



POLICY BRIEF

Conflict Prevention What's in it for the AU?

Gustavo de Carvalho

The African Union (AU) has developed several conflict prevention initiatives since its inception in 2002. Now, with the increased expectation for more effective responses to conflicts, the AU must reflect on its different roles and improve its ability to implement policy frameworks with the goal of preventing conflicts and sustaining peace. This brief assesses the role of the AU in conflict prevention initiatives and shares some potential entry points for increased effectiveness.

Key points

- ▶ **Defining success:** The AU's conflict prevention activities and the definition of successful conflict prevention must be better understood.
- ▶ **Funding:** Predictable and increased AU funding should enable more consistent approaches to prevention.
- ▶ **Realistic planning:** The AU can strengthen its efficiency by restructuring certain working methods and reinforcing synergies.
- ▶ **Roles and responsibilities:** Divisions and departments of the African Union Commission (AUC) should work together, enhancing the role of inter-departmental working groups in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction and development.
- ▶ **Reflection on AU engagements:** The AU must reflect on engagements on structural prevention, beyond developing vulnerability assessments, particularly when conflict prevention links to governance, development and human rights.
- ▶ **Operationalising subsidiarity and complementarity:** The AU must provide guidance and frameworks for coordinating conflict prevention efforts with Regional Economic Communities, Regional Mechanisms and civil society organisations.

'People are paying too high a price and you, the member states, are paying too high a price. We need a whole new approach.'¹ This quote, from United Nations (UN) Secretary General António Guterres, reconfirms that the international community needs to do much more to prevent conflicts and sustain peace.

Recently, 'conflict prevention' has become a catchphrase often repeated in political speeches² on conflict management'. Yet there is no satisfactory clarification about what this means.³ There is still uncertainty regarding the definition of successful conflict prevention, and what works in this field.⁴ Globally, the idea of conflict prevention is part of a powerful rhetoric, but weak in practice.

Africa has been active in exploring the effectiveness of conflict prevention initiatives, particularly the conflict prevention role played by regional actors

This is particularly relevant to conflict prevention in Africa. Africa hosts the largest number of countries in a situation of fragility.⁵ With an increasing number of conflicts globally since 2010,⁶ Africa has been active in exploring the effectiveness of conflict prevention initiatives, particularly in relation to the conflict prevention role played by regional and sub-regional actors, including the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs).

This policy brief provides an overview of the AU's current and expected roles regarding conflict prevention, and recommends possible entry points for strengthening these roles.

Overview of African Union approaches to conflict prevention

The AU's approach to conflict prevention can be categorised into operational and structural prevention.

Operational prevention relates to *actions designed to address the proximate or immediate causes of conflicts, normally taken during the escalation phase of a given conflict, where proximate, dynamic factors come into play.*⁷

Structural prevention aims to reduce the likelihood of conflict and violence with positive incentives for societies that strengthen their resilience and provide access to political, economic, social and cultural opportunities. Structural issues often relate to issues such as political inclusivity, the development of justice systems, public administration, governance, and economic development.

Table 1 provides examples of responses that target operational and structural aspects of prevention:

Table 1: Examples of conflict prevention approaches

Operational	Structural
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mediation, negotiation, signing peace agreements• Good offices and dispatch of envoys• Implementation of sanctions• Use (threat) of military intervention• Electoral observation• Deployment of peace support operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trust-building initiatives among different groups (ethnic and nationalities)• Public participation in developing public policy• Developing strong, stable public institutions at local, national and regional level• Using countries' or societies' law and order processes and institutions• Good governance, rule of law, democracy and human rights• Using countries' or societies' formal and non-formal mechanisms for conflict resolution, such as peace councils and traditional or religious platforms• Transitional justice and reconciliation

Operational approaches to conflict prevention are often developed to address an ongoing or imminent escalation of violence, whereas the structural approach takes a longer-term view. Currently, the AU's focus is on conflict prevention through initiatives such as diplomacy efforts and mediation. Both the AU and RECs have given a great deal of attention to developing early warning systems.

