

POLICY MEMO

November 13, 2017

Taking Stock of the Evidence: What Works to Reduce Violence and Prevent Atrocities?

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for the first time since the Cold War, violence and violent conflict are increasing worldwide, and today we face the largest displacement crisis the world has ever seen, predominantly as a result of violent conflict. A new report from the Institute for Economics and Peace found that violence containment costs the global economy \$14.3 trillion per year. Yet a 2016 analysis by Mercy Corps and Search for Common Ground of annual official development assistance (ODA) spending, as defined by the OECD, found that governments spend just 1 percent of ODA on conflict mitigation and peacebuilding and only 8 percent of ODA on politics, security, justice, and rule of law. This means that less than 10 percent of global ODA is spent on the very things we know can counter humanitarian suffering, mass violence and atrocities, and chronic underdevelopment. When asked why a higher proportion of official development spending is not going toward violence reduction and conflict or atrocity prevention, policymakers routinely cite a lack of sound evidence for solutions that work.

To address this, roundtable participants discussed what works to guide successful policy and programmatic investments and to help communities and whole societies find ways to break the cycle of violence, build resilience, and promote sustainable peaceful change. A more detailed policy dialogue brief is forthcoming.

Discussion Themes

Effective Strategies for Reducing Political Violence, Mitigating/Managing Violent Conflict, and Preventing Mass Violence and Atrocities

Cumulative and collective impact of prevention and peacebuilding efforts

Progress toward peace is not linear and is often fragile. Progress in one area can prompt gains in another, but so too can lags in one area cause resistance elsewhere. By accessing the linkages across

On October 18–20, 2017, experts and policymakers gathered at the Airlie Center outside Washington, DC, to participate in the Stanley Foundation’s 58th annual Strategy for Peace Conference. Autonomous roundtables focused on policy ideas, challenges, and recommendations in three key global issue areas: climate change, nuclear policy, and mass violence and atrocities.

This policy memo captures the major discussion points and policy recommendations from the roundtable on mass violence and atrocities cochaired by Dr. Dafna Rand, vice president for policy and research at Mercy Corps, and Dr. Rebecca Wolfe, director of evidence and influence for peace and conflict at Mercy Corps; it was organized by Stanley Foundation program officer Jai-Ayla Quest. Stanley Foundation program associate Kelsey Shantz served as the rapporteur. Additional information about this roundtable and others held as a part of the 58th annual Strategy for Peace Conference is available on the [foundation’s website](#).

sectors and targets that allow for progress—thus the cumulative and collective impact of peacebuilding—there is more chance for success.

Reducing support for armed groups: how, why, and when does support for armed groups decrease?

Since 2010, there have been several research efforts to understand and test why people join armed groups, including violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram. However, it is important to carefully consider macro-level data and not draw micro-level assumptions from it—and vice versa. In many cases, the macroeconomic indicators of motivations for joining violent groups do not hold true at the country or community level.

Experts have found that communities with dense social networks and more trust are key factors that generate more resistance to violent threats of all kinds. The structural conditions of a resilient society are not by themselves enough to dissuade youth from supporting armed groups. Often a combination of tools, designed specifically for the community in question, is necessary in order to see change in beliefs and actions regarding support for armed actors among young people. Counternarrative projects are also being tested as a means of dissuading individuals from joining armed groups.

Military efforts, such as stability operations, security sector assistance, and support for military reform, can be an important part of the solution in conflict-affected areas, when done correctly and used thoughtfully. Such efforts can help prevent large-scale violence and can significantly help deter groups from picking up arms.

While it is generally accepted in the peacebuilding field (and development more broadly) that engaging local perspectives on prevention efforts is essential, roundtable participants emphasized the importance of working with local communities and merging evidence-based practices and peacebuilding analyses with local perspectives to build strategies for conflict reduction. In conflict situations, often a major challenge is keeping people safe while simultaneously grappling with policy problems. Integrating local civil society actors and indigenous approaches already present in communities for safety and protection can help advance prevention and protection efforts—including nonviolent approaches—to create or maintain a level of safety for all people in conflict or potential conflict areas.

