The concept of ‘upstream conflict prevention’ has gained increasing currency among the development, diplomatic and defence communities. Yet for many there remains a lack of clarity as to what the term means and how to put it into practice. This briefing therefore seeks to provide an overview of ‘upstream’ conflict prevention and illustrate how this approach can be put into practice.

Preventing violent conflict might at times take the form of last-minute diplomatic interventions to stop disputes from turning violent or military action to prevent escalation. However, moments of crisis are usually symptoms of long-standing tensions within or between societies. These tensions may be a result of, for example, political exclusion, lack of jobs, or inadequate access to basic services such as security and justice, health or education. By identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict, societies have the greatest chance of becoming more cohesive, resilient and able to manage tensions without resorting to violence.

The UK Government has made upstream conflict prevention a key pillar of its cross-departmental Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS). The BSOS represents a commitment to developing a coherent, comprehensive, and long-term approach to conflict prevention which involves supporting “political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all.” It suggests that this type of “structural stability” is “built on the consent of the population, resilient and flexible in the face of shocks, and can evolve over time as the context changes”. The BSOS sets out the UK Government’s ambition to co-ordinate its development, defence and diplomatic capabilities to pursue this vision. This is an important step forward.

The following briefing outlines the elements of an upstream conflict prevention approach, followed by selected case studies that illustrate what applying elements of this approach looks like in practice. It concludes with recommendations on how government, parliamentarians, and development and humanitarian actors can put this approach into action.
When to work ‘upstream’?
An important acceptance of the upstream conflict prevention concept is that any early intervention is a matter of degree, not a matter of time. Whether an upstream conflict prevention approach is effective will depend on the context; for example, whether or not the conflict is ‘frozen’. It is therefore necessary to ensure that all engagements are undertaken at the right time and in the right way, if they are to make a positive difference to conflict dynamics.

A context-specific approach
Any effective conflict prevention effort will need to be tailored to the context at hand. This involves taking into account the number and diversity of different actors involved, but is a necessary underpinning of all upstream conflict prevention efforts to be effective.

In order to have real effect, an upstream conflict prevention approach requires prioritisation of the nature and concerns of local communities in conflict-affected countries.

A holistic approach
If upstream conflict prevention is to be taken seriously, it is not enough for upstream conflict prevention to be undertaken at any point during the conflict cycle, even at the same time. The defining feature of an upstream approach is not when in the conflict cycle it takes place, but that it seeks to address the underpinning drivers of conflict. In theory, intervention to prevent conflict upstream can be undertaken at any point during the conflict cycle at any one time. The defining feature of a conflict is that it seeks to address the underlying drivers of conflict in a context-specific way.

What does taking an upstream conflict prevention approach look like in practice?

Taking action on small arms proliferation in Jonglei, South Sudan
The Office for Small Arms and Light Weapons (OSALW) in Southern Sudan, together with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and national and international partners, has been taking steps to address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) throughout the region.

The proliferation of SALW has become a significant concern in South Sudan, where the conflict has resulted in increased numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees. The proliferation of SALW has contributed to the escalation of violence and instability, which has further exacerbated the conflict.

The OSALW has taken several steps to address the proliferation of SALW, including:

- Engaging with local communities to raise awareness of the dangers of SALW
- Providing training to local authorities on the legal framework for regulating SALW
- Supporting the establishment of community policing units to help enforce the law
- Providing assistance to conflict-affected communities to help them build resilience against SALW

In addition to these measures, the OSALW has also been working with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to support the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373, which calls for a comprehensive arms embargo on South Sudan.

As part of this effort, the OSALW has been collaborating with the South Sudanese government to establish a national arms registry, which will help to track and control the flow of SALW.

In conclusion, the OSALW’s approach to addressing the proliferation of SALW in South Sudan is a successful example of an upstream conflict prevention approach, as it seeks to address the underlying drivers of conflict and prevent further escalation of violence and instability. This approach is essential for preventing future conflict and ensuring a more stable and prosperous future for the region.

Supporting inclusive politics in Yemen
The Yemen Human Rights Foundation (YHRF) is working to support inclusive politics in Yemen by promoting the participation of women and young people in political processes.

The YHRF has been involved in various initiatives to support women’s participation in Yemeni politics, including the establishment of women’s councils and the promotion of women’s leadership roles. The YHRF has also been working to promote the rights of young people, particularly those living in areas affected by conflict.

Through these initiatives, the YHRF aims to create a more inclusive political environment in Yemen, where women and young people can participate fully in political processes and have their voices heard. By promoting inclusive politics, the YHRF is working to create a more stable and prosperous future for Yemen, where all citizens can play an active role in shaping the country’s future.
Putting upstream conflict prevention into action

For UK Government
The UK Government must invest time and resources in putting the bold vision set out in the BSOS into practice, including:
- ensuring awareness of and buy-in for the progressive vision of stability laid out in the BSOS throughout Whitehall and country offices
- working to translate this progressive vision of stability into context-specific implementation plans
- incentivising officials to prioritise shared BSOS objectives over those of individual departments
- ensuring all interactions, including trade, aid and diplomacy are seen through the lens of conflict prevention, not only those activities specifically targeted at conflict prevention
- ensuring that engagement to protect UK national security interests is consistent with efforts to promote the security and development needs of ordinary people living in conflict-affected states
- when carrying out a conflict analysis and programme design, ensure that the perspectives of the people affected by conflict and insecurity, including the most marginalised groups such as youth and women, are taken into account
- promoting the principles of responsible, legitimate and transparent governance in all interactions with other states.

For Parliamentarians
Parliamentarians can play a key role in ensuring that the government is held to account on conflict prevention work by increasing parliamentary scrutiny of conflict prevention activities, for example by:
- finding an effective way of providing formal parliamentary scrutiny of cross-departmental BSOS implementation
- tabling an annual parliamentary debate on conflict prevention and posing parliamentary questions targeted at BSOS implementation, as well as on departmental activities in conflict-affected states
- ensuring attention in Parliament is given to longer term conflict prevention activities that are focused on improving the lives of those who are affected by conflict and instability, resisting the temptation to only focus on the crisis of the day
- working with parliamentarians in other countries to promote the principles of accountable and inclusive politics.

For the development and humanitarian communities
Development, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors all have an important role to play in upstream conflict prevention, for example:
- taking a ‘do no harm’ approach to delivering humanitarian assistance based on a thorough analysis of conflict dynamics
- ensuring that, wherever possible, development programming takes a maximalist approach to conflict sensitivity by addressing the root causes of conflict
- when consulting communities on their development needs, include questions on their security and justice concerns
- ensuring that development interventions also address security and access to justice where these are community concerns, as the ability to live peaceful, secure lives and to seek redress against injustice is a basic need on a par with health care and education.

While challenging, implementing an upstream approach to conflict prevention has the potential to secure real and long-term gains in promoting a more peaceful and stable environment for all.
Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in over 17 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe. All our publications are available for download from our website. We can provide hard copies of specific publications upon request.

Displaced Somali women queue for food at a centre operated by the government and local NGOs, south of Mogadishu. © Reuters/Faisal Omar courtesy of the Thomson Reuters Foundation – Alertnet

NOTES
1 Saferworld. (August 2010). The war over South Ossetia: two years on. www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/news-and-views/comment/44