

# **“Getting the Biggest (Silent) Bang for the Buck”**

Harnessing Conflict Prevention as an Effective Tool to Realize  
the MDGs and Global Security\*

By

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*\* This post-symposium position paper reflects on the findings of the ATHGO symposium on the “Global Third Way: Pursuing Global Security and Realizing the Millennium Development Goals” in Los Angeles, November 2005. The author thanks all participants and speakers for their valuable contributions to the ideas discussed in this paper.*

*“One of the most important lessons we in the development community have learned is just how intimately connected development and peace really are.”*

Susan Brown, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

Violent, organized group conflict is clearly the most severe impediment to sustainable development and global security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A few years of war easily destroy decades of hard effort and investments in the fight against poverty, hunger, disease, and lack of education. Today, a strong consensus in the international community has emerged that the most effective tool to fight these violent conflict is their prevention. Nonetheless, peacebuilding efforts still suffer from a chronic lack of systematic application, strategic coordination, and sustained funding.

But if conflict prevention is so widely acknowledged yielding the “biggest bang for the buck”, in the fight for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and global security, why isn't it used more extensively? I argue that there are three major structural factors that hinder the wider use of systematic conflict prevention by the international community: political visibility, time-inconsistency problems, and sovereign states that are conflict parties. However, this does not imply that systematic conflict prevention is impracticable, as long as these obstacles are overcome through well-designed institutional mechanisms. Three of these are discussed in this paper: A UN High Commissioner for Conflict Prevention, automated early warning mechanisms, and budget fixed as percentage of post-conflict expenses.

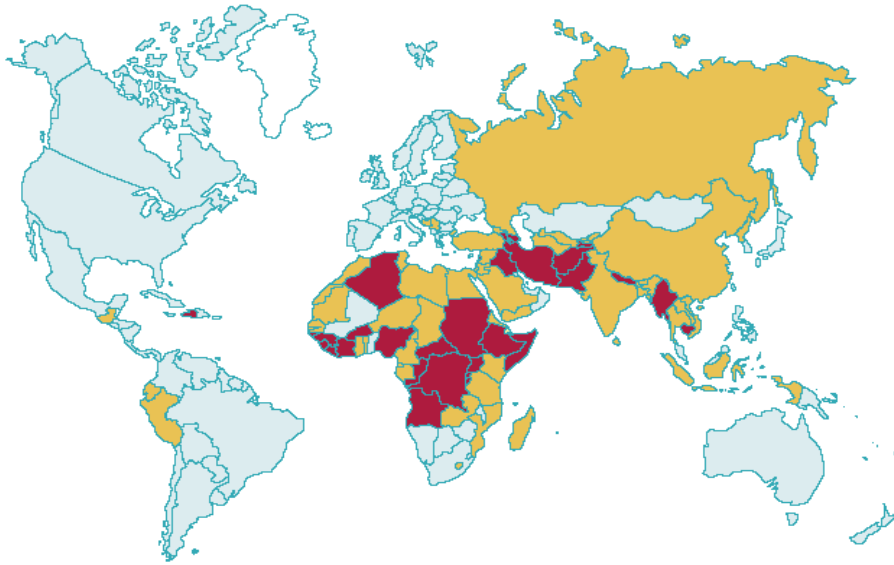
*“Thus, the question remains: Why is conflict prevention still so seldom practiced, and why do we so often fail when there is a clear potential for a preventive strategy to succeed?”*

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General

In a world with tight budget constraints and a very limited willingness by global powers to engage into risky military adventures, peacebuilding appears as *the* “win-win solution”, a point also stressed at the ATHGO symposium.<sup>1</sup> The fight against violence and underdevelopment are really the same: It is no coincidence that 75% of the least-developed countries experienced wars in the last decade and that ca. 50% of low income countries were subject to major political violence in the recent past (Brown, 2002; Stewart, 2000).<sup>2</sup> This becomes obvious when comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2: Most top or high-priority countries in the struggle to implement the MDGs display significant shortcomings in their peacebuilding capacity.

