Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict

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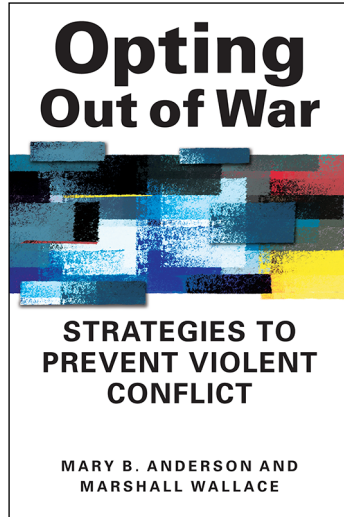
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Preventing
Violent Conflict

Why is the prevention of violent conflict so difficult? International actors agree that prevention is preferable to and less expensive than humanitarian assistance or postconflict reconstruction. Donor countries have adopted broad policies and initiated funding and programming mechanisms to support prevention. Attention is given to early warning systems designed to alert diplomats and aid-providers to impending conflicts so that they can act in timely, preventive ways. Still, conflicts occur.

This is particularly puzzling because war is, oddly, an unnatural institution. It requires organization, money, charisma, and sacrifice. In the twenty-first century, active warfare is not now, if it ever were, the normal state of affairs. Statistically, more countries do not engage in war than do, and where war occurs, more people do not actively participate than do. War is in this sense a fragile undertaking; most people, including many in the highest echelons of military defense forces, want and work to avoid it.

Nonetheless, war continues to be common, enduring, and persistent. There are few locations and few individuals who are not somehow affected by it. Defense budgets are sizable and supported by the taxes citizens pay. The news heard and read around the globe carries regular stories of war-related injuries, destruction, and death. There seems to be a threat of war somewhere in the world at all times. It appears that people and societies slip into warfare almost without thought if they feel threatened by others. Although people want to avoid war, most accept that it is natural and necessary to fight for

certain values. Once war begins, ending it requires intense and long-term efforts of many actors.

If most people want to avoid war and its costs are so high, why is it also common? If war requires an unnatural effort, why does preventing violent conflict remain elusive? Perhaps part of the reason can be found in the approaches taken by most international conflict prevention efforts. Largely, these focus in four areas.[1] Some emphasize early warning as essential for initiating preventive activity. Some focus on dispute resolution tools such as mediation, trust-building processes, or diplomacy. Some take an educational or training approach, with the expectation that alternative conflict resolution skills and techniques or new attitudes can enable leaders and communities to resolve differences without resorting to violence. Finally, some focus on changing structures that divide people and building the institutions of statehood (good governance, strong judiciaries, well-trained and disciplined police, secure economies), with the expectation that where such institutions exist, conflict is less likely to occur compared to places where they are missing or weak. Even as these approaches differ, they often involve bringing something new to conflict-prone environments to enable people in these places to avert violence.[2]

Largely missing, however, from many (possibly most) international efforts to prevent conflict, is acknowledgment that systems and skills to prevent overt violence between groups already exist in every society.[3] In fact, violence is regularly prevented even in conflict-prone areas. Local people have structures and connections that they use to maintain peace day by day in their own space. Communities who want to avoid violence often find ways to do so—at least for a time.

If war breaks out and widespread violence occurs, this of course indicates that existing prevention systems were not strong enough. Worse, war itself causes many preexisting connections to fail. As a result, most observers—both insiders and outsiders—conclude that new systems need to be imagined and created to enable a warring society to become peaceful.

This conclusion is undoubtedly true, but it may be less true than we imagine. A closer examination of areas of conflict reveals that, in the midst of war, some communities—sometimes quite sizable and significant—develop strategies by which to exempt themselves from participation in surrounding violence. In this sense, some communi-

ties, despite prevailing pressures and often without outside help, successfully prevent conflict.[4]

The Value of Community-Based Conflict Prevention: Relevant Lessons for Larger Efforts?

In this book we approach the issue of conflict prevention from the perspective of such communities that in their own settings succeeded in preventing violence. The book tells the stories of thirteen communities of people—living in circumstances where all the forces and incentives that surrounded them seemingly should have pushed them into conflict—who somehow, as a group, decided not to fight and instead developed strategies for exempting themselves from war. In eleven of the stories the communities literally maintained a nonwar stance in the midst of surrounding civil war.[5] In the other two, an entire nation, where all the early warning indicators of impending conflict were high, managed repeatedly to step back from the brink. All these communities managed to exempt themselves from participation in the wars that others around them willingly and unwillingly were drawn into.

