Issue Brief

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP)

Strengthening Preventive Diplomacy: The Role of Private Actors

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CCDP Issue Brief

Executive Summary

This report explores the role of private actors in preventive diplomacy. The report is structured along five main themes: (1) The comparative advantage of private actors vis-à-vis large institutions; (2) entry points, access, leverage, and resources available to private actors for preventive diplomacy; (3) challenges faced by private actors; (4) concrete experiences of private actors, especially with regard to assistance and design of political processes; and (5) strategic coordination and partnerships between private actors, the United Nations, and regional organizations.

The report finds that:

- Private actors are strategic partners for preventive diplomacy. They possess many advantages in comparison to formal actors, despite recurring human and financial resource challenges. Private actors also fill a gap within the preventive diplomacy field by providing functions such as good analysis and network capacities, confidentiality of dialogues, access to a wider set of actors, and connections to local actors through long-standing engagements.

- There is an emerging practice in the fields of armed violence reduction, peace mediation, and human rights protection that, if more widely applied, would represent a tremendous opportunity to strengthen preventive diplomacy. These opportunities relate to current efforts to establish networks of insider mediators (Box 1) and Armed Violence Monitoring Systems (Box 3), and to the designation of country or regional rapporteurs on conflict prevention.

- Effective preventive diplomacy should be based on an in-depth contextual analysis and rooted within collaborative and inclusive-enough coalitions between state and society actors. Such coalitions are crucial to build confidence, as they can thereby diffuse tensions or prevent the relapse of violence. The inclusion of such coalitions in conflict-sensitive programming strategies helps nurture a culture of prevention and strengthens social capital.

The report concludes by highlighting the underlying challenge for preventive diplomacy of finding the right balance between international demands for stabilization and local demands for political space to drive transformative change.

Introduction

Enhancing the preventive diplomacy capacity of the United Nations has become an ever more critical objective. Against the backdrop of a fluid security landscape, preventive diplomacy has been rediscovered as a strategic tool to face the new and persistent threats to peace and security. These threats include, for example, repeated cycles of political and criminal violence, complex patterns of state breakdown and civil war, non-constitutional changes of authority, powerful international crime networks, and stress factors that perpetuate instability and violence. The rediscovery has also been associated with the strategic value of preventive diplomacy and mediation "as a cost-effective option for dealing with crises".[1]

The last few years have seen a major effort to retool the United Nations into becoming geared towards rapid political response, more tuned to the needs on the ground, and more able to take calculated risks. Events in Kyrgyzstan and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as the violent transitions in North Africa and the Middle East, have again underlined the costs of failed prevention and the importance of entry points, leverage, and resources for early preventive engagements. The 2011 Secretary-General's report on preventive diplomacy underscores "the relevance of preventive diplomacy across the conflict spectrum and as part of broader, nationally owned strategies to promote peace".[2] What is more, it highlights that "in order to be durable, preventive diplomacy engagements must also be broadened from the circle of decision makers and senior officials to civil society at large (…) Ideally, therefore envoys and their teams should develop joint strategies and a division of labour with United Nations and other actors on the ground who are engaged in longer term peacebuilding efforts".[3]

This report explores the role of private actors in preventive diplomacy as a contribution to the deliberations encouraged by the Secretary-General's report to broaden our optics on preventive diplomacy engagements. Private actors are understood to involve non-state organizations focusing their activities in the fields of peace mediation, disarmament, human rights, and humanitarian assistance.

1. Comparative advantage of private actors

Private actors are particularly well placed to drive informal and confidential engagements, mainly because they attract far less attention compared to formal actors, and their activities are easier to fall below the radar. What is more, due to their unofficial character, meetings and substantive issues are more easily deniable, which allows parties to save face with their constituencies if interactions become problematic. This is especially important in the early stages of the mediation processes, when actors venture into the exploration of new grounds for compromise.

Structuring engagements through private actors therefore opens back-out options for the parties.

Private actors can engage a broader range of parties than official institutions. Official actors are often more constrained in engaging extremists groups, especially if these are on lists that officially characterize them as terrorist organizations. While private actors could face legal constraints in some countries, they are usually better equipped to speak to non-state armed groups or extremist organizations. This is because their engagement neither involves formal recognition of such actors nor the recognition of any form of legitimacy.