While a thorough analysis reveals that carefully implemented conflict prevention is a relatively low-cost, high-benefit policy instrument, promoting it is a difficult task mainly for three reasons. First, its benefits remain hard to assess and largely invisible. Successful conflict prevention bears one hallmark: No violent crisis erupts and “business as usual” prevails (UN, 2001). This poses a serious problem, as peacebuilding is continuously competing for limited funds and attention of an international media and political community often-occupied with large-scale crises with spectacular amounts of casualties and the highly-visible, urgent needs of the victims. The perverse result is that help for today’s victims consumes direly needed resources in the fight to prevent tomorrow’s crises. Yes, peacebuilding might offer “the biggest bang for the buck”, but unfortunately the bang is a “silent” one.

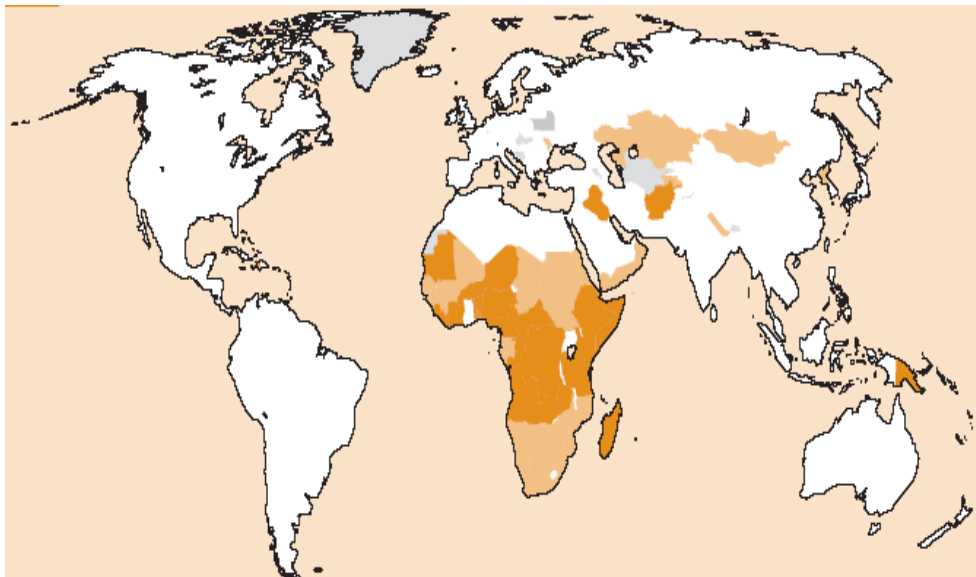
Figure 1 *Nation states capacity to avoid violent conflict 2005*



Red countries: At the greatest risk of neglecting or mismanaging emerging societal crises such that these conflicts escalate to serious violence and/or government instability.  
Yellow countries: Intermediate risk.  
Green countries: Low risk

Source: CIDM, 2005 Figure 2.1, p. 3.

Figure 2 *MDG Top and High Priority Countries*



Dark-brown countries: Top priority countries.  
Light-brown countries: High priority countries.  
Grey countries: no information available.

Source: UNDP, 2004; Figure 6, p. 134.

The second impediment to systematic conflict prevention is a time-inconsistency problem reinforcing the attention problem described above (UN, 2001, p.36). One could say that the “bang” is not only inaudible, but also comes only in the distant future, while the “buck” has to be invested today. It should therefore come as no surprise that policy-makers often prefer to choose less effective instruments as long as the benefits of these strategies are realized as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, most of the current violent conflicts are intra-national in nature.<sup>4</sup> These almost always involve the sovereign institution of the state as a conflict party. Conflict prevention initiatives, certainly in case of UN missions, depend on the agreement of the state. In cases where the party that controls the state has no interest in mediation,<sup>5</sup> this agreement might be hard to obtain. Two prominent examples of this are the conflicts in Sudan’s Darfur region and the ongoing struggle in Chechnya, Russia, where governments have lobbied relentlessly against voices for an international intervention.

The above-mentioned structural difficulties pose a serious problem to attempts to reap the full benefits of conflict prevention.<sup>6</sup> However, these can be tackled through effective institutional arrangements. I advocate the creation UN High-Commissioner for Conflict Prevention, with a small, permanent professional staff.<sup>7</sup> The High Commissioner would systematically coordinate the scattered UN efforts for peacebuilding, promoting a “culture of prevention” throughout the institution (Lund 2002).<sup>8</sup> Further, the High Commissioner should be able to raise issues directly to the Security Council, putting more pressure on states in conflict to support peacebuilding initiatives. This would also help to “mainstream” and improve the political visibility of the idea of conflict prevention.

