

Upstream conflict prevention and the Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

'Upstream conflict prevention', a phrase that has gained some degree of currency among security and development circles in recent years, is effectively shorthand for a range of policies and practices that aim to identify, understand, and respond to the underlying causes of conflict and instability in a given context. At its simplest it is designed to support societies to manage conflict and address grievances without resorting to violence. Examples can involve tackling bad governance and corruption, preventing human rights violations and ending impunity, supporting effective service delivery, promoting equitable economic growth, and building capable, fair and accountable institutions in conflict-affected and fragile contexts so that they are capable of managing tensions before they escalate. At its most effective it should respond to the human security needs of local populations as a fundamental contribution to broader national and international security and therefore be informed by the priorities and perspectives of those who are affected by the violence.

This briefing paper is one of several outputs from a two-year Saferworld project funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) entitled 'Conflict prevention in the 21st century: China and the UK'. The project aims to raise awareness of differences and similarities in the UK and China's approach to conflict prevention, to build mutual understanding between UK and Chinese policy communities and explore the potential for greater collaboration by promoting dialogue on conflict prevention between China and the UK. It builds on a 2011 Memorandum of Understanding¹ between China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and DFID which commits to development cooperation

(including conflict prevention) to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals – a partnership which has recently been updated to focus joint efforts on the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

This dialogue is timely. The UK has recently launched its 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), and announced a new strategy for UK aid, both of which will affect how upstream conflict prevention is managed by UK actors. It is also a defining moment for China as its development efforts become more prominent with, for example, the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a new multilateral development bank headquartered in Beijing which became operational in January 2016. The dialogue also takes place within the context of the recent introduction of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This new universal development framework can encourage and support countries to better implement and coordinate their development efforts including those that relate to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, most notably through Goal 16 which commits all states to "promot[ing] peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". In response to these new commitments, this briefing paper examines how both China and the UK perceive upstream conflict prevention and its link to the SDGs and attempts to identify synergies in their approaches and opportunities for cooperation. It draws on the perspectives of one Chinese and one UK policy specialist who offer some contrasting definitions but complementary views of the potential for UK–China cooperation on security and development issues at both international policy and in-country operational levels.

¹ Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China and Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2011) 'Memorandum of Understanding for a partnership to enhance development cooperation and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals', July, (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/197473/China-UK-MOU-Signed-Version.pdf)

Conflict Prevention Working Group

Saferworld is working with partners in China, the UK and conflict-affected states to increase awareness and expertise on different approaches to conflict prevention, focusing on three main themes: early warning, crisis response, and upstream conflict prevention. This work is facilitated by a [Conflict Prevention Working Group](#) (CPWG) composed of Chinese and UK policy experts. In order to raise awareness of how China and the UK currently approach conflict prevention CPWG members are co-authoring a series of joint briefings. This is the third briefing in the series, and is authored by CPWG members Dr Zhang Chun (SIIS) and Robert Parker (Saferworld).

Aims of the Conflict Prevention Working Group

- Create opportunities for constructive dialogue on conflict prevention among international experts, including those from China, the UK, and conflict affected or fragile states.
- Develop a source of expertise and knowledge on the policies, practices and attitudes towards conflict prevention in both China and the UK.
- Identify policy areas where China-UK dialogue or cooperation on conflict prevention could be most productive.

China's approach to upstream conflict prevention and the SDGs

Zhang Chun

Upstream conflict prevention pursues long-term stability and peace by addressing root causes of conflict through a holistic approach combining political, economic, and social endeavours. Compared to conflict early warning and crisis management, upstream conflict prevention is a more strategic, long-term and indirect approach to conflict settlement. It operates not only during times of conflict or war, but also in peaceful periods. It aims to deal with the root causes of conflict rather than prevent short-term crisis or conflict. To realise such a long-term and strategic goal, upstream conflict prevention mobilises all political, economic, and social resources, as opposed to limiting efforts to a military or security response.

