able to confirm the obvious: there was no peace to keep.”<sup>16</sup>

The central difficulty with the Council’s approach to intervention can be stated simply enough. It is extraordinarily difficult to persuade the key Council members to commit major resources--human as well as political and economic--to issues in which they perceive no major interests to be at stake. This was most tragically obvious in the case of Rwanda but remains a continuing and pervasive source of concern.<sup>17</sup>

In such a context it was not surprising that arguments in favor of prevention should have come to resonate more strongly in the Secretariat and even in the Council. Prevention, as was increasingly being pointed out, was cheaper than cure--in lives as well as money. Interest in embracing prevention within the system was complemented and reinforced by pressure from civil society groups--not least by the many NGOs accredited to the UN and the umbrella European Platform for Conflict Prevention, a 200-strong NGO consortium. The increased interest in “structural prevention” within the Secretariat was paralleled by growing pressure to address “root causes” from influential member states. Notable among the latter was Britain, where the Department for International Development led by Claire Short was pouring millions into prevention policy. Prevention had also been taken up by the OECD’s Development Assistance Commission and--with less and less diffidence--by the World Bank. By 1999 the G-8 were taking an increasing interest in the issue. In their communiqué from the July 2000 summit meeting, G-8 ministers indicated that they were firmly in the prevention camp--rhetorically at least.

In the publication of the 1999 Secretary-General's Report on the Work of the Organization,<sup>18</sup> the idea of a comprehensive approach to prevention was embraced without reservation--at least within the Secretariat. The key question was--and remains--how to turn rhetorical commitment into effective policy. The 1999 report noted that: "Today no one disputes that prevention is better, and cheaper, than reacting to crises after the fact. Yet our political and organizational cultures and practices remain oriented far more towards reaction than prevention."<sup>19</sup> In March 2000 the well received Secretary-General's *Millennium Report* noted: "There is near-universal agreement that prevention is preferable to cure, and that strategies of prevention must address the root causes of conflicts, not simply their violent symptoms."<sup>20</sup>

With respect to security the Secretariat now agreed that what was needed was a shift from a "culture of reaction" to a "culture of prevention." There was also increased emphasis on the security/ development nexus at the very heart of "structural prevention." The "Freedom From Fear" chapter of the *Millennium Report* argued that ". . . every step taken towards reducing poverty and achieving broad-based economic growth is a step towards conflict prevention."<sup>21</sup> In July 2001 *Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General* was presented to (and later endorsed by) the Security Council.<sup>22</sup> The report's endorsement by the Council added authority to the prevention/ peace-building cause. Like the *Brahimi* and *Millennium* reports, *Prevention of Armed Conflict* has become a much-cited source.

Much of the report was devoted to a survey of what various UN agencies contributed to prevention. This was more detailed than, but otherwise very similar to, the survey undertaken by the JIU for its 1995 prevention report. The contents of *Prevention of Armed Conflict* are long on description and relatively short on analysis. It was and remains a highly political document designed not least to assuage the concerns of member states from the developing world about

possible interference in their internal affairs. Its introduction, for example, stresses that: “. . .the primary responsibility for conflict prevention rests with national Governments . . . The main role of the United Nations and the international community is to support national efforts for conflict prevention and assist in building national capacity in this field.”<sup>23</sup> The message here--that successful prevention does not undermine state sovereignty but enhances it--was clearly directed at G-77 prevention skeptics.

The fact that development, always the primary concern of the G-77, is critical to prevention was also strongly reiterated: “Conflict prevention and sustainable and equitable development are mutually reinforcing activities. An investment in national and international efforts for conflict prevention must be seen as a simultaneous investment in sustainable development since the latter can best take place in an environment of sustainable peace.”<sup>24</sup> G-77 states are far more comfortable with a stress on development-as-prevention than prevention policies that emphasize good governance, democratization, security sector reform, and respect for human rights, which some key donor states promote. This is a source of tension between some developing states and donor agencies--especially when the former are led by undemocratic, corrupt, and repressive regimes.

The Secretary-General's report made the by-now-familiar argument that security and equitable development are two sides of the same coin--each necessary for the achievement of the other. It contained much that was sensible but little that was new. There were, however, some pointed criticisms buried in the long text to which we will return later. Within the system real efforts are now being made to enhance prevention policy, but these mostly involve an increased effort towards enhancing intrasystem coordination.<sup>25</sup> This is further evidence for the growing acceptance of “structural prevention” by those parts of the broader UN system--like the World

Bank--that had previously been reluctant to embrace such policies. How effective such efforts will be in actually reducing conflicts given resource constraints remains to be seen.

