

PREPAREDNESS & Conflict Management

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

1. Certain skill sets clearly help locals survive conflict. They use intelligence, communications, safe movement, safe sites, and automatic threat response to either accommodate *or* avoid belligerents. *In so doing, accommodation reduces flashpoints and avoidance pulls fuel from the path of conflict.* This means locals reduce violence; in non-formal ways they limit and contain its scope. These are underappreciated forms of conflict management. There is a learning curve for these particular skills—but the field of conflict management does not invest in helping locals prepare for it.

Support tactics of accommodation so as to reduce conflict.

2. There is a canopy of efforts to reduce conflict led by family and community leaders who probe the outer limits of accommodation with violent groups. This refers not to partisan collaboration, but to pragmatic deals and concessions for survival's sake. Right now, in conflicts everywhere, individuals are talking or paying their way out of roundups and through roadblocks and getting back home safely to their families. Village leaders are making arrangements with belligerents and extortive “patrons”. What they do creates countless pockets of *deferred violence* in places where international efforts at conflict management perhaps have not moved an inch.
3. Locals very often try to win immunity from violence, reprieve from demands, and reduction of tensions. Typical examples include cutting deals for safe space, neutral status, separation from combatants, exemption from conscription or forced labor, removal of flagrant abusers, release of detainees, freedom of movement, permission to pursue livelihoods, and other leniencies. There are many instances in which locals have bartered with belligerents to create a safe corridor, zone, or town.¹ Of these goals, one of the most urgent is the “dissociation of civilians from combatants

... The ultimate challenge [is]: how to capacitate civilians themselves to negotiate the required separation... This could be a prime strategy.”²

4. This is not formal “negotiation” of the kind that outsiders might prefer to facilitate. After all, these are asymmetric encounters between unequal parties, often with the weaker trying to calculate which concessions will do the least harm. A more apt suggestion might be to “provide appropriate support to communities so they can deal with the armed actors that threaten them.”³ What do locals need in this sort of “dance with the executioner?” The most appropriate support might be whatever boosts their ability to *get accurate information*—which is a cornerstone of what the Center calls “preparedness support.”
5. Timely information helps locals see the opportunities and limits of dealing with dangerous actors. With it they can know how belligerents (down to the commander and unit) have treated civilians elsewhere. What do informants and open sources say? What do verification visits and survivor testimonials reveal? Did belligerent demands remain tolerable or become unbearable? Can belligerents be persuaded that a populace is compliant, or nonaligned, or harmless? Which faction leader can actually enforce promises made?
6. The more that locals know about their presumed adversaries, the better prepared they will be. The ranks of abusive militaries and members of oppressive majorities are never monolithic. There may be broken chains of command and shifting alliances. Attitudes change. The nature of the violence evolves over time. Individuals in any given camp may have motives (friendship, kinship, intermarriage, greed, resentment, professionalism, personal principle, pragmatic fence jumping) to assist, and these motives might make them discreetly approachable.
7. As an aside, anyone who thinks that efforts by locals to limit and contain conflict in these ways do not add up to much should consider the separate field of nonviolent resistance. It is a lynchpin of NVR theory to make discreet overtures toward pillar institutions and sections of society which the repressive power block relies upon, find those whose opinion and behavior can be influenced—and bring them into accommodative arrangements. Efforts by mere civilians to transform conflict (a task more challenging than anything described here), led 46 nonviolent transitions from dictatorship to free or partially free new governments between 1975 - 2005.⁴ How much easier then to limit flashpoints at the local level?
8. But when efforts at accommodation are not viable, locals often turn to avoidance strategies. This is their Plan B. For example, in Colombia “communities have managed a sometimes effective dialogue with armed groups. [But] the strongest of the communities have detailed contingency plans to deal with a deterioration in the situation.”⁵ Contingency plans for avoiding violence not only save lives—but also *reduce conflict* in ways we seem not to realize.

Support tactics of avoidance so as to reduce conflict.

9. There is another powerful dynamic that the conflict management profession tends to overlook: The more prepared that locals’ social units and economic assets are for violence, the less fuel and fodder there will be to feed that violence. Most post-Cold War violence targets noncombatants and their resources. What most of today’s conflicts want from communities is fungible assets and fighting bodies; materiel and manpower; contraband and conscripts.
10. Conflict’s combustibility can be compared to a British thermal unit, the measure of heat given off when fuel is burned for heating. Communities might ultimately be unable to prevent conflict or accommodate abusers—but they can do something about their own BTU rating. They can deprive violence of some strength and cause it to burn less intensely.
11. Their exposed assets are its fuel, their residents are its fodder (for, taxation, servitude, reward rape, conscription and more). Property and people alike are sucked into the firestorm. But through preparedness, they put their social units and economic assets onto a war footing. They

reduce opportunities for the requisitioning of supplies and recruitment of soldiers on which conflicts gorge and thrive. They remove accelerant from its path.

