PREPAREDNESS &
The Conflict Cycle

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.

Beware the hidden conflict trap.

1. The field of conflict <u>prevention</u> is concerned with the seeds and roots of violence. But a failure to prevent conflict does not mark an end to its mission because as the conflict rages those seeds are still being planted and those roots are still growing—and may grow into something even worse than the extant round of violence.

2. Most of the world's worst conflicts have histories. They have iterative legacies of damage which, though perhaps not determinative, can be dangerously formative of the future. Poorly named "post-conflict" situations very often revert to violence. We who are concerned about peace and conflict typically are not trying to prevent virgin violence, but rather prevent a *relapse* into cyclic violence in chronically defiled societies and fragile or failed states. We are trying to prevent conflict from re-igniting.

3. There are powerful reasons why this happens. *Structural liabilities* (poverty, inequity, injustice, resource scarcity, exclusion, weak civil society, weak security sector, ideological drivers, etc.) often go untreated when "peace" returns—thus inviting the return of violence. *Environmental liabilities* (ranging from surplus weapons to spoilers' schemes) also serve to reignite violence. We have vast peace and conflict enterprises justifiably dedicated to addressing these liabilities.

4. But clearly there are additional and rather *underreported* reasons why states and societies become so dangerously fragile and unstable. Violence lives on in the ways it exacerbates those structural and environmental liabilities. It also lives on in ways quite visceral to those living with its skeletons and scars. This is the living legacy of things that happened during conflict.

5.	Sir Paul Collier, the World Bank's former Director of Research and Vice President, coined the phrase "conflict trap". He found that the structural factors which investigators typically plug into conflict risk models tend not to show the whole picture. "The risk of a reversion to conflict is much higher than is accounted for by these effects. On average, only about half of the 44 percent risk of repeat conflict is due to characteristics either present before the conflict started or explicitly modeled as deteriorating as a result of conflict. *The other half of the risk is due to things that happen during the conflict but are not included in the analysis.*" [1] [Emphasis added]

6.	Collier meticulously reveals how "what happens during conflict increases both the risk and duration of subsequent conflict." [2] He graphs the "effect of the conflict trap into the economic factors that change as a consequence of the conflict and *other unobserved factors* that change during war. Such other factors… [include] *less tangible effects* of war, such as the breakdown of institutions and social polarization." [3] [Emphasis added]

7.	Research of the *Center for Civilians in Harm's Way* cites such breakdowns and how they are experienced by locals. The collapse of *sustenance*, *services* and *security* can leave populations in an unstable state, ripe for the resumption of violence. They often become demoralized and desperate due to the destroyed infrastructure of these very elemental things.

8.	*Sustenance*: The breakdown of life-critical sustenance can lead to desperate coping—adaptations even more precarious than those used in times of "normal" grinding poverty and government dysfunction. This has long-term implications. It is well documented that civilians who find little way to mitigate the worse effects of war upon their livelihoods are often coerced or enticed into illicit economics which then affects the prospect for normal recovery and peace for years to come. These are distortions that are slow to be undone. Moreover, unmitigated violence is the perfect growth medium for predatory economics; for the onset of criminal, syndicated violence which sometimes produces the dangers and damage on a scale close to war.

9.	*Services*: Weak services might well have been a cause for unrest even before violence hit. Yet disruptive violence invariably then makes that ignitable discontent even worse. It is not merely the hardship of broken services, but the suggestion that this shows an abdication of responsibility by the state, that makes this explosive. There must be someone to blame. Even if old leaders are ousted and new governance comes to the fore offering a political order that is inclusive and just— if it cannot fix the infrastructure for such elemental needs fast enough then violence may return. There will be estrangement from the political establishment and cynicism about working through peaceful governance mechanisms for remedy.

10.	*Security*: Trauma, bitterness, fear, and gun-lust are among the damaging legacies of violence. Trauma, both individual and societal, resulting from bloodshed is not an "end result" but rather a continuing fact of life. In the same way that it is a misnomer to call landmines a "remnant" of conflict because they still can kill at any moment, so too is human and social trauma an ongoing threat. A state, indeed the entire international community, might do everything right in an effort to restore the structures and environment for peace—but it cannot easily erase these scars. No political mechanism (no conciliatory power-sharing, no truth commission, etc.) can quickly undo what has been done.

11.	Bitterness and the thirst for revenge, caused by deaths amid conflict, is a polarizing bequest that can stand between the end of major violence and the resumption of normalcy and peace. Times of violence can be dangerous gestation periods establishing or hardening "group identities"—with consequences for years to come.

12.	As Connie Peck's landmark report for the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, concludes, "previous violence between groups contributes to animosity and fear, which can last for generations." She adds that, "When memories or stories (whether true or not) of atrocities exist, these beliefs can stimulate fear and influence behavior. This is one way in which *past conflict makes future conflict more likely.*" [4] [Emphasis added]

13. Trauma, bitterness and fear are not simply conditions which create a drag on individual and collective steps toward peace and recovery. Rather, they can provoke a heightened sense of insecurity which itself might trigger preemptive violent strikes against the perceived threat. In that vein, bitterness, and fear are easy motivations to manipulate for any spoilers who want to reignite conflict for their own purposes.

