

Applying Sustaining Peace Workshop 4

On March 15, 2017, the International Peace Institute, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, and NYU's Center on International Cooperation organized a workshop on applying the sustaining peace framework in practice.

This workshop was the fourth in the "Applying Sustaining Peace" series, and focused on how to conceptualize prevention through a sustaining peace lens. Later this year, the Secretary-General's forthcoming report on Sustaining Peace will further explore and define sustaining peace.

This workshop drew on two recent and interesting cases, the ECOWAS intervention in Gambia and the lack of regional or international intervention in Burundi. Discussing processes and progress in both countries, workshop participants analyzed the role of regional and international actors in prevention.

Workshop participants included member states active in the Security Council and/or the Peacebuilding Commission; experts from the UN system including the Peacebuilding Support Office, the UN Development Program, the Department of Political Affairs' Africa Bureau, and UN Women; and representatives from international think tanks working in the peace and security arena.

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Sustaining Peace and Prevention: Comparing Responses to Crises in Gambia and Burundi

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Prevention from a sustaining peace lens involves the continuous attention of the international community and regional partners from early warning to post-conflict recovery. This means analyzing, understanding, and utilizing existing mechanisms in society to build up positive resilience and drivers of peace. The role of regional and sub-regional organizations is particularly important in this regard.

At the start of this year, the UN was quick to commend the work of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in "preventing" the outbreak of immediate conflict in Gambia. However, to what extent is Gambia truly a case of prevention from a sustaining peace perspective? The strong message sent by the deployment of ECOWAS units on the Gambian border helped prevent violence, forcing the outgoing leader to concede power. While imminent conflict was prevented, this example brought into question whether the situation qualifies as the type of prevention envisioned under sustaining peace.

Prevention in Practice: Burundi and Gambia

In Gambia, after conceding victory of the presidential election to his opponent Adama Barrow in early December 2016, former President Yahya Jammeh contested the results and declared a state of emergency, thus creating a significant risk of eruption of violent protests and conflict in the country. The response of ECOWAS was swift and united; a first mission, composed of the heads of states of Liberia, Nigeria, and Ghana, was deployed within the following days to convey ECOWAS' support of a peaceful political transition in conformity with the results of the elections. A few days later, during the ECOWAS summit in Abuja, attended by eleven heads of state, ECOWAS declared its intent to take all measures necessary to enforce the results of the election; in other words, the only solution for Jammeh was to accept his defeat and cede power.

ECOWAS sustained its engagement throughout the entire transition period; this is visible in its press statements congratulating Barrow and statements made to the Gambian people indicating support for transfer of power. On the continental level, ten heads of state were involved in mediation efforts, through statements, sending envoys, or offering to host Jammeh. On the international level, the UN Security Council unanimously expressed “support to ECOWAS in its commitment to ensure, by political means first, the respect of the will of the people.”¹ At the same time, however, ECOWAS deployed a military force on the Senegalese border ready to intervene to remove Jammeh from power, if necessary.

This sustained, clear and united engagement was not present in the case of Burundi, where the absence of regional and international consensus is striking in contrast. President Nkurunziza’s refusal to respect the country’s constitutional term limit, thus “winning” the disputed 2015 presidential elections, did not garner the same unified response of disapproval. At the regional level, the East African Community’s (EAC) efforts to mediate the conflict have traditionally been rather weak given a lack of leverage and lack of unified will among its member state to intervene. The African Union’s (AU) plan to deploy 5,000 troops in Burundi in December 2015 quickly fell apart as Burundian authorities rejected the force.

At the international level, the UN Security Council consistently remained hesitant and divided in its response, further straining relations with national authorities. It passed a weak resolution in July 2016, authorizing a police component with a ceiling of 228 officers to monitor the security situation and support human rights monitoring, under the authority of the Secretary-General’s special advisor on conflict prevention, Jamal Benomar.² The resolution urged Burundi to cooperate fully with the police component, including unhindered access to detention facilities. In response, Burundi publicly rejected the resolution.³

Comparing Regional and Sub-regional Action for Prevention

The sustaining peace resolutions, adopted one year ago by the General Assembly and Security Council, emphasize the key role that regional and sub-regional organizations play in prevention and peacebuilding. Participants in the workshop built on this notion by identifying the successful elements employed by regional organizations as the main difference in responses to Gambia and Burundi.

In Burundi, regional influence has been lacking. The Inter-Burundian Dialogue, led by the EAC and facilitated by former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa, is struggling to achieve consensus with the government claiming there is no crisis in the country and focusing on the 2020 elections, with the opposition demanding a transitional government and the removal of Nkurunziza before that time.⁴ Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the country continues to deteriorate, with 390,000 refugees and civil society activists being forced to live in exile.