Contraband

12. Consider how central the stripping of civilian assets is to conflict. In some cases it is done to deprive opponents of what is perceived to be to a resource base. In other cases, unpaid soldiers might rely on plunder for their own provisioning. In yet other cases—when “conflict” is better described as an “asset stripping” criminal enterprise—looting drives “strategy”. But when families and communities “strip first,” then violence has less to feed on.
13. Preparedness support can emphasize ways to preemptively strip and transfer civilian possessions. Locals can learn (if they do not know how already) how to cache, document, disperse, dismantle, diversify, liquidate, redeem, preemptively transfer or in some other way “strip” their own vital assets before criminal belligerents do. These measures can begin in sequenced, provisional, and reversible steps. When to actually take steps like flight that are more uprooting depends upon having good intelligence for threat assessment.
14. Civilians often realize that their valuable properties are actually drawing violence toward them. At times they take steps which, though short of full flight, are drastic. These are “scorched earth” tactics in which locals create the impression that their properties have already been attacked, abandoned, or in some way been made uninhabitable. They recede to the bush or hills (sometimes having prepared discreet secondary home lots and farm lots), leaving would-be raiders empty handed and eager to move on.
15. These extreme tactics, all inventoried, sometimes prevent deeper harm to life and livelihood. The logic especially holds true when assaults more resemble banditry than professional military sweep and hold operations. Absent easy plunder, marauders may lose the stomach for pursuit and squatters may lack incentive for illegal occupation. There is no grittier cost-benefit calculation by locals, no stronger testimony to the role of contraband in conflict management.

Conscription

16. Recruitment fuels general violence. But, just as with the more select poaching done to lure violent extremists, child soldiers, or gang members serving syndicated crime (see the companion paper in this series entitled “Reduce Recruitment into Violence”), general recruitment into arms can be curbed.
17. Preparedness can reduce conscription based on *abduction* as well as voluntary enlistment due to various *push* or *pull* factors. The word “voluntary” is used loosely here given the physical or psychological duress those factors often pose.
18. Abduction: Kidnapping is partly countered by improving the situational awareness of individuals at risk, particularly youth and children. So too, measures prepared by the larger community (safe spaces, policing, early warning, evacuation, etc.) keep these individuals inside a better security envelope. Of course, if the environment becomes permissive enough to seek an accommodation with belligerents about halting abductions, then that method can (again) be tried. Having strong, continual intelligence will be the best way of knowing if the timing is right for that.
19. Push pressures: Conscription based on *push* factors can be countered by trying to mitigate those pressures. (There are of course long-term structural pressures like poverty, inequity, injustice, exclusion, resource scarcity, weak civil society, weak security sector, etc. But their primacy and predictability as drivers of recruitment is somewhat in dispute and they are, regardless, beyond the scope of preparedness support. This section instead looks locally at the more proximate and precipitating threats that come with the onset of conflict and push people who have not yet joined conflict to take up arms.)