14. The environmental liabilities lubricating violence are worse upon emerging from conflict than before. Weapons and spoilers may be found in greater number in the aftermath. Unmitigated violence commonly inculcates a taste for power through the barrel of a gun. It can breed a martial law mentality in those holding power and vigilantism in the common citizen. Once these psychoses are propagated they can take generations to undo.

15. While these deep wounds are still open, it is hard for any political mechanism or milestone (a truce, a repatriation, an election, etc.) to truly herald a "post-conflict" period. More likely, there may remain years of "no war, no peace."

16. All of this argues for one thing: plan and employ mitigation against the impacts of unstoppable violence. Actually stopping the violence would of course be best. But the tools of conflict <u>resolution</u> (via diplomacy) or peace enforcement (via armed intervention) might not materialize for years if ever. The time before and during conflict must be used to diminish the effects of violence, both for reasons of humanity now and for the possible prevention of conflict later.

Mitigate violence that breeds violence.

17. It sounds almost self-evident: the shallower these wounds—physical and financial, psychological or societal—then the sooner the healing and return of normalcy. A few observers have however questioned this truism, reasoning that the wounds actually need to be *deeper*.

    a. Notably, Edward Luttwak once wrote that the international community should "give war a chance."[5] He argued that if we allow conflict to burn, then there can come a point at which either one side wins decisively or exhaustion with fighting sets in. The logic and "useful function" of uninterrupted conflict is to "resolve grievances" and "bring peace."

    b. As an aside, it is hard to see how, in his words, the violently induced "preconditions for a lasting settlement" will indeed last if and when it happens to be criminals, spoilers, brutal dictators, thug nationalists, or zero-sum ideologues or fundamentalists who win. Besides, individuals like these, who drive much of today's violence, typically are not troubled by fighters' exhaustion or civilians' war weariness. They thrive on wealth, power, and extremism—of which there will always be more to pursue.

    c. But more to the point, efforts at "preparedness support" which the Center advocates have nothing to do with interventions of the kind that Luttwak cites, which impose a halt to violence "with cease-fires and armistices." Indeed, preparedness support is premised on the opposite outcome: that violence is not going to be halted.

    d. He levels his harshest criticism at "the disinterested interventions" of humanitarians, faulting NGOs for "inserting material aid into ongoing conflicts" and hence prolonging them. It is true that international relief has sometimes become a symbiotic part of war strategies and war economies. Camps are often opportunity structures for belligerents and criminals. Frequently, they are undefended repositories of resources (food, supplies, vehicles, coercible labor) that competing parties almost have no choice but to battle for control over, leaving camps politicized and militarized in the process.

    e. But preparedness support has nothing to do with this kind of Cadillac aid intervention either. Rather, it helps local providers serve discreetly in ways that are much harder to target. And it helps locals brace their families and assets in ways that are too small to fight over and too scattered in situ to become a symbiotic part of the violence.

      f.   The "Give war a chance" theory therefore does not apply here. Preparedness support doctrine holds that the more mitigated violence is now, then the better the preconditions for peace and normalcy later.

18.   The less death, destruction and displacement from the onset (the less disruption to family units and assets; the less trauma to communities), then the faster that "post-conflict" periods (which otherwise often languish in conditions of "no war, no peace" for years) might truly return to peace and prosperity.

19.   It is revealing to list the billion-dollar tasks we belatedly set ourselves to "post-conflict" around the globe: *re*patriation, *re*unification, *re*conciliation, *re*habilitation, *re*construction, *re*integration, *re*investment, and more. They are all *re*active. They try to undo damage that locals themselves tried to mitigate in real time, as it was being done. If we so clearly believe the *re*pair of damage is needed for a return to stability and peace—then why wouldn't the preemptive mitigation of that damage be even more so?

20.   This begs counter-historical questions: Why does our "transition" and "stabilization" work not begin in the middle of conflict? Isn't the most fateful moment for a shaping a transition to peace right when violence threatens to form its ugly future legacies? Isn't the best time to help stabilize a populace precisely when its resilience hangs in the balance? This is precisely what preparedness support does.

21.   Does the fact that those who care about conflict prevention continue to stay in their temporal silo mean they think that "experts" in "some other field" are handling this aspect of prevention for them? *There are no such experts and there is no such field*. The enterprise of preventing reemergence of conflict is logically inseparable from the task of mitigating conflict earlier in its cycle—the very essence of preparedness support.

22.   Preparing for a failure to prevent conflict is not an admission of failure. It is a recognition of hard reality and of the hope that second and third generation violence might be prevented.

23.   <u>Preparedness support can help prevent conflict returning: it reduces cyclic conflict traps by mitigating the impacts of violence which breed future violence.</u>

Endnotes

[1] Paul Collier, et. al, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, A World Bank Policy Research Report, A co-publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington DC, 2003; pp. 87-88.

[2] Paul Collier, et. al, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, A World Bank Policy Research Report, A co-publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington DC, 2003; p. 104.

[3] Paul Collier, et. al, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, A World Bank Policy Research Report, A co-publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington DC, 2003; pp. 106-108.

[4] Connie Peck, *Sustainable Peace: The Role of the UN and Regional Organizations in Preventing Conflict*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., New York, 1998; pp. 33-34. The author cites Lake and Rothchild, 1996.

[5] Edward Luttwak [Luttwak, Edward (July–August 1999). "Give War a Chance". *Foreign Affairs* 78 (4): 36–44].