Most AU mechanisms were developed as responses to given situations or identified needs, and evolved to become institutionalised. As a result, most AU conflict prevention initiatives still focus on short-term, programmatic and reactive approaches. To clarify its longer-term approaches to prevention, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) has increasingly called for the AU commission to clarify its roles in structural issues that can lead to conflicts. It has requested that AU conflict prevention approaches include a *structural dimension to address the root causes of conflicts*.⁸ This request assumes that conflict and violence develop in places where structural issues may contribute to political instability and conflict.

African Union conflict prevention structures, plans and policy frameworks

The creation of the AU in 2002 and the subsequent Protocol that created the PSC in 2003⁹ produced a range of tools that may be used within the framework of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to prevent conflicts. APSA was created with the expectation that it would provide conflict management assistance, particularly by supporting ongoing peace processes or deploying peace support operations.¹⁰

The following APSA pillars were created to empower the continent by highlighting its strengths and making the organisation more nimble, mobile and effective:

- Peace and Security Council
- Panel of the Wise
- Continental Early Warning System
- African Standby Force
- African Peace Fund

Each pillar has an existing or potential role in preventing conflicts. While their increasing maturity gives the organisation a wider range of tools, these need to be better tailored to responding to emerging challenges. The AU Summit in January 2017, for instance, stressed that the PSC needed to focus more on conflict prevention, early warning and early response to prevent full-blown conflicts in the continent.¹¹

The AU Agenda 2063 acknowledges that conflict and violence are a major threat to development and cannot be disassociated from conflict prevention

A range of planning documents, visions, frameworks and roadmaps developed by the AU support the priority of conflict prevention (in this regard, conflict prevention is linked to both armed conflicts and broader ideas of preventing violence, violent extremism and even mass atrocities). The AU Agenda 2063 acknowledges that conflict and violence are a major threat to development.¹² Agenda 2063 brings to its understanding of the *Africa we Want*¹³ the idea that development cannot be disassociated from conflict prevention. This idea is supported by the declaration to silencing the guns in Africa by 2020.

In late 2015, the AU developed its APSA roadmap for 2016 to 2020,¹⁴ one of several policy documents to assist with implementing its goals, and an example of a more direct link between development and conflict prevention. It bases some of its assumptions on the fact that conflict prevention involves *simultaneously, a direct and operational focus of intervening before violence occurs as well as a systematic, strategic focus of addressing the root, proximate, and structural causes of conflict*.¹⁵

A new Master Roadmap

In January 2017, the AU summit endorsed another policy document providing specific mechanisms for conflict prevention: the AU Master Roadmap on Practical Steps for Silencing the Guns by 2020.¹⁶ The Master Roadmap is based on the understanding that the AU must develop initiatives that support the continent in achieving its Agenda 2063 goals.

January
2017

THE AU MASTER ROADMAP
ON PRACTICAL STEPS
FOR SILENCING THE GUNS
BY 2020 WAS ENDORSED
AT THE AU SUMMIT

The Master Roadmap states the importance of developing practical outputs in relation to structural prevention, including infrastructure for peace at member states level and encouraging member states to use structural vulnerability assessments (SVAs). However, the AU's role in developing and implementing this infrastructure, and addressing vulnerability points raised by member states, is uncertain.

The Master Roadmap explores clarifying linkages between early warning and early responses, as early warning systems must be accompanied by the institution's capacity to respond effectively. These steps seem clear when dealing with operational responses, ensuring that the AU has mechanisms to respond quickly to an imminent crisis. However, there is still uncertainty when dealing with early response mechanisms related to structural approaches, especially when identifying longer-term indicators and less reactive strategies for its interventions.

While operational responses are better addressed, the AU continues highlighting the importance of dealing with structural issues related to conflict prevention. However, it requires further understanding of its roles and responsibilities, and how to strengthen these, in relation to structural prevention. In 2015, the AU endorsed its Structural Conflict Prevention Framework, which described the Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework (CSCPF) and the development of country structural vulnerability assessments (CSVAs).¹⁷

While the AU's roadmaps and plans provide clarity in dealing with operational approaches, they do not give practical steps for effective structural conflict prevention

While the Master Roadmap encourages member states to use CSVAs, there is limited acceptance from member states in voluntarily using those tools. Due to sensitivity to the AU potentially interfering in internal affairs, and the voluntary nature of the CSVAs, no country has implemented them yet.