20. Usually these pressures are a dire loss of *safety*, near collapse of *sustenance*, and utter breakdown of *services*. Indeed, these are frequently referred to as conflict's "center of gravity." Control of a populace goes to the side that can control these elemental things. Join us and you get beans; don't and you get bullets. Security, sustenance, and services are at the heart of insurgency and counter insurgency. They are also the three concentrations of preparedness support.
21. Belligerents might try to convince a populace of its utter reliance on them. Reliance comes at the price of joining—which can then further endanger locals. In response, families and communities often try to augment their capacities. They adapt sustenance, substitute services, and bolster their own means of security. Preparedness support has precisely the same aim. To the degree this helps them become more self-reliant in these fundamental matters, then the better they can resist the push by violent parties. With more such self-reliance *they can stay nonaligned longer*.
22. Interviews with former recruits very often find they felt that they "had no choice" but to join a fight. Mary Anderson observes that, "In many places, an exaggerated perception of threat can lead to unnecessary acts of preemptive violence."⁶ But in being more prepared with time-tested steps for safety as well as life-critical sustenance and services, they may feel less vulnerable and be less apt to lash out. If we support such efforts of theirs, then we might help raise up or restore choices where there appeared to be none other than a gun. In this way we help the countless local leaders who try to keep their own people from taking up weapons.
23. Pull pressures: Conscription based on *pull* factors derived from emotional and social influences can be countered by trying to debunk, alleviate, or co-opt those pressures. Much depends upon control of the narrative.
24. Are youth hearing messages about humiliation and revenge? About hate of another identity group? About glorification of the gun and easy wealth? Anyone who feels that information about threats and how to prepare for them can be destabilizing (which is true, if done improperly), must also agree that it is often *mis-information* which is destabilizing. Populations caught between fighting factions are typically fed information that is deliberately false and inflammatory. It is calculated to tempt or incite them to fight. But local leaders who are armed with facts and proofs might be better able to belie belligerent fear and hate mongering propaganda, or to dampen the ardor of naïve youth about the real nature of violence with graphic evidence. They may be better able to offset radical, mercenary ideologies with counter narratives to either prevent enlistment or encourage defection.
25. Are youth feeling the pull of honor and duty, or needing to fill a void of purpose and self-esteem? Any such code or coming-of-age act that taking up arms might fulfill can have its equivalent in noncombatant life. Any such yearning that taking up arms might fulfill can have its mirror or analogue action in bold nonviolent duties. Youth can join their cohort to serve the community. Employing them to help those they love and look up to prepare for threats can become a way for these youth to earn community respect, self-esteem, and (if micro-funding were attached) some income. This is conflict management down in the villages and slums.
26. Are they capable? Youth (and children!) across the globe have, willingly or not, performed very difficult and dangerous tasks amid conflict, serving as cooks, food suppliers, porters, scouts, spies, messengers, tactical trainers, and medics—and in ancillary functions such as gathering intelligence, patrolling, and manning checkpoints; cleaning weapons; laying, detecting and clearing landmines; and guarding arsenals. Some served as decoys, detectors of enemy positions, and bodyguards for commandants, or deployed as propagandists and recruiters. If they can do all this, then they certainly can master weaponless arts of survival.
27. Are they inspired? As Diane Paul writes, former rebel conscripts "are an important source of information about prevention and mitigation" of threats, and sometimes "are very motivated to share that information" with their communities once restored to civilian life.⁷

28. The words “once restored” indicate that the conscription that has already taken place. If a local community does not proactively harness the *constructive* potential of youth, then any organization, ideologue, or political entrepreneur seeking opportunities for violence might be very willing to tap their *destructive* potential.⁸ That is, who will control the struggle of push and pull factors first?
29. Preparedness support can help manage conflict by bolstering local efforts to either accommodate or avoid belligerents and thus limit the scope of violence on a daily basis.

Endnotes

¹ Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001; pp. 120-121. The instances cited include Bosnia, Northwest Somaliland, Armenia, South Africa, the Philippines, Northern Ireland, Central America and West Africa. **See also** the interesting series of reports produced by the Steps Toward Conflict Prevention (or STEPS) Project of the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Cambridge, MA.

² Max P. Glaser, *Negotiated Access: Humanitarian Engagement with Armed Nonstate Actors*, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2002-2003; pp. 59 and 60.

³ Andrew Bonwick, *Protection in Colombia: A Bottom-up Approach*, HPG Background Paper, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, December 2006; p. 14.

⁴ Adrian Karatnycky, et. al, *How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy*, Freedom House, New York, 2005; pp. 6-7.

⁵ Andrew Bonwick, "Protection in Colombia a Bottom-up Approach", *HPG Background Paper*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, December, 2006; p. 7.

⁶ Mary B. Anderson and Lara Olson, *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc., Cambridge, MA, 2003; p. 18.

⁷ Diane Paul, *Fulfilling the Forgotten Promise: The Protection of Civilians in Northern Uganda*, Protection Working Group, InterAction, Washington, DC, January 2006; pp. 57 and 58.

⁸ Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, prepared for the United States Agency for International Development by Management Systems International, Washington, DC, February, 2009; p. 10. **See also:** INEE's *Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction: Talking Points*, Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies, a web-based organization, January 2005; p. 1. The author states, "Children and youth have enormous potential... This potential can be constructive or destructive, and children and youth without meaningful opportunities and positive influences are easily recruited or attracted by alternative and often negative activities."