The locations of these thirteen communities are not unique. Around the world wherever conflict occurs, we have heard stories of similar groups. These thirteen provide examples of strategies and processes for avoiding participation in conflict that very likely exist more often and in more warring areas than we usually recognize.

The stories are interesting and impressive in and of themselves. But beyond that, by describing, comparing, and analyzing these thirteen examples, we intend to add to and broaden the discussion of how conflict prevention can work in other locations. How have these communities succeeded in opting out of war? Do their strategies hold any relevant lessons for broader peacemaking efforts undertaken by international actors? These are the questions that we explore.

Where This Evidence Comes From

Some years ago, as they visited numerous warring societies to work with aid-providers, two international humanitarian workers began to hear of communities in conflict areas that had somehow managed to avoid participation in war.[6] These communities were described not as

pacifists or antiwar activists but as normal cities, villages, or regions that had managed to not take part in war and had survived without suffering the extensive damage experienced by most surrounding communities. Clearly, this was intriguing.

Prompted by these stories, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA)[7] initiated a project called Steps Toward Conflict Prevention (STEPS). From 2002 to 2006, CDA organized a process, generously supported by several donor countries (named in the preface to this book), through which observers visited the nonwar communities, talked with and heard from many people about what had happened, how, and why, and wrote these stories into case studies. In most cases, a two-person team, one a local person with broad access across the community and one an international visitor who had some background in conflict prevention, made the visit together. The stories vary in length and depth, partly reflecting the amount of time the teams were able to spend with the communities. However, each provides perspectives and insights that, cumulatively across contexts, add up to a surprising body of evidence.

The Experience

These thirteen case studies of nonwar communities will be quoted and referenced extensively. Five of them are more fully covered in Part 2 of this book in order to illustrate, in some detail, the ways in which the communities made collective choices and developed common strategies for staying out of conflict. These are:

- Afghanistan, where the Jaghori district in Ghazni province "surrendered" to the Taliban rather than fight against it, managing not only to not succumb to the Taliban's agenda but also to maintain its own way of life and values.
- Bosnia, where Tuzla managed to maintain its multiethnicity despite the agenda promoted by political and military leaders intent on establishing ethnically exclusive states in the former Yugoslavia.
- Colombia, where three indigenous communities developed strategies to assert themselves as "peace villages" and avoided conscription and involvement in the conflict between government, paramilitary, and rebel armed groups.

- Mozambique, where a region of Gaza province, under the protection of the ancestral spirit of Mungoi (a deceased former chief), was able to maintain roads, schools, and agricultural production even as surrounding areas were looted and destroyed.
- Rwanda, where the Muslim community, comprising both Hutus and Tutsis, did not participate in the genocide that engulfed the country in 1994 and instead managed to rescue many who would have been victims.

Two of these five case studies come from Africa, and one each comes from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The conflicts they report on range from a hundred days (Rwanda) to four decades (Colombia) in length. They include diverse geographical areas, ranging from villages (Colombia) to districts (Mozambique and Afghanistan) to a dispersed population (Rwanda) to a sizable industrial city (Bosnia). The driving forces behind their avoidance of war range from religious belief (Rwanda), to an injunction from an ancestral spirit (Mozambique), to the political leadership of an elected mayor (Tuzla), to encouragement from outside human rights and church groups (Colombia), to the savvy calculations of a traditional council (Afghanistan). These five cases have been chosen for fuller inclusion in Part 2 because they represent the variety and complexity of the experiences of all thirteen of the nonwar communities and, at the same time, illustrate the patterns and common approaches discussed in Part 1.

The other eight cases provide similar evidence of the differences and commonalities of these nonwar communities,[8] as the following brief overviews make apparent.

Fiji and Burkina Faso

These two countries (as compared to the preceding examples, which represent subgroups within a country) have repeatedly come to the brink of war but, to date, have avoided full-scale fighting. In the case of Fiji, there were several coups d'état and instances of significant intergroup violence. However, the Fiji experience also contained a strong narrative about consistent "connectors" that kept the Indo-Fijians and the indigenous Fijians interlinked. In Burkina Faso, also a country that has experienced a coup d'état, a fascinating range of na-

tional strategies was developed to encourage a shared identity and commitment to living without intergroup violence. The experiences of these two countries provide a counterbalance for the smaller-scale cases in that they challenge any analysis that oversimplifies the decision to step away from war. They make abundantly clear that the ability to stay out of war is not an issue of scale; rather it is, indeed as the other cases also show, the result of conscious, collective decisions and choices.

