



# Methods for Evaluating Conflict Prevention

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# TWO APPROACHES FOR MEASURING SUCCESSFUL CONFLICT PREVENTION

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## Introduction

In early 2007 political unrest in the West African nation of Guinea-Bissau was growing: an ongoing general strike being held to display dissatisfaction over the appointment of a new Prime Minister who had close ties to the President quickly escalated into violent clashes and riots which resulted in over 100 people dead within the space of six weeks (International Crisis Group, 2007a). In response to this growing violence, the US embassy ordered all staff family members to leave the country, and Guinea-Bissau's President declared martial law.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) became engaged in the growing crisis in Guinea-Bissau engaging in preventative measures in an attempt to circumvent the outbreak of more violent conflict. The President of ECOWAS (Mohamed Ibn Chambas) and an ad hoc mediator chosen for the occasion, the Nigerian former head of state General Ibrahim Babangida, met representatives from Guinea-Bissau and negotiated the replacement of the contentious Prime Minister for another who would be accepted by the population (International Crisis Group, 2007b: 14). Following the intervention efforts from ECOWAS the tensions in the country appeared to subside.

A seemingly simple question that results from this case is whether the preventative intervention efforts of ECOWAS were successful or not? A more complicated follow-on question is how to determine whether or not preventative efforts are successful in preventing the outbreak of a violent conflict.

ECOWAS is one of many conflict resolution and peacebuilding organizations that purport to prevent violent conflict through a variety of different projects, programs, and activities. Measuring the success of conflict prevention – which is widely defined here as those activities which take place prior to the outbreak of a violent conflict for the explicit

purpose of preventing the escalation of a crisis into a stage of open warfare - thus becomes an important concern not only for academics, but also for those organizations engaged in this type of conflict prevention work. Having a well-defined notion of successful conflict prevention is important for program design, implementation, and evaluation.

The problem of defining and measuring the success of peacemaking and peacebuilding has been widely discussed in the literature (Anderson and Olsen, 2003; Bercovitch, 2006; Hampson, 1996) and the problem of defining success becomes even more acute when the focus is placed on the prevention of violent conflict. That is, many researchers have observed that it is notoriously difficult to prove the counter-factual of successfully preventing an event. While it indeed may be easier to prove that a specific peacebuilding objective did occur rather than proving that something did not occur, the challenge of obtaining a tangible and accurate measure of successful conflict prevention remains unmet.

## General Approaches for Defining and Measuring Success of Conflict Prevention

In order for activities related to conflict prevention to be of use it must be possible to determine if they are achieving the desired outcome. Woodrow (2008: 22) notes, 'relatively little attention has been paid to how specifically to evaluate conflict prevention activities; much more effort has been expended in developing frameworks and tools for evaluating broader peacebuilding programming and policies.' Woodrow (2008: 25) describes one approach for measuring the success of conflict prevention as follows:

The ***primary broad evaluation inquiry*** for conflict prevention programmes would be:

*Is the effort making a contribution to preventing violence, by intervening swiftly to avert escalating violence, or by addressing long term structural factors that are, in the context, highly relevant to positive or negative intergroup relations? (italics in original)*

Ackermann (2003: 343) has a view similar to that of Woodrow as indicated by the statement, "Much of the discussion over enhancing the effectiveness of conflict prevention centers on how to design preventive action plans and strategies that accomplish the stated objectives and desired preventive outcome." Woodrow (2008) adds to this view of assessing conflict prevention by listing a number of other general type of questions and then three sets of more specific questions which reflect three stages of the conflict in which the conflict prevention intervention is occurring (early interventions that occur before the outbreak of violent conflict, later interventions which occur during a stage of crisis but before the outbreak of violent conflict, and interventions which take place after a war has erupted and are therefore aimed at preventing the outbreak of new wars).

The limited approaches that currently exist for determining the success of conflict prevention activities focus generally on whether the intent of the activity was met, however they do not provide a comprehensive model to assess the success of activities. It is noted within the literature that developing a comprehensive model for determining success has received very little focus thus far, suggesting that the goal of this paper is one which will be very relevant to both the academic study of conflict prevention and policy decisions.

## Two New Methods for Evaluating Conflict Prevention

### Approach #1 Measure Cause-based Indicators

The first approach to measuring successful conflict prevention is based on identifying indicators that are derived from the causes of the conflict. More specifically, the rationale behind this approach is that a reduction in quantity or severity of the causes of conflict will be reflected in a reduction of violent conflict (e.g. no violent conflict will manifest because there is no cause for it to erupt), and thus effective prevention can be proven when the causes of conflict are eliminated or become no longer relevant.

To apply this approach would first require that the causes of the conflict are identified. Then, specific indicators to measure changes for each cause of conflict could be identified.

