PROACTIVE CONFLICT PREVENTION: IMPACT ASSSESSMENT?

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Limits of Conflict Prevention

In 1994, Interdisciplinary Research on Root Causes of Human Rights Violations (PIOOM) registered 22 high intensity conflicts (wars with more than 1000 deaths in one year); 39 low intensity conflicts (with 100-999 political violence victims per year), and 40 serious disputes (less than 100 political victims per year) (1995). Such data clearly indicates that there is still a wide gap between international aspirations and reality. If a distinction is made between proactive and reactive conflict prevention, we notice that most of today's efforts are of a reactive nature. Proactive conflict prevention refers to measures taken before the conflict has escalated; reactive conflict prevention refers to measures taken after the conflict has escalated. The aim of the latter is to contain and reduce the intensity, the duration and the geographic spill-over of the armed violence. Proactive conflict prevention is a more cost-effective way of handling conflicts. After crossing the threshold of violence, the conflict dynamic becomes not only more destructive, but also very costly and difficult to transform. How does one account for the failure of proactive conflict prevention? Many explanations have been given (See Bauwens and Reychler, 1994). The three most important explanations relate to problems of prognosis, perceived interests and know-how.

To prevent surprises, many governments and international organizations have paid considerable attention to the improvement of *early warning systems*. Universities and research institutes have also been very active in developing and testing alarm bells and warning signals. Six types of early-warning models can be distinguished: signal, trend, added value, sequential, scenario, and strategic models. Signals are events or developments which historically tended to be predictors of conflict escalation (See Dunnigan and Martel, 1987). Signals can be: arms buildup, mobilization of troops, dehumanization campaigns, inability or unwillingness of the potential aggressor to negotiate a settlement, and internal unrest within the potential defender. The trend model bases its forecasts on an extrapolation of perceived trends. Illustrative are Melko's peace and war cycles and his expectation that, at least until the middle of the 21st century, the northwestern part of the world will be characterized by peace (Melko, 1985). The added value model has not only an empirical but a theoretical base as well. A classic illustration of this approach is the security community model of Karl Deutsch. The chances of creating a security community are assessed by checking the realization of a series of preconditions, such as the compatibility of values, a *weness* feeling, democratization, economic growth, the expectation of mutual benefits, mobility, effective governance, constructive transformation of ethnic and nationalist conflicts, arms control, etc. (Reychler, 1991). Sequential models differentiate between background, intervening, response, and trigger variables. Scenario models are also very useful. The development of best, better, more of the same, worse and worst case scenarios raises the awareness of unexpected developments. Finally, the strategic model identifies the points in the conflict dynamic in which interventions are expected to make a difference in outcomes. Despite all those efforts and the development of better early warning systems, reactive conflict prevention still prevails. Africa is covered with alarm bells and flashing lights. However,

early warning is a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for implementing an effective conflict prevention policy.

The perception, by potential intervenors, that proactive conflict prevention is advancing their *interests* is a second necessary condition. As long as the conflict is not perceived as threatening vital interests, the response tends to be too little, too late and of a low risk nature. The main interest of the European Community in Bosnia has, for a long time, been to contain or quarantine the conflict. Human suffering and moral considerations, amplified by the media, could jolt the international community into action. However, moral considerations by themselves do not seem to be sufficient to provoke adequate proactive conflict prevention measures.

The third factor which inhibits proactive conflict prevention, is the lack of *know-how*. There are numerous research and training programs to address most serious problems in society. For problems related to health, universities provide for the education of medical doctors; for legal problems there are excellent law schools; for economic problems there are master programs in Business Administration, etc. However, when dealing with large scale violence, with some exceptions, no comprehensive academic training is available. Until recently, conflict management was considered the exclusive domain of professional diplomats and soldiers. The training was provided by departments of international relations, the military academy or on-the-job training. The conflicts they were expected to handle were predominantly interstate conflicts. The traditional approaches of conflict have proven to be of limited relevance for coping with non interstate conflicts. Managing new types of conflicts requires a more sophisticated analysis of conflict dynamics, an acquaintance with a wide battery of conflict prevention instruments and with constructive conflict transformation. It requires not only skills in peace-making and peace reinforcement/keeping, but also in peace (re)building.