*“In order to translate prevention into practice, one probably has to be a combination of political realist and impatient idealist”*

From the “Krusenberg Conclusions”, resulting from a joint study on peacebuilding by Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK.

Second, I propose the permanent establishment of “early warning” and “early action” mechanisms, using the readily available expertise of specialized NGOs in the field. Systematic monitoring of conflicts worldwide would trigger an response in the form of automatic funds and personnel allocation in case of escalation. This automatic response is crucial to work around the afore-mentioned attention and time-inconsistency problems: Resources would automatically appear were they are most needed and most effective.

Third, these activities should be funded through a budget set as *a fixed percentage of 10 to 15% of all realized funding* for United Nations interventions during and after conflicts. Similar to a tax, these funds would be automatically deducted from any expenses toward such activities. This is the only mechanism that is able to translate the public’s political pressure to act against the *symptoms* of violent conflicts into resources for the most effective tool in combating their *source*. I am fully aware that this would further diminish the often already inappropriate funding of these vital activities. Nonetheless, in the long run, every dollar diverted to peacebuilding in this manner would reduce violent conflicts and underdevelopment by multiple amounts of what results from its current use in combating “hot conflicts”.

By way of conclusion, conflict prevention is clearly the most effective means by which to foster the implementation of the MDGs and global security. While peacebuilding suffers from a number of structural shortcomings, hindering its deployment to its full potential, it is possible

and imperative to provide remedies for these shortcomings in form of enhanced institutional mechanisms within the United Nations framework. Three of which were discussed in this essay: A UN High-Commissioner for Conflict Prevention, automated early warning and action mechanisms, and a budget fixed as a proportion of post- conflict expenses. There is no time to lose as millions keep suffering daily. In the words of Kofi Annan: “The time has come to translate the rhetoric of conflict prevention into concrete action” (UN, 2001).

*Word count excluding figures, referencing, bibliography and endnotes: 1039.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This point that was stressed by Prof. Michael Intrilligator in his speech at the ATHGO Symposium in Los Angeles on Nov. 3, 2005. Responding to the question which alternative approaches instead of increases in foreign aid he has in mind to prevent war and foster development in Sub-Saharan Africa, he explicitly pointed towards increased diplomatic activity to help settle conflicts as an effective instrument.

<sup>2</sup> The costs of such violence are enormous: in roughly a hundred armed conflicts, more than 5 million people have been killed in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone and a “typical civil-war” is estimated to cost at least 50 billion. Civilians bearing the brunt of the costs and about half of the casualties and economic impact occurring indirectly and often after the end of major violence (ICRG, 2000; Collier, 2004; Hoeffler & Reynal-Querol, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> This might sound trivial, but to political economist this is a well-known and serious issue: Political agents tend to discount future gains and costs and, in the absence of appropriate institutions, this can easily lead to rational decisions that yield undesirable long-term results.

<sup>4</sup> 55 of the 59 armed conflicts between 1990 and 2003 were wars internal to a state rather than between states (NGLS, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> This might be the case e.g. because it feels that this might empower opposition groups or bring unwelcome attention to the conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Nearly all of the major global institutions and many national governments in the last decade have dealt extensively with the issue of conflict prevention (see e.g. UN, 2000a, 2001, 2004; OECD, 2001; NGLS 2005; Stremlau & Sagasti, 1998; for multilateral institutions or Utenriksdepartementet, 2004 for national governments). However, while some encouraging trends in conflict prevention have become apparent in recent years, only a quarter of the civil wars since the end of the Cold War were successfully mediated and today still more than a third of the internal conflicts worldwide have not been tackled by the United Nations (see UN 2004, especially Fig. III on p. 34).

<sup>7</sup> This idea is not new. E.g. the “Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change” in its final report the creation of a second Deputy Secretary General for peace and security (UN, 2004)

<sup>8</sup> Methods promoting such a culture would include training and raising awareness among other UN agencies and staff about conflict prevention and fostering a permanent dialogue with other multilateral institutions, the media, and the numerous specialized NGO’s in the field.

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