Private actors located in or around zones of current or potential conflict have a particular comparative advantage over official, outside institutions. Local private actors such as civil society organizations, churches, trade unions, or business councils can be important to build confidence, maintain dialogue, and diffuse tensions at the subnational level. Not only do these institutions often have pre-existing communications channels, but they are also seen as legitimate interlocutors by the parties in conflict, and therefore have specific entry and leverage points. These actors have also been characterized as 'insider mediators' (see Box 1).

The underlined comparative advantages of private actors emphasize that preventive diplomacy must break out of its formal, state-centric mode.[4] Such a change is necessary to improve the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy and structure preventive engagement according to context-sensitive parameters. Reaching out to private actors implies (a) acknowledging their comparative advantages, (b) recognizing their (sometimes) superior skill and expertise, and (c) seizing new opportunities by working in a context-sensitive mode at the local level.

Box 1: The insider mediator

Insider mediators are "trusted and respected insiders at all levels of a conflicted society who have a deep knowledge of the dynamics and context of the conflict, and a sensitivity in their contribution to finding solutions that are recognized by all parties".[5] These individuals often enjoy a high level of legitimacy that is rooted in their position in a society, their personality, and their skills. They are accepted in mediation roles not necessarily because of what they know, but because of who they are. Insider mediators have often taken on various mediation or peacebuilding roles such as those of messenger, host, facilitator, conflict analyst, human rights advocate, confidence builder, trainer, convener, coach, or coordinator. Examples of insider mediation include the Concerned Citizens for Peace structures in Kenya, the Conflict Management Panels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the National Peace Architecture in Ghana.

2. Entry points, leverage, resources, and skills of private actors

Many private actors have a proven track record in initiating contacts with non-state armed groups or extremist organizations. They also have a track record in maintaining informal or confidential communication over prolonged periods of time in specific conflict zones. In practice, this means that private actors are extremely well placed to provide entry points and facilitate the exchange of messages between parties that otherwise have no other channel of communication. They are also well placed to monitor attitudinal shifts of the parties and changes in the context in which preventive engagements takes place. However, there is a tendency that once the parties commit to a more formal process, the latter then becomes driven by formal actors (see Box 2).

The issue of entry points and leverage of private actors in preventive engagements critically relates to how they are perceived by the people or organizations they interact with. Here, adherence to the principles of independence and impartiality are key to establish a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the parties.

Many private actors are an asset for preventive diplomacy because of their long-term commitment in specific countries or regions. This continued interaction is critical for confidence-building and for the establishment of credibility, legitimacy and the ability to address sensitive topics. This long-term commitment also places private actors in a good position to conduct context-sensitive analyses that capture changes of perceptions and attitudes. These analyses are important to identify entry points and 'ripe' moments to launch a preventive initiative.

Private actors tend to be small organizations and are therefore more flexible and adaptable than large, formal institutions. They are also better equipped to respond fast to crises or requests. Nonetheless, with an increasing load of commitments, private actors can become easily overstretched. Private actors also distinguish themselves though their networks and skills. Senior figures in private actors often maintain a tremendous personal or institutional network in specific regions. They also possess crucial interpersonal, mediation, and negotiation skills that lie at the heart of face-to-face meetings.

> **Box 2: Emerging divisions of labor in peace mediation[6]**
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> A review of ten years of peace mediation observes five emerging trends about divisions of labor between official and private actors. The trends are that (1) official actors tend to dominate peacemaking processes in inter-state conflicts; (2) private actors tend to focus on internal conflicts; (3) private actors tend to engage at earlier stages of peace processes; (4) private actors generally have more access to conflicts of lower strategic priority; and (5) between private actors, the respective comparative advantages are less clear; they are much dependent on the lead mediators' personal characteristics and associated personal contacts in specific regions.

3. Challenges faced by private actors

Private actors often find it challenging to find the right kind of support for peace processes.[7] The current approach of project-based, country-specific and limited duration financing makes it challenging for mediation actors to build standing capacities – including human resources, travel expenses, and expertise – that can immediately be deployed in times of crises. It also means that interventions are planned according to short-term funding cycles, which in turn prevent mediators from adopting a long-term perspective. In the longer term, a more permanent funding mechanism would allow international and regional organizations as well as private actors to respond to crises without having to first engage in fundraising.