As one of the newest additions to the diplomatic vocabulary, the term peace-building tends to be loosely defined. *Peace building* refers to the creation of an objective and subjective context which enhances the constructive transformation of conflicts to a sustainable peace. A sustainable peace is a legitimate peace, supported by the major stake holders or the people involved. Such a peace is built on the concept of conflict transformation, underscoring the goal of moving a given population from the status of extreme vulnerability and dependency to that of self-sufficiency and well-being (Lederach, 1994). In more specific terms, conflict progression refers to the movement from latent to manifest conflict, confrontation, negotiation and finally to the peaceful relationships of a security community (Reychler, 1996). Peace building requires two sets of efforts relating to: (re)construction and (re)conciliation.

The most visible efforts are the *structural measures* which are meant to improve life conditions, reduce discrimination, and provide means for settling or resolving disputes. In more concrete terms, those efforts refer to: the installation and reinforcement of democratic structures, including the organization and supervision of elections; the strengthening of the legal system; economic reconstruction; rebuilding the educational infrastructure; the resettlement of refugees; and health services.

Less visible, but as essential, are the (re)*conciliation measures*. These measures intend to create a new moral-political climate in which the conflicting parties are committed to the restoration of ruptured relationships and the construction of a new future. This implies not only reconciliation

with the present (a peace agreement settling particular issues), but also a reconciliation with the past (healing of historical wounds) and the future. A reconciliation with the past, present and future, is necessary for achieving a sustainable peace. Another essential component of the new moral-political climate is the creation of a compatible value system. This requires a (re)conciliation of such competitive and interdependent values and forces as: truth, peace, welfare, justice, mercy, freedom and beauty (Reychler, 1996). This kind of reconciliation aims at creating a social context in which all those values and needs are validated, as opposed to a value system in which some values must win out over others. A last component of the new moral-political climate is the creation of a *weness* feeling. This implies efforts to enhance multiple loyalties.

Early Warning of What?

Tracing the causes of the failure of conflict prevention, one is struck by the importance of problems of a conceptual nature. The surprises, lost opportunities, chronic crisis management, as well as the lack of a coherent and effective conflict prevention policy, all point to a series of conceptual problems. With respect to the early warning efforts, four problems can de distinguished. First, there is a tendency to focus primarily on the hard, tangible, quantifiable variables while *overlooking the soft variables*—perceptions, expectations, analytic styles, preferred world orders and strategic approaches—which influence the conflict dynamic. A second problem is the predominant attention given to *forecasting threats, dangers or worst-case developments*. A disproportionatly low amount of attention goes to the warning of opportunities to intervene proactively. As a consequence, most wars can be analyzed as histories of missed opportunities. The third problem concerns the assessment of the costs and benefits of alternative policy options. The *cost-benefit analyses tend to be very rudimentary*, failing to acknowledge several important cost -factors. Finally , if policy impact assessments are made, they tend to be of a *uni-dimensional nature*. Not enough attention is paid to assessing the impact of conflict prevention measures on other domains, levels or time-frames.

| Reactive	Proactive
focus on threats	focus on opportunities
rudimentary cost-benefit analysis	comprehensive analysis of cost benefits
hard-quantifiable variables	soft variables
one-dimensional analysis	mulit-dimensional, cross-impact analysis

Table 1. Problems of early warning systems.

Missed Opportunities

During the Cold War most research efforts were directed to threat and worst-case scenario analysis. A disproportionately low amount of attention went to the assessment of opportunities for constructive conflict transformation. The same is true today. Practically all research money is spent on the development of systems for early warning of threats, dangerous escalations or worst case scenarios. Practically no attention is being paid to the development of early warning systems identifying the points in conflict processes in which particular interventions would enhance a constructive transformation of the conflict. A number of recent conflicts could be described as stories of missed opportunities. The term 'missed opportunity' refers to moments or periods during the conflict where measures could have been taken which would have had a significant positive impact on the dynamics of the conflict. A glance at the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia indicates several missed opportunities (See Table 2). In different phases of the conflict, measures could have been taken to enhance the chances of a positive conflict transformation. The artillery, maiming the beautiful city of Dubrovnik, could have been destroyed easily, conveying to the aggressor that the international community would not play the role of an innocent bystander.