### ***Decoding the UN's Prevention Discourse***

Outsiders trying to follow a paper trail of the emerging consensus on prevention within the UN have often been surprised by the inconsistency of various reports and extraordinary confusion of terms used to describe the organization's prevention policies. The latter include "peace-building," "pre-conflict peace-building," "preventive development," "preventive deployment," "preventive disarmament," "preventive peace-building," "structural prevention," and "operational prevention"--and there are almost certainly other terms as well. How can such confusion persist? The answer lies in part in the fragmented nature of the UN system and in the lack of communication between its constituent parts. But the inconsistencies in definition and policy approaches also reflect the intense bureaucratic politics that are a defining characteristic of the internal operations of the UN.

There are even major inconsistencies between the Secretary-General's own reports. This is difficult for outsiders to comprehend, but in fact the Secretary-General does not write these reports himself--"his" reports reflect differences in assumptions between both individual authors and the bureaucratic interests they represent. If DPA is writing a Secretary-General's report, one can be sure that the stress will be on the "essentially political" nature of prevention.

Contributions from UNDP, by contrast, will tend to stress the preventive role of economic and social development.

All major reports that go out under the Secretary-General's name are reviewed by senior officials in his executive office. But these officials do not ensure consistency between different

reports, and they may know little about the substance of the issue in question. They are, however, skilled at detecting material that might be controversial. Given a natural inclination to avoid any sort of controversy that might embarrass the Secretary-General, the executive office will often require potentially controversial material to be removed from the report in question.

Recognizing this, report writers tend to self-censor their reports. Not surprisingly then, the Secretary-General's reports are often anodyne and sometimes excruciatingly boring. If the Secretary-General personally intervenes--as Kofi Annan did with the young authors of his Srebrenica report--and instructs them to "tell it as it is," the result can be startlingly frank and hard-hitting. But this is the exception and not the rule.

Report writers often have little familiarity with what was written five or more years earlier in their own departments--when they may have been pursuing tasks wholly unrelated to prevention issues. And the search function of the UN's website is so awful that tracking down in-house material on prevention produced by different departments can be extraordinarily difficult. Often reports seek to fudge what are essentially irreconcilable differences. This does not necessarily signal that an author lacks competence--though it may. It is far more likely to mean that she/he is trying to embrace contradictory political positions in response to the imperatives of bureaucratic politics. Statements that speak to different constituencies, but which are contradictory, may appear in different parts of a report, the author hoping that no one notices the contradiction. Boutros-Ghali's insistence in *Agenda for Peace* that sovereignty is "no longer absolute" and that "in situations of internal crisis the United Nations will need to respect the sovereignty of the State" is a case in point.

Students of UN affairs who seek to track the evolution of policy by decoding UN reports also need to understand that many UN reports have little or no impact on policy. Many of them

are mechanically produced by overworked staff without much substantive expertise in the subject matter. They are frequently produced in response to requests by member states and often reflect bureaucratic or political imperatives rather than substantive analytic contributions to evolving policy debates. Some--like an ill-fated report on peace-building that was produced at the same time as the Secretary-General's report to the Council on conflict prevention--are never released or even finished. Obviously a Secretary-General's report may have greater impact when endorsed by the Council than if it is simply produced as an in-house document, but Council endorsement does not necessarily mean that action will follow. Rhetorical affirmation and exhortation are as characteristic of the Council's deliberations as substantive commitment to policy.

Finally, it is important to realize that report writers dealing with prevention issues have a delicate balancing act to maintain. On the one hand they need to convince their intended constituency of the direness of the risks that need to be addressed--and hence the urgent need for more effective action and resources. On the other hand they have to avoid presenting too dire a picture in case donors come to believe that problems are insurmountable and not worth wasting resources. The UN has to be presented as capable--but under resourced.

### ***Barriers to Creating an Effective UN Prevention Policy***

Buried in the careful and bland language of the Secretary-General's *Prevention Report* are some oblique but telling criticisms. In the introduction to the report the Secretary-General suggests that--notwithstanding the long list of initiatives that follow--the UN has yet to "translate the rhetoric of conflict prevention into concrete action." Later (in paragraph 154) he argues that "adequate capacity for conflict prevention is still lacking" in the Secretariat. In paragraph 64 he

notes that the UN has yet to develop an enabling environment “in which United Nations staff are encouraged to develop a proactive, preventive mind set and in which incentives and accountability for preventive measures are put in place.” Member states are openly criticized in paragraph 72 for failing to deliver the prevention resources they have promised. “Too often departments, agencies, and programs have found that proposals, having received political endorsements from member states in one forum, fail to win support from the same states in other--particularly financial--forums.”