Lessons From Case Studies: Colombia and the Central African Republic

In the case of Colombia, long-term political and assistance commitments from the United States and the international community and the susceptibility of Colombian government officials to international pressure were two major factors in the steady reductions of violence from 2002 to 2015 and the peace agreement in 2017. Largely because of this pressure, death squads stopped massacring because the political cost was too high. The comprehensive demobilization program and reintegration package also played an important role in enabling rebels to disarm and integrate themselves back into communities.

We have learned from the Central African Republic that the cost of response is immensely more expensive than the cost of prevention. Since the crisis began, the United States alone has spent \$1 billion, and the crisis today is almost as bad as that which prompted US action in 2012.

International and local agencies on the ground in at-risk countries or regions must have the resources to be able to take action early and often over a sustained period. Early action makes a

difference and can be more cost effective if done before the onset of violence; late action is more costly and can sometimes make the situation worse.

Need to shift the dynamic from responding to crisis to investing in prevention

At a policy level, efforts are under way within the US government and the United Nations to move from a crisis response mindset to one of prevention. This can ultimately be more cost effective in reducing violence and preventing deaths. Data exists to support the business case of prevention as well. The question remains of how to use this data to message to the public and private sectors.

Additional research is required to build evidence-based approaches to prevent and reduce violence

There is a need to compile what works in atrocity prevention and other violence-reduction efforts and to identify examples that would be particularly effective in influencing policymakers. Donors also want to know metrics on the impact/success of prevention efforts. It is critical that practitioners and advocates gather evidence that covers all levels of analysis, various forms of interventions, and different types of violence.

A report released by the United Kingdom Department for International Development in 2016 assessed thousands of articles on preventing and mitigating armed violence, 149 of which met criteria to be included in the rapid study. Overall, just 29 of those 149 were considered high quality, and only three articles were high quality and demonstrated effective interventions.¹ This indicates that more-rigorous investment in program-level evaluations are needed to continue to make policymakers comfortable and confident with the idea of investing more resources in conflict prevention.

Translating Evidence to Policy: Challenges for the Prevention Field

A collective message within the prevention and peacebuilding fields is needed

The conflict prevention, atrocity prevention, and peacebuilding communities need to become more coherently aligned and organized, to develop a collective message, but the question remains how to do so. Often, efforts through the fragility framework, and by atrocity prevention advocates, peacebuilding and development groups, and violence-against-women-and-children groups overlap in common goals and advocacy for violence reduction broadly but do not agree on the same policy asks or have the same message. This limits the collective impact potential of the broad “sector.”

Roundtable participants expressed the need for relevant actors and research to coalesce and to create a stronger messaging framework. Much can be learned from the climate-change-policy-and-advocacy community, and the Human Rights Up Front Initiative at the United Nations, regarding a coalescing of research, information sharing, and messaging.

Language, specificity, and definitions are all factors to consider in messaging

Sustainable Development Goal 16 is potentially a great anchor for those within the prevention community, but is not yet translating well when working with policymakers or local peacebuilding groups. It is important to develop messaging and language that is digestible, quickly understandable, and effective for shaping policy debates around large-scale violence prevention and reduction, in politically relevant ways, for those who currently control policy setting and resources. Specificity is important in the design and implementation of efforts (the “how”) but not always helpful when messaging with governments and other actors.

Quality of policy actions rather than quantity of funds

Regarding funds available for addressing conflict, such as ODA, more funding alone will not be sufficient. Rather, the quality of efforts is critical; more can be done with current commitments through reallocation toward prevention and the development of specific measures for in-country efforts. National strategic issues of donor countries are highly influential in shaping policy debates and subsequent funding for prevention. Appealing to such issues in donor countries can be a useful tool for prevention advocates.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for government, nongovernment, and philanthropic entities working to prevent and reduce violence and build peaceful, resilient societies.

Knowledge Building

Curate and translate already existing evidence, and consider developing a shared, communitywide research agenda and/or research platform.