India

In 1992, in India's northeastern state of Manipur, violent clashes broke out between two tribal groups, the Nagas and the Kukis. The clashes left an estimated 1,000 people dead and as many as 130,000 displaced and, as a result, ethnically mixed villages, once common in Manipur, almost ceased to exist. Even as the violence flared, "some places managed to retain a modicum of peace and harmony." They adopted varying strategies and approaches that worked to prevent armed groups from conquering or coercing them into joining the conflict.

Kosovo

The motivations and actions of groups within four communities in Kosovo provide insights into their collective opting out of participation in the 1999 conflict that are, in this case, both revealing and puzzling. One community, for example, was known to have aligned itself, and provided support to, one side of the conflict. Still, according to their own accounts, people in these villages did not engage in the war and, according to the accounts of others, found effective ways of avoiding the destruction that came to many surrounding areas that were drawn into the war. These villagers defined themselves as people who did not participate in the ethnic divisions of the war.

Nigeria

The Niger Delta region is known worldwide for the violence of the people's reactions toward international oil companies that operate there and toward their national government. The Ukwa area, where about 100,000 people live in twenty-three villages, is described as

home to people who "in the midst of this madness . . . decided to keep the peace." Throughout the area, many people described a combination of factors that shaped their collective community choices to refuse to fight either oil companies or government. They claimed their stance was "only natural" and based in their history and training, though they acknowledged that their choices differed strikingly from those of neighboring communities and regions.

Philippines

Armed struggle in Mindanao has sometimes been attributed to tensions between Christians and Muslims or between tribal groupings (sometimes overlapping with religious affiliation); in other analyses, it has been traced to postcolonial land allocation and other economic disparities. In this context, numerous communities have been involved in the war but some, having previously engaged in or experienced violence, rejected further involvement and established themselves as zones or areas of peace. Often prompted or supported by Philippine and international nongovernmental organizations, they established intercommunal forums for discussion and planning and, in many instances, engaged commanders of opposing armed groups to join them in their ceremonies to exempt themselves from the war. As in Colombia, these Mindanao communities linked economic progress with avoidance of future violence and emphasized development as the basis of their strategies for nonengagement.

Sierra Leone

The village of Lawana, in the Moyamba district of Sierra Leone, was founded by a powerful warrior who "only wanted to protect and defend his village rather than attack and suppress others." This village and its chief developed strategies to avoid invasion or attack, and even to prevent the recruitment of its young men into the fighting forces, throughout the civil war between the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) that lasted from 1991 until 2002. Citing its history as one that prevented it from ever being invaded, these villagers welcomed anyone who sought refuge, hosting as many as 500 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in their homes and sharing their farmland so these strangers could support themselves. But even as they welcomed all strangers and gave them

support, the Lawana villagers maintained secret codes for communication and a variety of strategies for escape, hiding, and engaging with armed groups—all in order to avoid being forced to take part in a conflict that engulfed most other surrounding villages.

Sri Lanka

Madhu, a 400-year-old shrine carved out of the dense forest in northern Sri Lanka, has attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all parts of Sri Lanka and from all faiths and ethnic groups over many years. During the long-lasting war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers, this place became recognized as a sanctuary and safe space for all who wanted to escape the destruction and violence of the conflict. Working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose mission was to provide safe locations for displaced people inside Sri Lanka in order to curtail vast refugee movements to India, the bishop of Madhu negotiated with both the government and the Tamil leadership to guarantee their respect for the neutrality of the sanctuary and its security from armed groups.

* * *

These brief overviews and the five fuller cases in Part 2 do more than illustrate complexity, variety, and commonalities. They also show differences in outcomes. None of the stories is simple and straightforward. Some communities were more and some were less successful in providing security for their members. Some came closer to capitulation with armed groups while others maintained stronger separation. Solidarity varied and in some cases wavered. All these communities succeeded sometimes and failed at other times. The choices they made were deeply local, based on their best analysis of their circumstances at the time.

It is important to note here that the strategies of nine of the thirteen communities share a set of common elements that constitute the core of the chapters in Part 1. Another four of the communities shared some of these common features but were weak in others. As the stories unfold, these variations will become clear.

Nonetheless, the overarching lesson of these stories is one of existing capacities. In areas where war was being waged, these com-

munities had the capacities to opt out of the conflict and to develop strategies by which they survived without joining sides. Taken together, their stories provide useful insights into the capacities needed to prevent conflict. They show that such capacities exist— even in warring areas—far more often than is usually recognized or acknowledged.