More importantly, the practical responses required from the AU and the international community once these tools are developed are little understood.

While there are no major contradictions between the APSA roadmap and the Master Roadmap, they are still seen as providing different directions. The Master Roadmap appears to have prominence, but its use and implementation are still to be seen.

While the AU's roadmaps, frameworks and plans provide clarity when dealing with operational approaches, they do not give practical steps for effective structural conflict prevention. The disjointed approach between the roadmaps and long-term vision is yet to be addressed. As the roadmaps are designed for three to four years, they have a limited temporal scope. The use of Agenda 2063 for guidance must therefore be followed by a long-term strategy that



THE MASTER ROADMAP
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LINKAGES BETWEEN
EARLY WARNING AND
EARLY RESPONSES

enables the AU and member states to place their responses within a long-term perspective.

Opportunities for the African Union

Improve coordination among departments and divisions

The AU must address its ability to coordinate the initiatives within, and roles played by, its different departments and divisions.

With regard to APSA, both the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Peace and Security Department (PSD) play an important role in conflict prevention.

The divisions within the PSD have also developed a range of initiatives, from mediation processes to engaging with early warning mechanisms and paying increasing attention to structural prevention. The PSD's Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division (CPEWD) is often considered to be at the forefront of the AU's approaches to conflict prevention. However, the Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Division (CMPCRD) also plays a role, and there is some confusion about each division's roles and responsibilities. Other PSD divisions, like the Peace and Security Council Secretariat and Peace Support Operations Division, are also involved.

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The role of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) within the CPEWD is critical, as it provides a mechanism for collecting, analysing and sending information to the right decision-making bodies. It is an important coordination mechanism among divisions and departments within the AUC, and a central point for analysing needs and responses. To be more effective, the division needs support in the form of staffing, capacity, and clarity of roles and responsibilities.

As the AU Commission reflects on restructuring and reforms, it can provide an understanding of how divisions can work together, and the synergies between them. For instance, there is already collaboration between CPEWD and the DPA on electoral monitoring issues. This cooperation could be further institutionalised.

Link early warning approaches to longer-term responses

Linking early warning approaches to longer-term responses is a process that needs to be further developed. In 2015, the AU Structural Conflict Prevention Framework was developed¹⁸ to assist the AU in this regard. The framework has potential to increase engagements on structural prevention, but has not been implemented.

2015

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CONFLICT PREVENTION
FRAMEWORK WAS
DEVELOPED TO ASSIST THE
AU WITH LINKING EARLY
WARNING APPROACHES TO
LONGER-TERM RESPONSES

The framework also gives ideas on how to bridge certain organisational gaps, such as by developing the Interdepartmental Task Force on Conflict Prevention, but does not state how to implement these. It is not enough to state the need to link early warning to early responses. The consistency of early responses, responsibilities for these, and how they would be shared when so many parties are involved, must be clarified.

Identify potential mechanisms and approaches

The Master Roadmap is an interesting way to ensure the AU creates both policies and mechanisms for demonstrating and monitoring how approaches to prevention are effective and achievable. In addition to developing timelines, activities and indicators of progress, it is important to have stronger mechanisms for identifying and monitoring success in the short and long term. The African Peer Review Mechanism, if empowered, could be such a mechanism by becoming more involved in supporting structural prevention in the continent.

If strengthened, PCRD could bring together mediation, peacebuilding and development, and improve interaction between AU departments

The African Governance Architecture (AGA) could also be used to deal with structural prevention issues, as governance is often critical to addressing root causes of conflicts. Conflict prevention, particularly structural prevention, is increasingly seen through its potential linkages to notions of governance (through the AGA), post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD), and development at large. The assumption is that the AU would be more effective in handling longer-term trends and challenges related to conflicts by dealing with their root causes. This includes dealing with past conflict situations, and preventing both the emergence and re-emergence of conflicts.

This approach can help identify the right organisational entry points for collaboration, including the AGA, PCRD and other existing or potential mechanisms. But even with developments like the Interdepartmental Task-Force on Conflict Prevention, set up in 2014,¹⁹ many coordination structures require further attention if they are to be more effective at implementation.