- Stakeholders should leverage any ongoing curation efforts and more effectively communicate with policymakers.
- Consider who could hold responsibility for managing knowledge curation in this sector, including gathering and presenting the evidence. Informally and internally developed curation is not enough, and an intentional effort within academic and policy communities to develop a method for gathering and consolidating evidence is necessary, as is communicating this research to policymakers.

Invest in evidence generation on what works and promote findings.

- More-rigorous investment in program-level evaluations is needed to continue to make policymakers confident in investing more resources in conflict prevention.
- Create policy impact by including various stakeholders, and promote the evidence of what works among policymakers. Connect field experience with research, using caution to not extrapolate too much from micro- and macro-level data of what works for conflict prevention and reducing support for armed groups, but instead considering context-specific analysis.

Strategy and Tactics

Continue the conversation between peacebuilding and atrocity prevention researchers and advocates.

- More efforts are needed to take stock of what we know now and to assess how to further translate this into policy-relevant messaging and content. Work across sectors and push to think outside of the box about who can be partners in combating mass violence and atrocities.
- A subsequent gathering with greater representation of peacebuilding and atrocity prevention researchers and advocates could be extremely useful in continuing these efforts.

Set more-clearly defined global policy goals to help guide politically relevant research agendas.

- Learn from how the climate change community coalesced around a common goal, and determine how the violence prevention and peacebuilding sectors can similarly work toward a common goal. If not possible, consider how to start organizing research agendas and

advocacy strategies around the Sustainable Development Goal 16 targets and indicators, for example.

Acknowledge that the field is complex and progress takes time.

- Development and prevention actors are often nervous about discussing how difficult this work is, often for fear of diminished funding should they waver. Prevention actors should instead be more confident in stating the realities and complexities of this work.

Promote longer-term commitments in-country and in bilateral investment relationships.

- In the case of Colombia, these ties with the United States provided leverage for enforcing the peace agreement.

For those focused on US policy, connect prevention policy priorities with international efforts in order to build allies in the prevention space and create opportunities for shared approaches and learning.

- Expand the constituency of stakeholders to include the security establishment in a more meaningful way to explore points of convergence and how all groups can collectively act for prevention.

Messaging

Advocate thoughtfully and in a timely manner in policy spaces.

- Injecting research into the policy process can be difficult but very important. Holistic, cross-collaborative approaches can be very fruitful in foreign policy.
- There is a unique moment of opportunity in the current political context for the peacebuilding and atrocity prevention communities to play an important role in shaping the next steps in policy development for reducing and preventing mass violence.

Design messaging to target specific actors at many levels.

- Consider the best ways to present research findings to policymakers—this may mean messaging at different levels of government staff in order to disseminate the information to support policy change.
- To shift funding toward prevention, communicate concrete program-specific instances where investments have worked.
- Politically compelling talking points can be an effective tool in messaging with policymakers.²

Share impact evaluation results with policy actors to describe what does and does not work.

- Information sharing in policy-friendly language can be highly valued and influential.

Engage local publics to build support and demand for prevention efforts.

- Specifically in the United States, educating the public on conflict and atrocity prevention can be very worthwhile. Heightening the general public's awareness of international prevention efforts and making the connection to local issues and concerns can have an impact on prevention policy at the decision-making level.

Conclusion

Actors in the conflict and atrocity prevention communities must commit to continuing to build the evidence base and increasing research-to-policy translation efforts in ways that most effectively

promote lessons learned and best practices to three key audiences: policymakers, foreign assistance officials, and those in the public who have influence on these individuals. In most countries, policymakers and foreign assistance officials have a keen interest in improving their efforts to reduce and prevent violence and violent conflict. The peacebuilding and atrocity prevention advocacy communities have an important window of opportunity to respond to this interest, but it will require work and investment to translate existing research into politically relevant messaging and policy reform proposals.

Notes

¹ Christopher Cramer, Jonathan Goodhand, and Robert Morris, *Evidence Synthesis: What Interventions Have Been Effective in Preventing or Mitigating Armed Violence in Developing and Middle-Income Countries?*, Department for International Development, United Kingdom, 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555756/effectiveness-conflict-prevention-interventions1.pdf.

² An example can be found in this report and others from the Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2017: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/06/GPI17-Report.pdf>.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the views of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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