Thus, one interpretation of upstream conflict prevention is that it is a form of development philosophy or theory, rather than a means of conflict management. This would suggest that current development strategies are closely related to upstream conflict prevention agendas. The connection is further highlighted by the integration of peace and security issues into the UN 2030 Agenda

for Sustainable Development, as exemplified by Goal 16. Goal 16 of the SDGs aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” – underlining the importance of peace and inclusiveness to the enduring stability and prosperity of all countries.

The inclusion of peace and security as one of the SDGs reflects a fundamental transformation of how security challenges are viewed. Traditionally, when it comes to peace and security challenges, one thinks about inter and intra state conflicts and wars. Since the end of Cold War, security challenges have changed fundamentally. In the first decade of the post-cold war era, there was a gradual shift from the most important security challenges being international in nature, towards an environment in which domestic conflicts, civil wars and ethnic conflicts became the most prominent, although still within the domain of traditional high politics. Moving into the 21st century, a wave of new and interconnected security challenges emerged as the key challenges to the international community, ushering in growing support for the concept of the ‘development–security nexus’. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan rightly pointed out, “there will be no development without security and no security without development”. Here, the most important thing is neither development nor security – it is the link between the two.

The rising importance of the development–security nexus or the ‘securitisation of development’ legitimises the inclusion of peace and security into the SDGs. However, it is important to note that upstream conflict prevention is not the same as the SDGs. First of all, the SDGs are an international development framework, with development rather than peace or security at the core, although the connectivity between peace, security, and development has to be taken into consideration. Second, there are other platforms to deal with peace and security issues, such as the UN Security Council. The purpose of including peace and security issues within the SDGs is not to make the latter a platform to settle security issues, but to remind people of the importance of peace and security for development. Third, there are obvious differences between upstream conflict prevention and Goal 16 of the SDGs. For example, Goal 16 arguably focuses on intra-state and non-traditional security challenges but not traditional inter-state conflict or even war, while upstream conflict prevention embraces broader content and includes both domestic and international conflicts. Goal 16 is a target which, in order to be met, will require voluntary and ongoing effort from countries and national-level implementation; while upstream conflict prevention could provide more opportunity and space for international cooperation.

Initially China did not support the inclusion of peace

and security as an independent goal within the SDGs, but it supported their inclusion as targets or indicators within the SDGs. Nevertheless, China recognises how hard it was for the international community to negotiate this deal over the past two years, and hence was willing to accept the current version of the SDGs with peace and security as an independent goal. China accepts such a reality because of three major concerns. First and foremost, China acknowledges that collectively the SDGs are a result of international bargaining. Since intergovernmental negotiations on the 2030 Agenda opened in January 2015, China repeatedly demonstrated its support for the SDGs proposed by the Open Working Group and challenged any intention from developed countries, like the US and the UK, to reopen the negotiation in any form. Second, China also realised that many developing countries, including those in Africa, wanted to include peace and security as part of the SDGs because of the severe security challenges they face and the clear evidence of a development–security nexus there. Finally, China itself does not resist goals on peace and security. Rather, China supports many of the targets under Goal 16. China’s concern relates to the scale of the SDGs and the potential that having too many goals could divert attention away from other priorities and dilute their impact.

For China to implement Goal 16 globally there are two challenges. Politically, the SDGs are a non-binding international development effort which will be carried out by each state voluntarily. For different countries, the trade-off between development and security is different. Technically, it is hard to measure peace and security because of its subjective nature. No matter how accurate data collection is, any measurable means for Goal 16 cannot precisely reflect people’s feelings about peace and security; and any conclusion based on measurement will be distorted.

However, China has already started working towards some targets of Goal 16, for example, Goal 16.1 (“significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”), Goal 16.2 (“end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”), Goal 16.5 (“substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms”), and Goal 16.9 (“provide legal identity for all, including birth registration”), among others. Promoting Chinese domestic development will be inseparable with the efforts in solving the root causes of long-term conflicts, though China avoids using the term ‘upstream conflict prevention’.