Before outburst of violence

- deteriorating economic situation: 1982-89
- media war offensive of Milosovic '88
- repression Kosovo '89
- disarmament of Slovenia and Croatia before war started
- war games of the Yugoslav National Army (YNA)
- international community preferred unitary state and was not prepared to listen to Slovenian and Croatian points of view
- implicit green light for the YNA to intervene

Early in war

- no credible military response to the destruction of Vukovar and Dubrovnik
- recognition of Slovania and Croatia not successfully linked to overall peace and cooperation agreement.

During the war

- the arms embargo reinforced the asymmetric character of the war
- no credible stick....the no-fly zone become only operational in Feb'94
- peace proposals reinforced might is right options, and not a just peace.

Table 2: Ex-Yugoslavia : A History of Missed Opportunities.

Several explanations could be given to explain this sad history of missed opportunities: (1) the lack of foresight; (2) the overload of the political and diplomatic agenda at the beginning of the war caused by the implosion of the USSR, the Gulf War and the efforts of the European Union to strengthen integration, and; (3) the diminished interest in Yugoslavia caused by its reduced
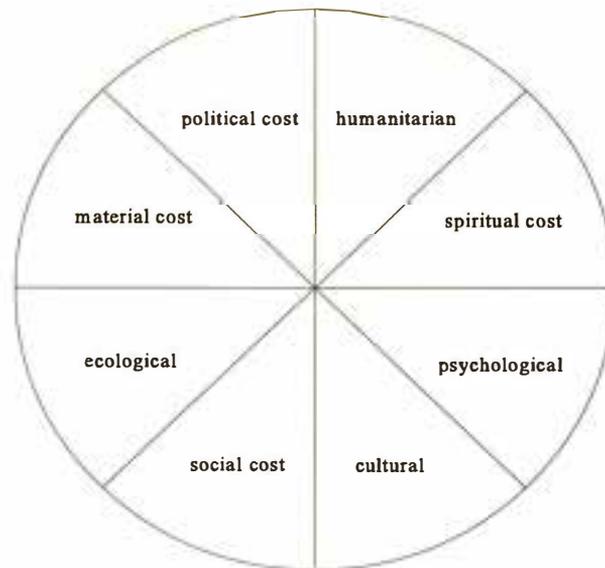
Figure 1: Costs of Wars

geopolitical importance after the Cold War and the fact that the country lies beyond 'Little Europe.'
To increase the chances of successful conflict prevention, much more attention should be paid to the
development of early warning systems that indicate to politicians when and how to intervene
effectively.

Accounting for Costs and Benefits

The development of a more effective proactive conflict prevention system also requires a
betterinsight in the economy of war and peace. This area of research has been neglected seriously.
It is, for example, practically impossible to find an accurate and comprehensive accounting, not only
of the costs of the destruction in a particular war, but also the respective peace-re-building efforts.
A complete assessment includes not only the human and economic costs, but also the social,
political, ecological, cultural, psychological and spiritual dimension.

Lacking also is research about the *vulture factor*, or the persons or groups who profit from
armed violence. Their identification is essential as the length of wars tend to increase as long as
major groups or decision-makers expect benefits. Neglected also, are studies comparing the costs
of proactive and reactive conflict prevention. Such data could help convince policy-makers about
the cost effectiveness of proactive conflict prevention. In addition, the publication of the cost and
benefits of war and the obligation of decision-makers to account for the destruction and profits,
could make them think twice before engaging in future wars. An early warning of the cost and
benefits of conflict policy options envisaged, could lead to a more enlightened assessment of the
interests involved.

Conflict Impact Assessment : CIAS

Research should also be focused on the assessment of the impact of intervention measures on the conflict dynamic. Most conflict prevention policies are compilations of well intentioned, unidimensional measures. Not enough attention is paid to possible negative externalities. Generally peace keepers play a positive role, but in some situations they have became an obstacle for peace-making and effective peace-reinforcement. The Khmer Rouge parasitized on the refugee camps in Thailand. Thus, food aid was ultimately used to sustain warmongering groups. The threat of a war crimes tribunal can, under certain circumstances, protract violent conflict as well. Democratization pressures can be a blessing, but can also enhance centrifugal forces and lead to anarchy, and eventually, a dictatorial system. In all cases, causal loops are not discussed systematically and comprehensively. The chances of proactive conflict prevention could be significantly enhanced by requiring conflict impact assessments (CIAS).