Another challenge is to find financing for preventive engagements *before* a dispute erupts. This point harks back to a well-known structural limitation of international donors to operate mainly reactively rather than proactively. A critical element for achieving more investment in preventive diplomacy is to strengthen the analytical capability in formal, private, and research institutions. The cases of Timor-Leste and Bangladesh show that fault lines are detectable and can be addressed preemptively before violence breaks out. But a lack of financial resources can make it more difficult to translate this analysis into effective action.

Human resource challenges relate to finding individual commanding with the right mix of technical knowledge about peace mediation and conflict analysis, experience in specific regions or countries, and interpersonal and mediation skills. Given the importance of human resources, training new and existing staff is an important contribution to strengthening preventive diplomacy.

Principal operational challenges relate to the issues of manipulations and sovereignty. Private actors are weak vis-à-vis governments or armed groups, and very often they become their play ball to test out ideas or the limits of compromise of the other party. The risk of manipulation is real and it is paramount for private actors

to have the right mitigating strategy against such practices so as to maintain their independence and impartiality.

Sovereignty becomes a challenge when it prevents access to local groups or individuals. This is particularly inhibiting in contexts were private actors need formal documentation, such as a visa, to enter a country to conduct dialogues. Particularly sensitive is organizing technical or skill trainings for non-state armed groups or extremist organizations. Receiving such assistance from foreign private actors can be perceived with concern by governments, some of which may consider such transfers as a contravention of national anti-terrorism laws. This poses a challenge to private actors aiming to build local capacity for preventive diplomacy, to redress imbalances in analytical capacity and negotiation skills between parties, or to promote international legal instruments and standards to non-state armed groups or extremist organizations.

4. Designing preventive diplomacy engagements

An important part of designing and implementing preventive diplomacy is the appropriate preparation. Many private actors find collaborative arrangements with partners or consultants to assist with design and implementation.

There is an emerging practice within some private actors to use the analysis of local actors to inform planning and implementation of initiatives. This is because external analysts often miss critical points of the local dynamics, mainly because they cannot be as firmly rooted in the context. Local perspectives are also important to link preventive engagement to the level of knowledge and analysis of the parties, so as to transform perceptions about the dispute over time. Choosing the right language and concepts is critical to start conversations and to establish a unity of perception on issues and a way to resolve them.

In some institutions and governments, the tendency to use conflict analysis as a means to streamline a particular vision across departments is quite frequent. Such a tendency is a concern to some observers because it fails to account for the multiple narratives about a dispute or armed conflict. The core objective should not be the establishment of the 'right' narrative, but portraying narratives in their full diversity while mapping which constituency maintains what narratives and for what reason. Organizations must be careful when adopting a particular view just because it best fits their analytical framework or programming objectives. Failing to do so can result in the unintended amplification of conflict drivers as a recent Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment on Madagascar has shown.[8] Cautioning about overreliance on elite vision of a conflict, and speaking to a broad range of observers is therefore critical to prepare preventive engagements.

Another aspect relates to the identification of influential local partners including. for example, local authority figures, specific government officials, traditional leaders, or businesses. Such efforts are critical to understand and navigate through the politics of fragile and conflict-affected countries, but also to enhance the inclusion of preventive initiatives while forging coalitions for political dialogues. Youth populations are a particularly important constituency to include. Young people are both the most common drivers and victims of armed violence and conflict, and represent the biggest part of the population in many contexts. Naturally, this constituency wishes to have a say about what is eventually 'their' future.

The design of preventive diplomacy initiatives must also consider that action must take place before violence breaks out. Mobilizing programmes to address known stress factors of violence and fragility is therefore central for preventive diplomacy.[9] By taking stress factors more seriously, international donors can progressively increase investments in proactive engagements, rather than purely focusing on reactive responses. It also means coordinating activities more closely with the development community because it drives much of the programming on stress factors, such as youth unemployment, low income levels, and rapid urbanization.