The important role of post-conflict reconstruction and development

AU PCRD approaches could be an important entry point for more integrated AU conflict prevention. If strengthened, PCRD could bring together mediation, peacebuilding and development, improve interaction between departments, and foster more comprehensive approaches. Also, by potentially dealing with the root causes of conflicts that affect both PCRD and structural conflict prevention responses, it could be an important point of collaboration between the CMPCRD and CPEWD.

2014

THE INTERDEPARTMENTAL
TASK-FORCE ON CONFLICT
PREVENTION WAS SET UP

The AU has an enormous opportunity to increase the coordination and efficiency of responses, as both the Mediation Support Unit of the AU and the PCRD sit within the CMPCRD.

For structural and operational conflict prevention to be more effective, all parties must understand their roles as well as how they can practically implement initiatives. As not all parties can develop these initiatives, there must be an understanding of these limitations so institutions and policy makers have realistic options for linking conflict prevention to broader societal challenges.

Even in more optimistic scenarios, it is unlikely the AU will have the resources to conduct a wide range of conflict prevention initiatives

Another challenge for the AU is that the international community still places a great emphasis on its reactive initiatives. There is an imbalance between the funding of peace support operations and prevention. The creation of mechanisms like the African Standby Force and the incremental experience of the organisation in deploying peace support operations show the important role of reactive conflict management tools in conflict prevention, but these come at a high cost to both the AU and the UN. The AU has the added challenge of unpredictable funding and a heavy dependency on external donors.

The need for predictable funding

The issue of sustainable funding must be addressed. Since adopting Kaberuka's plan for a revamped African Peace Fund in 2016, there have been some interesting potential approaches to conflict prevention. The Window on Mediation and Preventive Diplomacy, if implemented, would enable the AU to provide greater flexibility in facilitating and establishing conflict prevention initiatives, including mediation, peace processes, and dispatching envoys.

Even in more optimistic scenarios, it is unlikely the AU will have the resources to conduct a wide range of conflict prevention initiatives. However, it is important to understand that without sustained, predictable and prioritised funding (even if limited), conflict prevention will be relevant only at a policy level.

Conclusion

2017 is an important year for the AU, with a new chairperson, and several policy processes to be implemented. There is now an opportunity for the AU to adjust its structure so it is better able to prevent conflicts and sustain peace.

While roadmaps, plans and policy frameworks provide useful direction and boundaries, there must also be a critical assessment of the AU's capacity



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to respond to challenges by identifying and addressing shortfalls in its own structures and coordination mechanisms, and developing a specific resource mobilisation strategy. These, together with clarity on the types of prevention initiatives the AU can and will engage in, can contribute to achieving the goals of Africa Agenda 2063.

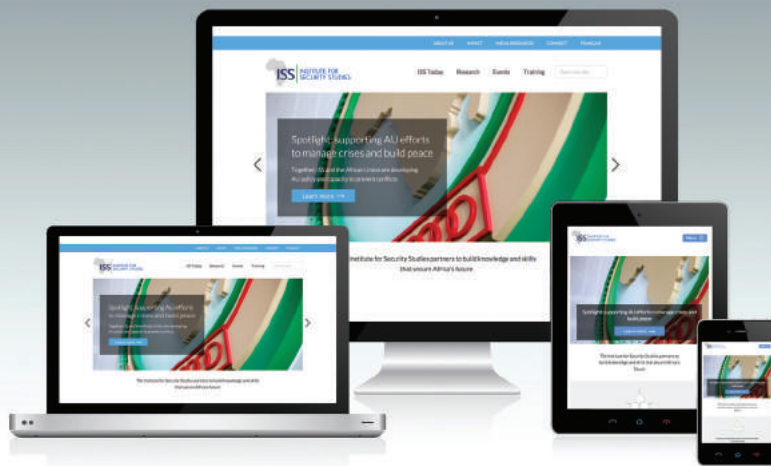
The AU can also reflect on how to make its structure more effective in dealing with conflict prevention, and identify ways to generate further synergy within and between departments. It can explore synergies with the African Peer Review Mechanism and broader monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and identify how to engage with structural prevention initiatives, such as implementing the CSVA, and determining the greater role for PCRD in structural prevention.

Notes

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