The aim of a conflict impact assessment system is (a) to assess the positive and/or negative impact of different kinds of intervention, or the lack thereof, on the dynamics of the conflict ; (b) to contribute to the development of a more coherent conflict prevention and peace building policy; (c) to serve as sensitizing tool for policy-shapers and policy-makers, helping them to identify weaknesses in their approach (for example: blind spots, incoherence, bad timing, inadequate priority setting, etc.; (d) to further the economy of peace building.

Despite the self evident need of a conflict impact assessment system, one senses resistance and reservations with respect to the development and the implementation of such a tool. Some reservations are based on the conviction that conflict dynamics are much too complex to be tracked by CIAS. Others fear that an adequate assessment will be a time consuming exercise, inhibiting their flexibility. There is also the apprehension by some, stated less explicitly, that a CIAS would expose the negative impact of one's policies on the chances of reaching a sustainable peace—making the pursuit of self-interest in conflict zones more difficult. All of these suggest some limits with respect to the development and implementation of an assessment system. The overall aim of such a tool is to sensitize decision makers and opinion leaders to the complexity of peace making, peace building and peace keeping, thereby helping them formulate or design a more coherent, efficient and effective peace policy.

A conflict impact assessment system requires:

- a clear and compelling definition of the peace one wants to achieve and a valid conceptual framework indicating the conditions enhancing or inhibiting the realization of the aim;
- a comprehensive assessment of the needs of, or the presence or absence of, the above mentioned conditions in a conflict region;
- a coherent action plan;
- an effective implementation of the action plan;
- a recognition of the ownership and legitimate control of the conflict transformation; and
- an awareness and dismantling of mental walls inhibiting the satisfaction of all the above.

One of the causes of the failure of conflict prevention is the existence of an incoherent peace policy. In many cases the incoherence results from the pursuit of different aims or of different kinds of peace. It is impossible to develop an effective conflict prevention policy when there is no consensus or clarity about what is meant by conflict prevention or the kind of peace one wants to pursue. Do the policy makers perceive peace as an endpoint or as a process? Are they satisfied with negative peace (the absence of military violence) or do they want positive peace? Are the aiming for a suspension of violence (a peace break) or a sustainable peace? The definition of peace is a moral-political decision. From an analytic point of view however, clarity and precision are very important. An analyst should insist on working with a clear operational definition. Without an explanation of the kind of peace one wants to see realized, it will be difficult to evaluate singular peace initiatives or the peace policy as a whole. To make a long-term difference, one must envision the peace one wants to achieve. Only in that way will it be possible to establish criteria for judging where it is heading. Equally important is to have a good idea of the conditions that must be fulfilled to achieve peace. Establishing a sustainable peace process requires much more than providing humanitarian aid or containing violence.

Secondly, the design of an effective conflict prevention policy requires not only a clear operational definition of peace, but also a comprehensive assessment of the needs in the region. In other words, we have to find out if the necessary conditions for a sustainable peace process are present or not. Need assessment helps to distinguish strong areas which have been adequately covered, weak areas which needs much more effort, and blind spots. In Burundi, practically nothing has been done to overcome the security dilemma confronted by ethnic groups-—development projects have ground to a halt as no inclusive peace making process seems to have started. Salient among the blind spots is the debilitating political/psychological climate dominated by fear, hostility, stress, cynicism and pessimism.

The third requirement for implementing a more effective conflict prevention policy is the design of a coherent action plan for building a sustainable peace. Most peace plans today are compilations of well intentioned, unidimensional measures (political, legal, humanitarian, economic. Not enough attention is paid to the cross-impact of these measures on the conflict dynamic. For analytical purposes several types of impacts may be distinguished—mainly postive and negative satisfiers, and weak and strong impacts.