Elsewhere in the report are veiled criticisms of the operations of the interagency framework team that deals with prevention and of the failure of the new executive committees to deal with prevention issues. But the Secretary-General does not deal in any real detail with what are arguably the four most important barriers to creating an effective structural prevention policy within the UN. These are the lack of analytic capacity within the system, interdepartmental “turf wars,” the so-called “political will” issue, and the UN’s lack of comparative advantage in dealing with security/development issues.

### **The Analysis Gap**

The Secretariat has only minimal research capacity and lacks both the research culture and research resources that exist in the World Bank. Policy is often driven more by precedent, mandates, and politics than by data and analysis. One consequence is that in-house analysis of the generic causes of violent conflict is rarely evidence-based--without proper resources the situation could not be otherwise. UN prevention practice is rather like medical practice without the benefit of epidemiology. Effective structural prevention policy requires knowledge of the factors that--in general--predispose countries to violent conflict as well as particular knowledge

of individual countries. Econometricians at the World Bank and elsewhere have provided a wealth of information on the former. But their findings are largely inaccessible to the innumerate, and little effort has been made by their authors to translate them for the policy community. This literature--and the data on which it depends--has had little impact on the UN system. The consequence is obvious. Prescriptions for addressing the root causes of violence are unlikely to succeed if those causes are not understood.

While there have been repeated demands from the Secretariat for more resources to improve in-house analytic capacities, these demands are unlikely to be met--at least to the degree needed. In many cases it may well be preferable to have most research contracted out to independent researchers, perhaps working with in-house officials. The International Peace Academy (IPA) often plays this role for the UN, but IPA's limited resources are not commensurate with the system's needs. Involving independent researchers to a much greater degree would help avoid the politicization that affects some reports. Such an involvement would also mean that researchers with specific expertise could be engaged for specific purposes. The research process that created the Brahimi Report on peacekeeping provides a good example of how inside/outside collaboration can work effectively in practice. The work of the expert panels on "blood diamonds" and related issues in sub-Saharan Africa also reminds us that independent outsiders can provide far more forthright and critical reporting than is usually possible from politically restrained Secretariat officials.

There is another analytic issue here. The need for conflict prevention has become widely accepted--at least at the rhetorical level--not only in the UN system but also in the World Bank, the G-8, and the OECD. The idea that development policy should be "informed by a concern for conflict prevention" or "viewed through the conflict prevention lens" has become a veritable

mantra within the system. This is perfectly sensible at one level--but what it means in practice is by no means clear. Would development policy be any different if viewed through the “prevention lens”--and, if so, how? These and other critical questions have barely begun to be answered in the Secretariat.

### **Turf Wars**

Interdepartmental rivalries and differing agendas have made creating cohesive structural prevention policy within the UN extraordinarily difficult. Almost everyone agrees that the “root causes” of violent conflict are to be found in the nexus between security and development. But over-worked officials in DPA--the department designated as the “focal point” for peace-building / prevention--know little about development issues. They have traditionally viewed prevention primarily in terms of preventive diplomacy--a quintessentially political endeavor. The parts of the UN house that deal with development have not, until recently at least, conceived of development as a conflict prevention tool. The result has been that long-term prevention has tended to fall between the institutional cracks. It was not until 2002 that an informal working group of DPA and UNDP officials was created to discuss “structural prevention.”

Annan’s creation of four executive committees as part of his 1997 reform package was supposed to enhance interdepartmental understanding and cooperation. The committees should act as instruments for those seeking to bring real coherence to cross-system prevention policy. But they have yet to do this. Paragraph 66 of the Secretary-General’s Prevention Report argues that preventive actions of a developmental nature are “the natural purview” of one of the four executive committees--the system-wide UN Development Group (UNDG). This may be true. But UNDG has been deeply involved with the Millennium Development Goals reporting

process, and while its members were tasked with creating a guidance note on prevention, UNDG simply doesn't have the resources to do more than skim the surface of this issue. The Secretary-General notes in his report that most of the work of the executive committees to date "has addressed issues other than conflict prevention" and that he intends "to promote their more proactive use for that purpose in future." This has yet to happen.