The UK approach to upstream conflict prevention and the SDGs

Robert Parker

New evidence and experience regularly informs the UK government’s approach to overseas intervention, including upstream conflict prevention. However, despite its position as a central pillar of the UK Government’s overseas engagement and the subject of much policy, academic, and practitioner discourse, the definition of ‘upstream conflict prevention’ has remained elusive and constantly evolving. The UK approach is also shaped by developments in the international context, including the perceived impact on national security of the changing nature of conflict (such as the rise of non-state security threats) and the recently agreed SDGs. At the domestic level, the July 2011 cross-departmental Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS) helped to shape the government’s approach to conflict prevention. Shared jointly by DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), this strategy outlines an approach to conflict prevention based on a progressive vision of ‘stability’ which appears to have been taken forward in the 2015 National Security Strategy and SDSR. The BSOS represents a positive step towards a coherent approach to conflict prevention which builds on some of the best available evidence for what works in preventing and reducing violence and instability. Arguably the most significant policy contribution contained in the BSOS is its progressive definition of ‘stability’, which is characterised by “political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all”.² The extent to which this definition of ‘stability’ (and by association that of upstream conflict prevention) informs the implementation of the SDSR remains to be seen.

Progress has been made on implementing some elements of the BSOS, including putting in place cross-departmental management structures and strengthening funding sources to support joint work. The new Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and its implementing secretariat under the auspices of the National Security Council (NSC) has broadened the cross-governmental platform with a mandate to contribute to upstream conflict prevention to include the Home Office, Intelligence Services, and National Crime Agency. It has also heralded a new era where the design and delivery of UK development assistance is increasingly explicitly aligned with UK national security interests in response to changing national security threats worldwide and domestic

² UK Government, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (2011), p 5.

pressure/political agenda to demonstrate value for money and joined up government.

The challenge of uniting government departments with distinct working cultures and practices behind a single vision for conflict prevention should not be under-estimated. Although ground-breaking in its time, the failure of the Conflict Pool (predecessor to the CSSF) to generate and deliver genuinely cross-departmental programming and demonstrate its lasting impact led to criticism from those who promote 'whole-of-government' or 'integrated' approaches. In addition to responding to a political imperative to use the UK's combined assets to strengthen national security, it remains to be seen whether the CSSF also offers a more promising platform for cross-departmental engagement in conflict-affected contexts that delivers lasting improvements for populations living with violent conflict and poverty. The recent National Security Strategy and SDSR, closely linked to the CSSF, offered a timely opportunity to reflect on progress to date in implementing the policy of upstream conflict prevention, the introduction of significant new cross-governmental actors and the associated risks of an increasing securitisation of UK conflict prevention efforts. For the first time the work of DFID was explicitly linked to national security – it is unclear how this will impact on UK interventions overseas or where upstream conflict prevention will fit in practice within the new cross-departmental vision of national security.

But what, in the eyes of the UK government, constitutes effective upstream conflict prevention – or perhaps more critically, what makes a peaceful society? The evidence points to a number of factors that are important across a variety of contexts. These include access to security and justice; transparent, accountable and effective state institutions; controls on corruption; voice and participation in decision-making; and addressing transnational conflict drivers such as the supply of arms and illicit financial flows. As well as seeking to reduce levels of violence, many of these specific issues are addressed in the targets currently under Goal 16 of the SDG framework.

There are many common elements between a progressive vision of upstream conflict prevention and the SDGs, in particular Goal 16. Overall, development can support peace when it is inclusive, responsive to the needs of affected populations, and delivered within a long-term transformative vision/framework. In addition to Goal 16 there are complementary goals that could be considered central to an expansive vision of upstream conflict prevention. Goal 5, on gender equality, especially targets 5.1, 5.2, 5.5 (on ending gender discrimination, and violence, and encouraging participation) could address links between gender and conflict.³ Goal 10 on inequality is

also important from a peacebuilding perspective and Goal 11 is concerned with safety in urban settings – important as the world becomes increasingly urbanised.⁴ Goal 4 on education references developing a culture of peace and the Financing for Development discussions and outcome document, which propose ideas for funding the SDGs, have strong references to peace throughout. The SDGs are therefore potentially a valuable tool for bringing key elements of the UK's upstream conflict prevention agenda to a global level.