Certain interventions could be listed as satisfiers, counterproductive measures, pseudo-satisfiers and inhibiting satisfiers (See Max-Neff, 1991). Satisfiers are measures which clearly advance projected goals, such as democratization and development. Counterproductive measures tend to have a paradoxical nature. For example, when applied with the intention to increase security (arms race), they not only impair the overall security, but also the adequate satisfaction of other peace-building conditions. Pseudo-satisfiers are measures that generate a false sense of achievement of a given need (formal democracy, stereotypes). Inhibiting satisfiers are those that oversatisfy a given requirement for peace, therefore seriously curtailing the possibility of satisfying other requirements. In addition to the direction, positive or negative, an assessment has to be made of the strength of the impact. Economic sanctions could hurt the power holders marginally or significantly. Peace keeping efforts could function as a credible or not so credible deterrent.

In many failed conflict prevention cases, the intervention efforts are frequently of the 'too

little too late' nature. Timing is crucial in the design of an effective conflict prevention policy. There are moments when a conflict is ripe for particular types of interventions and postponements equal deadly delays. There are also moments when one should get out and leave the transformation to the primary parties. The second time-problem concerns the coordination between the intervening actors. The lack of effective coordination frequently results in a waste of precious time. The third time-problem concerns the sequential or synchronous implementation of conflict prevention measures. Some decision-makers, for example, assume that democratization efforts have a higher chance to succeed after a level of socio-economic welfare has been reached. Others believe that economic and political development efforts need to be pursued at the same time. A final time related problem is finding the right mix of short-term, medium-term and long-term projects. In most violent conflicts, one notices that most of the attention goes to short-term measures (humanitarian aid and peace-keeping) at the expense of middle and long-term efforts.

Another important factor is the duration of the impact. The impact could be of a permanent or a temporary nature. The transformation of conflicts requires sustained efforts. One of the credos of field diplomacy is that a conflict needs to be adopted. One cannot adopt a child for a week or a month and then leave it. The same is true for conflict. A great deal of the efforts of external governmental and non-governmental actors are single shot operations betting on instant successes.

Yet another important factor is the issue of singular versus synergetic satisfiers. Single satisfiers are measures or initiatives which satisfy a particular requirement for building a sustainable peace (economic, legal, educational,...). With respect to other requirements, they are neutral (professional armies). Synergetic satisfiers are those measures that satisfy a given requirement, while simultaneously stimulating or contributing to the fulfillment of other requirements (popular education). The cross-impact could relate to different sectors (political, military, economic, legal, educational), levels (personal, local, regional, national, international), actors (man and woman) and time frames.

There is also the issue of exogenous and endogenous satisfiers. Exogenous satisfiers are measures which are prescribed, imposed, induced ritualized or institutionalized. They are generated from outside, or at the top. Endogenous satisfiers or measures, on the other hand, are elicited from the stakeholders or the people who have to live with the outcome.

Furthermore, systematic attention should be given to the complex interdependence of different intervention domains (political, economic, legal, military), levels, time frames and layers or depths. The field is full of jargon such as peace -making, peace-building and peace-keeping; and these are all necessary building stones. Thus, in conflict areas, piles of peace building stones are all that can be found. But where is the peace architecture? Where does one start? What are the priorities? How does one effectively combine time and means to build a sustainable peace process?

	Levels of Action *International* Global, Regional Sub-regional *National* Elite, Middle Local	
Domain Measures diplomatic political economic humanitarian educ / information military		**Time-factors** *timing of entry/exit* *leadtime* long middle short *synchronically or sequentially*
	Layers *behavioral* *conceptual* *deeper layers perceptions* wishes, expectations, feelings, emotions, historical memory	

Table 3. Cross-impact of the Domains, Levels, Time-factors , and Layers of a Conflict

     The purpose of Table 3 is to remind policy planners or makers of possible blind spots in their peace policy. Two types of blind spots could be distinguished. First, one could have overlooked certain relevant domains, levels, time-factors and layers of the conflict. Secondly, not enough attention could have been paid to the cross-impact between all the above mentioned components.