Program design must also be sensitive to the social transformations that occur during armed conflict or prolonged periods of instability. While these are often difficult to capture, it is critical for prevention to identify what specific social capital has been lost, and what resilience factors exist as a connector for preventive initiatives. Coping mechanisms of societies in the face of violence and state fragility can be used as entry points for prevention.

There is also an evidence base for the design of preventive diplomacy based on initiatives to reduce and prevent armed violence.[10] These activities recognize that the corrosive effects of armed violence can be similar in 'conflict countries' and settings experiencing high levels of criminal violence. There are many innovative approaches by private actors in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or South Africa. These offer evidence on the successes and challenges of activities targeting perpetrators, victims, instruments, and institutions while also implementing programmes against stress factors that nurture violence.[11] One example of such innovation is the establishment of Armed Violence Monitoring Systems (see Box 3).

Box 3: Armed Violence Monitoring Systems[12]

In relation to the prevention and reduction of armed violence, significant efforts have been devoted to establish Armed Violence Monitoring Systems (AVMS). An AVMS can be defined as an inter-sectoral system that: gathers data on an on-going and regular basis; systematically analyzes the data, including the nature of armed violence; and disseminates the information with a view to informing evidence-based programming and policy-making. Such systems already exist in many settings, including in countries such as Colombia, Jamaica, South Africa, Sudan, and the United Kingdom. An analysis of five AVMS in these countries in a forthcoming report by the Geneva Declaration Secretariat highlights the challenges inherent in on-going data collection in a conflict-affected setting, but also shows that quality data is an indispensable ingredient for concrete armed violence reduction and prevention programmes. The analysis shows that one of the major assets of an AVMS is its capacity to bring together different stakeholders and hence facilitate the development of multi-sectoral responses. These are necessary to generate comprehensive data and to develop effective programmes.

5. Strategic coordination and partnerships

Coordination within and between the multiple actors operating in fragile and conflict-affected counties is a critical component to increase the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy. It is central because preventive diplomacy – like other concepts such as peacebuilding or statebuilding – is truly cross cutting in two principle ways: firstly, preventive diplomacy cuts thought the multiple mandates of United Nations agencies and therefore requires coordination at headquarters and field levels. Secondly, preventive diplomacy cuts across traditionally defined sectors (e.g. security, economic, development, business, etc.) and thereby emphasizes calls for multi-sectoral partnerships.

In many settings, however, coordination is what many actors strive for, but what is often complicated in practice. While the quest for money and mandates is at the root of the unwillingness to cooperate, there are also perceptions of cultural barriers between, for example, the 'political', 'development', or 'military' departments that individual representatives find it difficult to divorce themselves from.

A specific element that complicates coordination with regard to private actors is the issue of information sharing. Mediation actors need to manage a sensitive balance between sharing information and keeping the promise of confidentiality. Given the importance of the latter, mediators are limited to cooperate in the field of information sharing to stay trustworthy in the eyes of the parties.

Given these constraints, recent years have seen a tremendous advance in collaborative initiatives in support of preventive diplomacy. Three specific examples of cross-cutting partnerships include:

- The Inter-Agency Framework Team for Preventive Action: the Framework team involves 22 UN agencies and departments and assists UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams to develop integrated conflict prevention strategies.[13]

- Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention: as a joint programme between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and DPA, this initiative supports the implementation of the Framework team's work in politically sensitive settings through confidence-building with key national stakeholders. In 2009, DPA and UNDP jointly deployed about 30 Peace and Development Advisors in 24 countries.[14]

- Political Dialogue in Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: the OECD's International Network on Conflict and Fragility instituted a special working group on political dialogue as part of its international dialogue on peacebuilding and statebuilding. This process takes stock of technical options to advance preventive diplomacy drawing on direct experience of over a dozen dialogue processes.[15]

There also appears to be an increased demand for services in preventive diplomacy, especially from African states and regional organizations. The African Union, for example, has invested in improving peace support based on its peace and security mandate. Initiatives include an African Peace and Security Architecture composed of a Peace and Security Council, the Continental Early Warning System, a Panel of the Wise, and the African Standby Force.[16]Also the National Architecture for Peace in Ghana has been a successful example of cooperation between national authorities, civil society, and the international community.[17]

In more general terms, funding and cost-effectiveness have been two critical drivers of cooperation between formal and private actors. Many mediation or disarmament actors are funded directly by governments or international organizations, reflecting a trend of outsourcing government tasks in selected areas due to political or economic calculations. From this perspective, private actors are keenly interested in increasing collaboration with formal actors, especially with regards to the support of strategies to take funding out of short-term cycles and towards more permanent arrangements. For formal institutions, collaboration with private actors has become a strategy to increase effectiveness – a point that has particular traction in countries that undergoing significant budget cuts.