The Security Council, a preeminently political body, has embraced the idea of addressing the root causes of conflict, but the permanent representatives of Council member states and their staffers rarely understand much about those socio-economic factors that are the root causes of violence. Their expertise is diplomacy, not economics. The Economic and Social Council might seem a more appropriate venue for dealing with structural prevention--but it lacks the authority of the Council and is not taken very seriously within the UN system.

### **The "Political Will" Question**

Effective preventive action by the United Nations requires sustained political will on the part of member states. First and foremost, this includes a readiness by the membership as a whole to provide the United Nations with the necessary political support and resources for undertaking effective preventive action in specific situations.<sup>26</sup> The failure of member states to provide the resources necessary for the UN to mount effective prevention operations is a constant refrain in almost all UN reports and is invariably attributed to "lack of political will".

What "lack of political will" means in practice is rarely spelled out but is fairly obvious in this case. "Political will" is a reflection of the pattern of the perceived interests of the major players on the Council. Despite their rhetorical commitment to prevention, these players rarely see their vital interests being served by providing the resources necessary to promote it. This is

not surprising. First, the Secretariat is not clear what preventive policies to “address root causes” of conflict would mean in practice. Second, member states are being called on to provide resources now in order to (possibly) prevent conflicts five, ten, or fifteen years into the future. Success in the future means that nothing happens. There will be nothing to show for the expenditure but the absence of a war that might not have happened anyway. This is not an easy proposition to sell to politicians who are unlikely to be in office even if the investments eventually have their desired effect.

Contrast this with the imperative to act when there is a major humanitarian tragedy. Here there are immediate urgent needs and--as the aid flows in and the hungry are fed--a clear and desirable result. Kofi Annan likes to quote an old Chinese proverb to the effect that “it is difficult to find money for medicine, but easy to find it for a coffin.” He has a point.

A second problem with the approach taken by many member states to UN policy has been well summed up by long-time UN observer, Edward Luck, who notes the following in a powerful recent critique of UN prevention policy: “In one issue after another, UN member states have adopted laundry-list action plans, based on comprehensive, undifferentiated strategies that have not required setting priorities or making choices that might offend one group of member states, agencies, domestic constituencies, or other. The expanded concept of prevention, it seems, is in danger of following this well-worn path towards rhetorical glory and programmatic irrelevance.”<sup>27</sup> Luck also notes that, in sharp contrast to their rhetorical enthusiasm for prevention, member states have been strikingly resistant to funding prevention policies in practice.<sup>28</sup> Thinking about how such behavior might be categorized, hypocrisy is a word that comes to mind.

## **The UN's Lack of Comparative Advantage With Respect to Structural Prevention**

If, as most analysts agree, structural prevention policies lie in the realm of development policy, then it follows that--in terms of development funding and expertise--the UN is at a comparative disadvantage compared with the World Bank and the major donor states. Its development assistance resources are simply too small. UNDP's core budget is less than ten percent of that of the World Bank and less than the combined budgets of the donor states. To put it bluntly, if the UN is not a major development actor, it cannot be a major structural prevention actor in the field. This is not to say that UNDP and DPA cannot make a difference on the ground--simply the value they can add is restrained by the very limited resources at their disposal.

### ***Conclusion***

Effectively promoting structural prevention is not easy. For international organizations like the UN, the EU, and the World Bank, as well as for individual donor states, prevention is a form of long distance social engineering practiced over vast distances with inadequate information and insufficient resources. It often seeks to change the behavior of governments that either lack the capacity to achieve needed reforms that will reduce the risks of violence or that are deeply resistant to implementing them. The UN simply does not have the resources to be a major player in the provision of on-the-ground prevention programs. The most cost-effective way for the organization to assist the cause of prevention would be to focus more attention on its traditional and still critical preventive diplomacy role--a realm in which it does have a comparative advantage and where the financial costs are relatively modest.

The UN can also promote prevention via its often overlooked ability to help create, sustain, and enhance global norms. The organization's major asset here is its credibility. Unlike

the Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, the UN has not been a target of violent demonstrations. Its credibility, especially in the developing world, remains high as countless polls attest. Key UNDP and Secretariat officials--in particular UNDP's administrator and the Secretary-General--could play a much greater role as "norm entrepreneurs" and sustainers--making the case for prevention clearly and compellingly. There are two important audiences for such a policy--the donor community, many of whose members are suffering from "aid fatigue," and those G-77 states who still view prevention policies as unwarranted interference in their internal affairs. There is an interesting precedent for such an approach--the UN's strategy for promoting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that emerged from the Millennium Declaration.