*According to this approach, prevention is successful if the causes of violent conflict have become no longer relevant, have decreased in number, or have been reduced in intensity.*

## Approach #2 Define Core Capacities

A second approach to measuring successful conflict prevention would consider the capacities that the country has acquired. More specifically, this approach would define prevention as being successful when the country has the capacity to express political conflict without resorting to overt violence. This approach assumes that a country normally has the capacity to manage conflict in nonviolent ways and it is therefore peaceful. Violent conflict emerges when these capacities are somehow diminished or missing.

From this perspective violent conflict would not occur if these capacities are present in a country and are fully functioning. Preventive efforts are therefore successful if they (re)build these capacities in the country because their presence implies that violent conflict is not likely to occur.

But what exactly are these core capacities? In order to identify them it is necessary to examine the features of intractable conflicts and the literature on nation-building and state failure.

### *Intractable Conflicts*

Intractable violent conflicts are those conflicts which are particularly difficult to manage primarily because, for many reasons, the parties will use violence to continue to wage their conflict rather than exploring political options (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 2004: 7). Clearly then, these intractable conflicts will have features or characteristics that are different from those countries that do use political options to manage their conflicts. Crocker, Hampson, and Aall (2004: 7) state that intractable conflicts have a number of salient characteristics, including the fact that they are typically long-standing: many have lasted for years or even decades. As a result of this, major psychological wounds, an intense sense of victimization, and serious grievances between the parties is common (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 2004: 7). Moreover, by the very definition of intractable conflicts, the parties prefer to use violence for whatever reasons as their primary mode of waging the conflict. Taken together, these features of intractable conflicts suggest that individuals and the society they are part of both play a role in perpetuating this ongoing violence.

The converse to a society that perpetuates violence is, of course, one that devalues the use of violence. *Values* at the personal, interpersonal, and societal levels that are more peace-oriented are therefore one core capacity of countries that express their political conflict without the use of violence. Evidence from some peaceful nations such as New Zealand and Denmark who have ranked the highest on the [Global Peace Index](#) (GPI) tend to support this.

Conversely, evidence from countries that have experienced violent conflict indicates that deep polarizations between the parties are common and increased levels of hatred are common too. Examples can be seen in conflicts in South America such as Columbia and Guatemala who were ranked poorly in the GPI.

### *Nation-Building and State Failure*

The literature on nation-building and state failure can be used to help identify the other core capacities required for preventing violent conflict. Nation-building, by one definition are those international interventions that are, ‘...directed not just at ending political violence but at restoring political order and laying the foundations for democracy in war-torn societies’ (Hampson and Mendeloff, 2007: 679). The literature on nation-building will therefore give important insights into the characteristics of states which fail to express their political conflict without violence.

Hampson and Mendeloff (2007) assert that there are three approaches to nation-building, each of which can provide us with a clearer understanding of what capacities are required in order for a country to express political conflict without the use of violence. The first approach (which they have termed ‘fast-track democratization’) assumes that all people, regardless of their culture, desire freedom and democracy expressed through and embodied by the rule of law, liberal values such as human and civil rights, and the principles of representative government (Hampson and Mendeloff, 2007: 679-680). The corresponding approach to nation-building seeks to rapidly create new political institutions in an expedient and cost effective manner so that this desire can be capitalized upon (Hampson and Mendeloff, 2007: 680). More precisely, this approach to nation-building asserts that, ‘...the only way to avoid anarchy and the outbreak of civil violence is through the rule of law and representative government’ (Hampson and Mendeloff, 2007: 682).

Taken together, the above view of nation-building reveals some more capacities that a country must have in order to express political conflict without the use of violence. First,



there must be *structures* that embody the rule of law and liberal values. As explicitly stated above, some of these structures will be political institutions. Other structures are educational, health, and judicial institutions.

Hampson and Mendeloff (2007: 682) also state that nation-builders who follow this school of thought are concerned with restoring political order by laying the foundations for democratic political *processes* such as elections. As a natural extension of this, it follows that *mechanisms* such as good governance, appropriate security measures (military and police forces), and judiciary also contribute to restoring political order.

However, just having the structures, mechanisms and processes in place is not enough. There must also be leaders equipped with the skills to utilize these various tools and they must also have the desire (or underlying personal values) to motivate them to resolve conflicts nonviolently using these devices.

The above discussion reveals that there are five types of core capacities required by a country in order to achieve the goal of expressing political conflict without resorting to violence, as follows:

1. ***Structures***
2. ***Mechanisms***
3. ***Processes***
4. ***Skills***
5. ***Values***<sup>1</sup>

The next step in the process of measuring success in this manner would be to devise appropriate measures for each of the five types of core capacities listed above, and then to apply these measures at various points before, during, and after the intervention.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth description of these core capacities, see Hoffman (2007).

<sup>2</sup> From a programming perspective, very specific activities to build each of the five types of core capacities could also be developed. For example, electoral training can be used to increase the “processes capacity”. Whereas work at the structural level might include initiating constitutional reforms.

Importantly, this approach would account for indigenous approaches to dialogue and conflict resolution. As Broome and Hatay (2006: 629) state, “The outbreak of violence is an indication that a society’s own mechanisms for conflict regulation have failed and that state institutions and the recourse for the settlement of disputes they offer may no longer be perceived as legitimate by all segments of the population.”