In Gambia, the region spoke with one voice, sending a strong message that the election results must be accepted. However, ECOWAS’ intervention in Gambia was not unique. The regional body has previously successfully intervened in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali and Cote d’Ivoire. This was, however, the first time an intervention took place prior to conflict breaking out. Gambia’s resilience was tested by

¹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2337 (19 January, 2017), S/RES/2337

² United Nations Security Council Resolution 2303 (2016), S/RES/2303

³ What’s in Blue, “Briefing on Burundi”, March 8, 2017, available at <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2017/03/briefing-on-burundi-2.php>

⁴ *ibid.*

parliamentary elections held on April 6, 2017, widely reported as peaceful but with low voter turnout. Moving forward, offering support to Gambia provides a unique opportunity for the international community to reflect on and apply sustaining peace in practice.

Unifying for Effective International Action

Participants also analyzed the different role and actions of the UN in both countries. While the Security Council provided clear and strong support to ECOWAS in its efforts in Gambia, workshop participants agreed that credit must be given to ECOWAS (rather than the UN) for its swift and sustained engagement in Gambia. Indeed, deficits in the UN role were highlighted in both cases: in Gambia, participants pointed to a gap in the understanding of prevention, and in Burundi, a lack of action.

In Gambia, with the electoral crisis averted, the level of international attention quickly and considerably decreased, including in the Security Council. This raises concerns about the commitment of the international community to provide sustained support, including financial support, even after an imminent crisis has been avoided. In Burundi, Nkurunziza stated at the end of 2016 that he might seek a fourth term in office in 2020 “if the Burundian people decide to change the Constitution according to their wishes.”⁵ This indicates a worrying disregard for the international community’s injunction and pleas for him to step down, but also offers an opportunity for renewed engagement with a firm stance and one voice—applying the unified front approach that succeeded in Gambia.

To achieve this, workshop participants called for reformed analysis, briefings and information at UN headquarters, including those delivered to the Security Council. Reports of the Secretary-General to date lack analysis from a sustaining peace perspective, with little examination of the drivers of conflicts or the grievances of local populations, and little consideration of endogenous local capacities for peace. There is a need to provide deeper analysis drawing on voices from different UN departments and more diverse stakeholders to influence the Security Council and ask more in-depth questions about the actors involved, causes, and political solutions to crises.

Political Legitimacy and Democratic Culture

ECOWAS is largely composed of resilient democratic states, which have experienced relatively smooth political transitions led by democratically elected opposition leaders. In West Africa, thirteen of ECOWAS’ fifteen member states have mandated term-limits enshrined in their constitutions. On the contrary, East Africa has seen fewer peaceful transitions and handovers of executive power, and a notable number of EAS heads of state are remaining in office through constitutional revisions or threat of the use of force. Denouncing Nkurunziza would ultimately risk discrediting their own legitimacy at the national level. This stark difference is important in understanding the absence of international consensus on the situation in Burundi.

This highlights a deeper issue for prevention efforts, in terms of unpacking democracy. Elections can be a preventive tool, but perhaps only with a common understanding of respect for democratic values and what this means in practice. In Burundi, political actors who believe they have won the election are using ruthless methods to eradicate the opposition in the name of electoral victory. This skewed understanding of democracy must be reformed in order to prevent further crises.

⁵ Ibid.

Box 1. A Successful Case of Prevention in Ghana, from a Sustaining Peace Perspective

Ghana's 2016 presidential elections were a successful case of prevention from a sustaining peace perspective. Continuous dialogue with all seven presidential candidates ahead of the elections helped to ensure a smooth and peaceful process. The National Electoral Commission briefed the candidates on all aspects of the electoral process and were assured of the Commission's "preparedness to deliver credible and transparent" elections. All seven candidates signed the "Accra Declaration" ahead of the elections, pledging their commitment to peaceful elections. The National Peace Council and the National House of Chiefs initiated this declaration, with support from the UN and AU.

These pre-electoral messages contributed to a smooth and peaceful presidential election; upon the outcome, incumbent President John Mahama immediately accepted the results and conceded defeat to Nana Akufo-Addo. This demonstrated the importance of encouraging dialogue among political actors to prevent violence. It is also important to note the active role played by the AU in these elections, including the deployment of a pre-election assessment in April 2016, the deployment of a joint High Level Political Mission with ECOWAS and UNOWAS in August, and the deployment of a Long-Term Observation mission in October which was present until the elections.