In order to maximise and leverage any potential synergy between the UK's approach to upstream conflict prevention to date and the future promise of SDG implementation there is a need for the UK Government to clarify the state of play, define/interrogate the terminology of upstream conflict prevention and 'stability', and set clear objectives for an integrated approach to delivering against the BSOS, SDSR, CSSF country strategies and implementation of the SDGs at home and abroad. Has there been consistent application of the principles contained in BSOS? Is there an understanding of what conflict prevention should look like outside of those working on the policy in Whitehall? What training is being provided? What practical guidance to common challenges posed by competing internal objectives is there? Has there been an assessment of in-country implementation? Who is responsible for implementation and how is it being assessed? Has any such assessment taken into account the potential complementarity between the UK's approach to upstream conflict prevention and the other prominent frameworks such as the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States and the SDGs? Is there political buy-in to the progressive ideas outlined in the BSOS, i.e. legitimate and effective institutions at the highest levels? Without political buy-in, there is a risk that conflict prevention remains a relatively isolated strand of work instead of a holistic approach that brings the combined resources of different UK government departments and security services together. The ideas in the policy are solid but seem to be at risk given the long-term nature of change and the pressure of the short-term political cycle. Do the SDGs with their 2030 horizon and broad scope offer a progressive longer-term framework within which UK upstream conflict prevention efforts can contribute more effectively?

On a broader scale, the implementation of the SDGs (and in particular Goal 16) offers a potentially unifying and global development framework within which the UK, other donors and their development partners can support and deliver the core elements of upstream conflict prevention. That Goal 16 and several targets

agenda' (<http://www.saferworld.org.uk/news-and-views/comment/124-gender-equality-and-peace-a-shared-post-2015-agenda>)

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015) 'World Urbanization Prospects The 2014 Revision' (<http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/FinalReport/WUP2014-Report.pdf>)

³ Saferworld (2014) 'Gender equality and peace: a shared post-2015

in other goals address many of the key and evidenced structural drivers of conflict (poor governance, injustice, inequalities between identity groups) make the SDGs a potentially powerful conflict prevention tool. That Goal 16 is universal – not just for conflict-affected countries – gives the framework an additional appeal that may open doors for collaboration and partnerships that break traditional moulds. In general, a move away from lists of fragile states towards an acceptance that all societies are on a spectrum of conflict risk, with variations in progress/baselines against some key targets, is a developing and welcome narrative that is both attractive and potentially threatening to some states.

Further, although still some way off, the called-for 'data revolution' to accompany implementation of the SDGs offers opportunities for all states, including the UK and China, to invest in and support data gathering and analytical capacities of National Statistical Offices and third party monitors/researchers. Goal 16 data could inform UN reports on conflict prevention globally and in a few years it may be possible to use disaggregated SDG data for other purposes such as conflict early warning and response. The experts' report on peace architecture rightfully calls for "a change in mind-set among member states"⁵ to embed efforts to prevent conflict and sustain peace, rather than waiting until a conflict breaks out before action is taken.

In terms of the multilateral level there are several issues worthy of consideration. First there is the potential for Goal 16 to be used as a common, overarching framework to coordinate the work of different UN agencies in conflict-affected contexts. It could contribute to bringing a semblance of harmonisation between UN agencies working on security, human rights, and development issues – a shared platform for the haloed 'comprehensive approach'.

Second, Goal 16 creates a platform for collaboration with other, non-UN actors (given the multi-stakeholder dimension of the SDGs). Beyond 'conflict-affected' countries, the fact that Goal 16 brings together development, rights, and security and justice issues means that it could, if approached in a sensitive manner, offer a common platform for many different agencies, NGOs and governments alike.

Third, the recent expert report on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture proposed compacts between the UN and post-conflict countries that jointly identify a number of shared objectives to work towards (as happens in the New Deal); Goal 16 targets could offer an initial template for these (along with key targets from other goals). Finally, although

data may be sparse in such contexts, SDG indicators could help monitor progress, tracking change relative to such compacts. There is potential for the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (UNPBC) and the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) to be brought into these discussions, taking into account the successful cooperation between UNSC and UNPBC, for example in Sierra Leone (as noted in the Expert's Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture).