*According to this approach, prevention is successful if the target country has the structures, mechanisms, processes, skills, and values to express and manage conflict nonviolently.*

## Conclusion

The problem of defining the success of conflict prevention is an important question that has not yet been adequately addressed in the conflict resolution and peacebuilding literature. The task of measuring successful conflict prevention can be approached in a number of ways. Two approaches outlined here include measuring cause-based indicators of conflict and assessing whether a country has the capacity to express political conflict without resorting to overt violence.

Both of these approaches for measuring the success of conflict prevention have inherent strengths and weaknesses however. For this reason, it is argued here that the most useful method for measuring the success of conflict prevention efforts would combine two or more approaches in a comprehensive and adaptable model.

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## About the Author

Dr. Evan Hoffman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (DCAR) at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Dr. Hoffman is also a Senior Associate at the Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation (CIAN), an Associate Faculty member with the School of Peace and Conflict Management at Royal Roads University, and a roster member with the UN's Mediation Support Unit.

Dr. Hoffman holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Canterbury (New Zealand). His doctoral research focused on the question of why mediation sometimes produces a durable peace and this research culminated in the creation of a new model for durable peace. His research findings are presented in an easily-accessible handbook format entitled "The Mediator's Handbook for Durable Peace" (2010).

Dr. Hoffman also completed a Master's degree in Post-war Recovery Studies at the University of York, UK in 2001 and an undergraduate degree in psychology at Carleton University, Ottawa in 1999. In 2001 he earned a Certificate in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) from CIAN.

Dr. Hoffman was one of the first people at the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York to study trauma created by violent conflict and the methods of individual and community trauma healing in a post-war context. His initial examination of the subject began on a field study in Sri Lanka. His research then took him to Bosnia for field study and data collection. The results of this research are documented in his Master's thesis entitled "Creating the Space to Heal: Principles of War-Induced Trauma-Recovery, with Case Studies in Bosnia-Herzegovina".

Dr. Hoffman was then an intern with the Delegation of the European Commission (EC) in the Republic of Sudan. The focus of the internship was on the EC-funded Sudan Landmine Information and Response Initiative (SLIRI) - a landmine marking and removal project. During this time he had the unique opportunity to work with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rae McGrath. Additionally, during this same period he assisted the Carter Center in the design and delivery of a week-long peacebuilding training workshop which was held in Nairobi for members of the Governments of Sudan (GOS) and Uganda (GOU) and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) as part of the efforts to implement the Nairobi Agreement.

From 2004-2009 Dr. Hoffman was an 'Analyst and Policy Advisor' for CIAN's International Peace and Prosperity Project (IPPP) in Guinea-Bissau. The IPPP was a political violence prevention project testing the application of lessons learned and best practices to develop a model for fragile, failing, and failed states.

From 2009 to 2013, Dr. Hoffman served as CIAN's Executive Director. During this period he worked closely with the Ottawa Police Service to revise their mediation program and he oversaw its operation for several years. Stemming from this, Dr. Hoffman was then invited to develop and deliver innovative and practical conflict resolution training for new recruits joining the force – this being one of very few courses of this type being offered on a regular basis to new police officers in Canada. During this same period he delivered numerous customized training workshops both in Canada and overseas for a number of different participants ranging from municipal level staff to community mediators.

Dr. Hoffman has published numerous articles on the themes of conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and mediation.

# About CIIAN

## **The Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation (CIIAN)**

CIIAN is dedicated to the prevention and resolution of destructive conflict and to building sustainable peace at local, national, and international levels.

### **Our Commitment**

We believe that reducing violence, achieving stability and building sustainable peace can only be attained through the sound engagement of the people and institutions in conflict. We are committed to building relationships and partnerships with appropriate leaders and organizations as a route to real change. We use and develop state of the art, empirically tested methods of conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. And we are committed to transferring knowledge and competencies to those with whom we work.

### **Achieving Our Mission**

CIIAN achieves its Mission and fulfills its Commitment through four programs: [International Program](#); [Domestic Program](#); [Violence Prevention Early Response Unit](#); and [Special Programs](#).

All of CIIAN's professionals are theory-informed practitioners. Experienced as facilitators, trainers, mediators, researchers and peacebuilding consultants, their services draw upon lessons learned and best practices to design customized interventions and training programs.

### **A Brief History**

Founded in 1992, CIIAN was built upon the notions of peace, social justice, and principled dispute resolution based in negotiation. CIIAN soon became one of the leading ADR organizations, gaining a solid reputation for effective programming and training. Our growing reputation resulted in international recognition and by the mid-1990's we were invited to partner with organizations, especially in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe. Recent years have seen CIIAN continue to offer dispute resolution programming through local organizations in a number of conflict zones, including Azerbaijan, Bosnia, Columbia, Haiti, Lebanon, Macedonia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Crimea. We are now recognized as a leader in violence prevention, using a catalytic approach that balances security and development.