     Fourth, implementing a peace plan effectively remains a major conceptual problem. It requires coordination and leadership as well as the will to make the necessary means and time available. Delivering the necessary means is, to a great extent, related to the perceived interests of the donor countries. When vital interests are at stake, it seems to be easier than when it concerns a far from bed type of conflict. How does one convince opinion leaders that one should be involved, or that proactive conflict prevention is more cost-effective than reactive conflict prevention? Other questions predominate as well. Who will be the prime mover(s)? How will the peace efforts be coordinated? Should it be one person or a team who will handle the conflict? Should the team consist of outsiders or also include partial insiders? When do coordination efforts result into a creative synergetic process and when do they become stifling? Finally, more attention should be paid to the role of leadership in conflict transformation. What kind of leadership is appropriate for conflict transformation?

Fifth, it has become part of the litany for peace workers that conflicting parties should be the owners of their conflict; that one should not steal them; that one needs a mandate in order to provide peace services; and that one ought to work with local partners, etc. The problem of ownership is also alive in academic discussions concerning the pros and cons of inclusive versus exclusive, elicitive versus prescriptive, and exogenous versus endogenous approaches of conflict transformation. It is also related to the entry and exit of a conflict. The underlying assumption of this concern is that a peace process can only be sustained when it is supported by the internal and external stake holders. But who are these stake holders? Should the efforts be concentrated on the elite or also involve the people? What does it mean to empower the people? Should the extremists be invited to the negotiation table? How and to what extent should external parties, who's security and interests are linked up with the conflict, have a say in the conflict transformation process and the peace agreement. What are the guidelines for governmental and non-governmental third parties whose expertise and others kinds of support are needed for peace making, peace building and arms control.

Finally, several socio-psychological walls stand in the way of developing the necessary flexibility, open-mindedness and creativity to help to transform conflicts constructively: (1) myths, illusions and taboos; (2) reductionism and intolerance of complexity; (3) elite orientedness; (4) the propensity to react rather than proact; (5) a destructive socio-political climate; (6) lack of innovative thinking hindering the development of new tools (hope-raising measures, field diplomacy) (Reychler, 1996). One of the most severe challenges facing practitioners who tackle entrenched conflicts is how to unlearn or discard inappropriate ways of thinking, thus recasting conflict transformation as a learning process for all involved.

The Soft Dimension

One of the major factors inhibiting the development of a more effective early warning and conflict prevention regime is the relative neglect of several soft variables. These variables can be clustered into four groups: the approach of the conflict ; the elite networks; leadership; and the moral-political climate.

The handling of the conflict is, to a great extent, determined by: the definition of the conflict situation of the actors (how they see and feel about the current situation and the expected future developments); the causal attributions; the preferred world orders; and strategic thinking. A chronic and serious error that outsiders continue to make in their analysis of conflicts is the attempt to apply their own system of logic or reasoning when assessing the motivations of the protagonists. A basic question that confronts, for example, Hutu and Tutsi policy-makers and third parties today is how to interpret the intentions and capabilities of the primary conflicting parties and how to design policies that will minimise risks and maximise the achievement of important goals. Gathering reliable information about private perceptions is no sinecure.

The second type of information which is often difficult to access are the informal elite networks and the advisors or grey eminence's, which are consulted by the decision-makers. Thirdly, more in depth information is needed about the leaders in conflict ridden regions and their relationship with their respective followers. With the exception of outstanding leaders, such as

Mandela, Ghandi or Arafat, it is hard to get in-depth information about the leading figures in today's conflicts

A fourth type of intelligence needed relates to the moral-political climate in which the conflict is situated. An effective assessment of the moral political climate requires an insight into: the value systems of the conflicting parties and the degree of value reconciliation; their internal and external legitimacy status; the presence or absence of a *weness* feeling and or multiple loyalties; the expectation of mutual benefits as a consequence of co-operation; hope or despair; trust or distrust; psychological ossification/close-mindedness or open-minded creativity; reconciliation; and the healing or festering of psychological wounds.

Conclusion

The diminished cost/tolerance of violent conflicts has led to more conflict prevention efforts. These efforts were not automatically translated in successes. The euphoria of the immediate post Cold War period is turning into a clearer appreciation of the limits and possibilities of conflict prevention measures and a need for the more sophisticated analysis and handling of conflicts. Indicative of the increasing concern with conflict prevention is: the demand for a better accounting of the costs of destructive conflict management, the growing apprehension about missed opportunities, the awareness that the inclusion of soft variables can make the difference between success and failure, and the research and development of a proactive conflict impact assessment system.

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