This strategy has four elements:

- The Millennium Project, which analyzes policy options and will develop a plan of implementation for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is a public-private cooperative endeavor directed by Columbia University's Jeffrey Sachs.
- The Millennium Campaign, which mobilizes political support for the Millennium Declaration among developed and developing countries. This is led by Evelyn Herfkens, the Secretary-General's executive coordinator for the MDG Campaign.
- Country-level monitoring of progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, led by the UN Development Group.
- Operational country-level activities, coordinated across agencies through the UN Development Group, which help individual countries implement policies necessary for achieving the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>29</sup>

One of the ironies of the Millennium Development Goals is that--though no one disputes the interdependence of security and development--not one of the 48 indicators that are used to monitor progress towards the various development goals relates to security. The MDGs call for a halving of world poverty by 2002--yet there has been no call for halving the numbers of wars or refugees. A UN-led strategy to promote coordinated structural prevention in conjunction with other international agencies and donor governments could complement the Millennium Development campaign and monitoring process. Combining the sorts of analytic capabilities that the Sachs team is bringing to the Millennium Project with a powerful advocacy campaign and effective country-level monitoring would be a relatively low-cost, potentially high-return strategy for the UN. Norm-building, -sustaining, and -enhancing are not sufficient for successful conflict prevention, but these are roles where the UN can play to its strengths--not its weaknesses.

## Endnotes

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- 1 United Nations, “Secretary-General Says Proposals in His Report on Africa Require New Ways of Thinking, of Acting,” (1998), para. 5.
- 2 Peter Wallesteen and Patrik Johansson, *The New Security Council: UN Decision-Making in Perspective*, (forthcoming 2004), 1
- 3 United Nations, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping* (New York : United Nations, 1992). para. 23
- 4 Ibid. para. 15.
- 5 H.L. Hernandez and S. Kuryama, *Strengthening of the United Nations System Capacity for Conflict Prevention* (Geneva: Joint Inspection Unit, United Nations, 1995).
- 6 Ibid, 32.
- 7 Ibid, 32.
- 8 Administrative Committee on Coordination, “Summary of Conclusions of the Administrative Committee on Coordination at Its First Regular Session of 1997,” (Geneva: United Nations, 1997), 7.
- 9 United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization Joint Inspection Unit: Strengthening of the United Nations System Capacity for Conflict Prevention,” (1997), para. 7.
- 10 Ibid, para. 26.
- 11 Ibid, para. 19.
- 12 Ibid, para. 45.
- 13 Ibid, para. 26.
- 14 Mark Malloch Brown, *Administrator's Statement on UNDP's Role in Crisis and Post-Conflict Situations before the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board 2nd Regular Session* (New York: UNDP, 2000), 17.
- 15 United Nations, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (2000).
- 16 United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35: The Fall of Srebrenica* (1999), para. 492.
- 17 The neglect of humanitarian / security issues in which the interests of major powers are not engaged is not restricted to the Council. In 1999, for example, more than 60 percent of UNHCR’s requests for assistance were for

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aid to the Balkans. This was despite the fact that the war in Kosovo had generated fewer than ten percent of the world's refugees for less than six months. Africans unsurprisingly saw UNHCR's requests as reflecting European racism.

18 Andrew Mack was the main author of this report.

19 Kofi Annan, *Preventing War and Disaster: A Growing Global Challenge* (United Nations General Assembly, 1999), para. 60.

20 Kofi Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (United Nations: 2000), 44. Andrew Mack drafted the security chapter of the Millennium Report.

21 Ibid, 45.

22 United Nations, *Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: 2001).

23 Ibid, 2.

24 Ibid.

25 See Tapio Kanninen and Jochen Prantl, *Conflict Prevention as Concept and Policy at the United Nations: A Policy Planning Perspective*, (forthcoming, 2002) for a useful insiders' review of UN prevention policies.

26 United Nations, *Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, para. 169.

27 Edward C. Luck, "Prevention: Theory and Practice" in *From Reaction to Prevention: Opportunities for the UN System* eds. Fen Osler Hampson and David M. Malone (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2002), 257.

28 Ibid, 258.

29 See Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/about.htm>.