How This Book Is Organized

The evidence from all the cases is presented in Part 1 under the topics that emerged as the most important in determining how successful the communities were in preventing involvement in conflict. Chapter 2 looks at three steps each community took to establish itself as exempt from engaging in the conflict it faced. Chapter 3 discusses the importance of governance and of normalcy for maintaining community cohesion over the long term. Setting itself apart from war was not, as the evidence shows, a onetime decision by a community, but rather required daily, constant reinvigoration. Chapter 4 describes the systems and processes of nonwar governance by considering the roles of leadership and of communication. It discusses how leadership worked both to lead and to reflect popular will, ensuring that the decisions and choices made included everyone, reflected a broad consensus, and reinforced community cohesion. Chapter 5 then describes how these nonwar communities interacted with armed groups, reaching out to them but refusing to submit to them. Chapter 6 reviews the roles of international actors in each of the locations, examining how these roles both harmed and helped the processes of conflict prevention. Chapter 7 concludes Part 1 with a summary and consolidation of these experiences that shows how the approaches of these communities can be combined into a complete nonwar strategy.

    Part 2, as mentioned, provides a closer and fuller look at five of the nonwar communities on whose experience Part 1 is based. Part 3 then concludes the book with a chapter that gathers the learning and applies it more generally to other times and places. We address here the basic questions of the book: What is the relevance of the experiences of these nonwar communities to the larger international conflict prevention community? What may be learned and adapted from these examples that will enable us to become more effective and more constructive in preventing conflicts in the future?

Hypotheses About How
These Communities Avoided War

Although we are always mindful that implicit hypotheses can mis-shape findings when observers look for what they expect to find, the individuals involved in gathering the stories of these communities did discuss and imagine some of the factors that might allow these communities to stay out of war. Some suggested that the explanation would lie in the fact that the communities were marginal to the conflict. Either they were remote and in areas where there was little or no military activity, or they were not strategically important to the cause of the war. Some imagined that these communities would have unusually visionary and charismatic leaders who led them to develop unfamiliar strategies and techniques. Others imagined that these communities had been able to "stay below the radar" and avoid attention—partly because they were not strategically important but also because they marginalized themselves.

None of these ideas proved true. In fact, as the evidence will show, each of these notions was strikingly wrong. These communities were located in the midst of fighting and had strategic importance; all of the leadership structures were in place before the conflict and bore strong similarities to those of surrounding communities; and far from hiding, these communities took steps to engage with armies and to interact with them on their own terms rather than those of the war. The surprises were many and instructive.

Terminology Going Forward

This book is about communities who develop strategies to avoid engaging in violent conflict. These groups, as all groups everywhere, are not exempt from differences that divide them within and from others, and they clearly experience and cope with significant disagreements. That is, they do not try to avoid all conflict, because they recognize that differences are inevitable and that struggles can be productive. As we describe the strategies that these groups developed, it should be remembered that the term "conflict prevention" refers to their strategies for avoiding *violent* conflict—not all conflict.

It should also be noted that these thirteen communities were neither pacifists nor antiwar activists. All would fight if they felt a war

were justified, and many had fought in other wars. In these cases, they simply calculated that the present war made no sense to them. Therefore, it was not a conflict in which they would participate. Most did not try to end the war or to convince others not to join. They did not try to confront fighters about their ideologies or purposes. They set out their own terms for nonengagement and, largely, managed to maintain these terms.

To reflect the pragmatism and nonideological approach of their strategies, we have chosen to use the term "nonwar communities" to describe these groups. They are not, universally, "peace communities," nor even "zones of peace"—terms used elsewhere. They are groups of people who organized themselves to create and maintain their collective nonwar ways of living as a community.

Conflict Prevention or Avoidance?

The nonwar communities described in this book did not prevent all intergroup violence in their countries. To what extent can they then be said to demonstrate strategies for preventing violent conflict? Would it not be more accurate to say that our focus here is on conflict avoidance rather than prevention?

If our interest were only in how people avoided fighting, we would have both a larger—and less instructive—body of experience. Included would be individuals and groups who flee fighting and become refugees or displaced persons. Groups who are remote or isolated geographically or who make themselves unimportant to the purposes of the war, as suggested in our review of implicit hypotheses earlier, would also be discussed. Every neighborhood that maintained friendships across warring lines, every family that lived its commitment to peace, would qualify for analysis. Even the vast number of individuals who, even though war surrounds them, are not themselves active, would qualify. As already noted, even in war, most people do not take an active part. However, even if they do not become active and even if they object to war, most people are not part of an organized, preexisting community that, as a community, decides it will remain separate from war.