Box 4: Coordination between Track I and II diplomacy

Multi-track diplomacy is a way of conceptualizing peacemaking by highlighting the different interconnections between activities, individuals, institutions and communities in the pursuit of peace. Most generally, the approach distinguishes between Track I diplomacy (official diplomacy between governments) and Track II diplomacy (unofficial interaction and intervention of non-state actors). The distinction between the two tracks it is often blurred in contemporary peacemaking, mainly due to the frequent involvement of former heads of states in unofficial peacemaking roles, or the sub-contracting of peacemaking from government to specialized conflict resolution actors. In order to ensure long-term sustainability, it is important to connect the two types of Track diplomacy. An exclusive focus on Track I risks creating elite-negotiated pacts. While such pacts can form the basis of short-term deals, they often miss the necessary legitimacy in the eyes of the population, which is critical for a lasting peace. It is also important to consider that there are democratic and undemocratic ways of conducting diplomacy. Diplomacy is inherently an elite business, but effective, long-term preventive diplomacy may require activities at various tracks and the best possible level of inclusion of local perspectives and stakeholders.

6. Conclusion: Enhancing preventive diplomacy

The past two decades of mediation and prevention activities by private actors open up new opportunities for strengthening preventive diplomacy. This report has shown that private actors are often better placed than governments and international organizations to engage preventively. This is partly due to their flexibility, expertise, and skills, but also due to their ability to reach out to a broader range of actors. While situations with significant strategic interest will remain the policy domain of governments, private actors tend to engage in earlier stages of a process and in situations of lesser global importance that are alas no less painful for those suffering violence.

The United Nations therefore has a tremendous resource base for preventive diplomacy that, if more widely explored, could become a significant contribution for long-term, in-country prevention programmes. There is an emerging trend of collaboration across institutions and sectors, especially in the field of peace mediation and armed violence reduction and prevention. However, to take full advantage of these opportunities, formal institutions must recognize the leading role of private actors more upfront in some contexts, and step back from administrative positions and intellectual silos to unlock the potential of new partnerships.

Much can be done to strengthen the capacities of preventive diplomacy. Specific propositions include: (1) the intensification of training activities that make contact across institutions and sectors more regular, while improving the skills, expertise, and sensitivity to preventive diplomacy; (2) the strengthening of the role of women in preventive

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diplomacy both as facilitators but also as representatives of parties or constituencies in town hall meetings or informal dispute resolution; and (3) the inclusion of local perspectives and expertise in conflict analysis, and of local actors in the implementation of preventive initiatives.

Opportunities to enhance preventive diplomacy within the United Nations system also exist. For instance, the Secretary-General could encourage visiting and observer missions to include a prevention perspective, and invite regional or sub-regional organizations to prepare prevention debriefs about important developments in their region every 6 months. There are also various opportunities to increase the profile of preventive diplomacy within the United Nations. Such opportunities include the designation of national or regional Rapporteurs on Conflict Prevention, and the creation of a Centre for Preventive Diplomacy headed by an Under-Secretary-General for Preventive Diplomacy. Such a centre could form the focal point for prevention within the United Nations.

Underlying these observations is a more fundamental point about preventive diplomacy: in transitional situations, political agendas oscillate between demands for stabilization and fundamental structural change. During the upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East, many local activists interpreted the prevention of violent escalation by outside actors as a strategy to strike deals with incumbent leaderships, thereby undermining their demands for change. This dilemma highlights the need for preventive diplomacy to navigate around the need to save lives by preventing armed violence, while creating the space for political processes to transform structural conflict drivers that perpetuate violence, injustice, and inequality.

Endnotes

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