As the report from the UN Secretary-General's panel on peace operations stresses, "put simply, the international community is failing at preventing conflict".⁶ The SDG agenda is global, multi-stakeholder and aims to bring the whole international community together around a set of shared goals. If we can leverage this agenda correctly, including by seeing through the commitment to end exclusion and leave no-one behind, we will be better-placed to address this failure. As members of the P5 and leading international development actors with active engagements overseas in many conflict-affected contexts, the UK and China are well-placed to help deliver this agenda. It will require innovation and political leadership on all sides to overcome 'zero sum' approaches to overseas engagement but the combined imperatives of human security, national security and their links to sustainable development should provide ample motivation.

Conclusion: China-UK Cooperation in upstream conflict prevention and the SDGs?

In a previous briefing Saferworld recommended that: "The UK's work with China on conflict and fragility must move beyond co-operation on peacekeeping issues to look more at upstream conflict prevention. [...] In particular, [...] UK commitments to conflict prevention, good governance, and human rights should not be sidelined in favour of geopolitical interests and competition with China. Avoiding polarisation between China and the West, the UK and China should seek to build on their shared concern for stability in conflict-affected states, engaging in dialogue on what is meant by 'stability' and how this is applied. China is undergoing a period of policy development as it engages more on issues of peace and security, and the UK and others should take advantage of this opportunity to help shape China's approach in conflict-affected states."⁷ Saferworld continue to endorse this recommendation.

⁶ High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (2015) 'Uniting our strengths for peace – politics, partnership and people', June, p16

⁷ Saferworld (2012) 'Building Stability Overseas Strategy: challenges and opportunities - A review of implementation to date and recommendations for the way forward' (<http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/707-building-stability-overseas-strategy-challenges-and-opportunities>)

⁵ The Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture (2015) 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace', June, pp58

Our authors have presented different positions. Zhang Chun has highlighted the tentative stance that China still adopts in relation to upstream conflict prevention. He suggests that although China is committed to the need for upstream conflict prevention, there is nervousness about a drift both towards the securitisation of development, and that Goal 16 becomes a point of reference for international dialogue on peace and security that would be better placed within the UNSC.

Robert Parker has described the recent policy evolution in the UK in relation to upstream conflict prevention. He highlights the challenges that the UK government faces in realising its ambition of creating an effective cross-governmental approach, and the potential of Goal 16 to contribute a unifying vision, both to support UK policy and approach and international cooperation.

The differences between the UK and China relate not to the end point – more effective upstream conflict prevention – but the way of getting there. With governmental structures (albeit imperfectly run) and considerable resources already in place the UK government is more direct in its approach and seemingly less concerned by the increasingly blurred lines between security and development. China's instruments are far less well developed, its policies generally more diffuse, but its concern for national ownership much more central.

In these circumstances, what are the possibilities for cooperation? And might the SDGs be a rallying point or a point of divergence?

The SDGs can and should become a common language with which countries can debate and prioritise their development challenges internally and then, as a second stage, with their development partners. Kept at a technocratic level, alongside the raft of accompanying indicators, they can be the basis for joint analysis, for coordination of efforts, for the identification of best practice. They can be the basis on which both China and the UK can have the same conversation with conflict-prone countries about how that conflict can be avoided.

Both countries are well placed to support upstream conflict prevention in unstable contexts. The UK has one of the most progressive approaches to international development and conflict prevention issues globally. China with its increasing economic might is becoming a major player on the world stage. The potential for direct cooperation is greatly enhanced if both countries are working within the same framework.

The views represented here are those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the opinions and views of Saferworld.

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Robert Parker is a senior manager with 15 years' experience working on conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues. He joined Saferworld in 2006 and is the Director of Saferworld's Policy, Advocacy and Communications Division where he leads teams conducting research, analysis, technical support and advocacy on security and justice; gender, peace and security; aid and conflict; arms control; and governance. Previously Saferworld's Head of Europe Programme, he has experience working in and on Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, the Caucasus, Central and South Asia and East Africa.

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About Saferworld

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 in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

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