Prevention from a Sustaining Peace Perspective

From a sustaining peace perspective, prevention involves analyzing the resilience factors in a society and asking how these can be used to mitigate conflict and sustain peacefulness. In Burundi, participants highlighted the relative resilience of endogenous institutions, despite the ongoing political and security crisis. One example is the Women Network for Peace and Dialogue, a UN Women-supported network that has been operating since January 2015, with funding from the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The network includes 534 mediators working across all municipalities in Burundi to promote nonviolence and dialogue, and to counter rumors and fears with verifiable information, thus contributing to calming and preventing the doubt and panic widespread in Burundi since independent media outlets were shut down in May 2015.⁶ Groups like this have helped to avoid the "worst-case scenario" in Burundi to date. In addition, the work of the UN over many years of engagement in Burundi has contributed to resilient institutions, particularly on transitional justice, development, rule of law, DDR and SSR reforms through the mission and representatives of the Secretary-General.

In Gambia, resilience factors were also identified in women and youth organizations, through the conduct of civic education activities. For instance, the #GambiaHasDecided youth social movement was created to ensure respect of the people's voice through elections results, and played a crucial role in educating Gambians on their rights as voters and opening space for political debate. Most Gambian youth have only known their country under the rule of President Jammeh (22 years), and as such, many experts praise the role of the youth in this election and their call for change.

Both cases of the Gambia and Burundi demonstrate the importance of investing in elements of resilience as key to prevention. However, the current climate of tension and mistrust between the UN and Burundian authorities requires a new entry point for engagement. Participants suggested looking into strengthening democratic culture in East Africa by establishing a *Groupe de Sages*, or Panel of the

⁶ UN Women, "Women mediators promote peace in Burundi", January 25, 2016, available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/1/women-mediators-promote-peace-in-burundi#sthash.zSLL2YeQ.dpuf>

Wise, in the context of elections. Both the AU and ECOWAS have established such a group of experts to play a mediation and facilitation role, as outlined in the box below.⁷

Box 2: The AU Panel of the Wise

The *Group de Sages* or Panel of the Wise is the highest-visibility conflict prevention structure of the AU. It organizes fact-finding surveys in the field, presents policy options and seeks the conclusion of agreements. It is composed of "five highly respected African personalities who draw on their experience and moral persuasion to promote peace," and represent the five regions of Africa. Since its creation in 2007, the Group has undertaken several missions. In 2007, in the Central African Republic, it hosted talks between the rebels and then-president François Bozizé. In 2011, following controversial elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it negotiated a truce between President Joseph Kabila and opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, and provided assistance to stakeholders to draft and complete the Somalia End of Transition Roadmap. In order to achieve these objectives, the panel draws heavily on regional entities such as ECOWAS's regional Council of the Wise and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's Contact Mediation Group, the Council of Elders of the Common Market for Southern and Eastern Africa, and the Mediation Group of the Southern African Development Community.⁸

The 2015 report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the UN peacebuilding architecture review also emphasized the important role of the Peacebuilding Commission in early warning. The PBC can bring attention to early prevention priorities at the regional, sub-regional and country level, including through convening discussions with key stakeholders. However, questions remain about how best to achieve this. How can the PBC be strengthened to be more active and effective in early warning analysis? In Gambia, the population's expectations for President Barrow are high. To help support the new administration deliver services and meet expectations, in the interest of sustaining peace, the PBC can help maintain attention and support for the country. The Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea, as chair of the PBC, recently visited Gambia to meet with President Barrow and civil society groups. These gestures show promise in terms of maintaining attention and addressing the risk factors in the country.

As we move toward the report of the Secretary-General on sustaining peace, participants suggested enhancing engagement with regional actors, as they are taking a larger role in conflict resolution. Participants agreed that the concept of sustaining peace is about national ownership, which in some cases can be better facilitated by regional organizations than by the UN. Still, a centralized approach to sustaining peace within the UN and enhanced engagement (that is both inclusive and well-coordinated) with civil society and regional actors is needed. To promote smooth and peaceful transitions of power under the sustaining peace concept, elections can be better connected to prevention, through new and renewed thinking on the role of elections and democratic institutions and culture.

⁷ ACCORD, *The African Union Panel of the Wise: Strengthening Relations with Similar Regional Mechanisms* (South Africa: ACCORD, 2013).

⁸ Paul Nantulya, "Le Groupe des Sages de l'Union Africaine et la prévention des conflits", June 8, 2016, *Centre d'études Stratégiques de l'Afrique*, available at <http://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/le-groupe-des-sages-de-lunion-africaine-et-la-prevention-des-conflits/>