The communities described in this book are included here precisely because they acted, with intentionality and planning, to set themselves apart from the agendas of a war, without, at the same time, acting as peace or antiwar activists. They did not move to avoid

conflict nor attempt to make themselves irrelevant. They were not hidden from view by remoteness or because of their insignificance in number. A wide number of people, including armed groups, knew about these communities and brought them to our attention because they—those who did participate in war—perceived that these communities had accomplished something special in their nonengagement. They are interesting precisely because they represent preexisting communities who collectively developed strategies for nonparticipation in war when all the pressures and incentives around them seemingly should have pushed them, like most others, to become involved in the conflict.

Though the alternate route they chose was not war prevention, this route does constitute significant prevention of violent conflict. The communities, themselves, did not claim to be models of universal applicability, and we do not make this claim for them. But what we do see in these stories is a strong, coherent body of experience that might provide useful and practical insights for local and international actors who seek to improve the outcomes of current conflict prevention efforts. In this sense, these cases provide grounded evidence of how, in a range of locations and wars, certain communities have successfully engaged in conflict prevention.

The stories show that prevention of violent conflict is doable. Normal people living normal lives have the option to say no to war. Normal leaders in systems that already exist can respond to and support their people in nonengagement. This kind of conflict prevention does not require special training, new leadership, or special funding. It occurs, repeatedly and around the world in different types of conflict, and we can learn from it. This is the premise of our book.

Notes

1. A useful discussion of the range of theories and approaches embedded in the concept of conflict prevention (and its evolution) is found in Lund, "Conflict Prevention."

2. Over the past decade, many of the international policy documents and conflict-related projects conducted with international funding have reflected these approaches. See, for example, Debiel and Fischer, "Crisis Prevention and Conflict Management by the European Union," which traces the development of the European Union's guidelines on crisis prevention. See

also *The DAC Guidelines on Helping Prevent Violent Conflict,* which emphasizes, with some variations, the importance of anticipating the causes of conflict and addressing them by training, economic development, support of good governance, and to some extent mediation. As the OECD Development Advisory Committee (DAC) document says: "Within the overall efforts by the international community to promote peace-building and conflict prevention, development assistance programmes will find their most important role in promoting the democratic stability of societies." Similar approaches can be found in the policy documents of each individual donor country as well. Some international non-governmental organizations also add engagement with local civil society groups to support their analysis of their contexts and development of conflict prevention efforts. Search for Common Ground (Washington, DC) and Interpeace (Geneva, Switzerland) are just two examples of the many organizations that work with local leaders to promote mediation, institution-building, and attitude change.

3. Most international actors express their commitment to work with, and support, local ownership of peacebuilding activities, but many assume that such support involves training people in new attitudes or skills that they do not yet have. There are notable exceptions to this general approach, which can be found in the individual projects of many nongovernmental organizations. The literature on local success stories is also vast, with most of it focused on peacebuilding rather than on conflict prevention. However, because the lines between these endeavors are often blurred, these stories are important in their recognition of indigenous capacities. See, for example, Galama and van Tongeren, *Towards Better Peacebuilding Practice;* and van Tongeren et al., *People Building Peace II.*

4. There are definite trends under way to look for examples such as these. In the more recent conflict assessment tools of donor agencies, note is taken of existing capacities (among actors and in terms of institutions and processes that exist). See, for example, Goodhand, Vaux, and Walker, *Strategic Conflict Assessment.* Also, the Positive Deviance Initiative (Freidman Center, Tufts University) collects evidence "based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having the same resources in facing similar or worse circumstances" (quoted from www.positivedeviance.org).

5. Some argue that once violence begins in an area, "conflict prevention" is not the right descriptive terminology (see Lund, "Conflict Prevention"). We recognize that we are stretching the concept, but we do so intentionally because of the importance of recognizing the centrality of effective local processes and systems as a basis for any outsider efforts to support prevention.

6. The two staff, Marshall Wallace and Wolfgang Heinrich, were working for the Do No Harm Project of the Collaborative for Development Ac-

tion (later, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects). They were invited by many active humanitarian and development assistance agencies to help them "mainstream" the ideas and approaches of Do No Harm in their fieldwork as well as at their headquarters.

7. Formerly the Collaborative for Development Action.

8. These can be found on the CDA website, www.cdainc.com.