







Policy Brief

The Limits of Conflict Prevention Efforts in Burundi:

Lessons for Greater Innovation

Priyal Singh

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Policy Brief

The Limits of Conflict Prevention Efforts in Burundi:

Lessons for Greater Innovation

Priyal Singh*

Executive Summary

Recent developments concerning Burundi provide an important example of how difficult it is to develop and implement meaningful and effective conflict prevention strategies. Nevertheless, it is an important case that shows how political will and strategic coherence, amongst key actors involved in an overarching process, is essential to ensure successful strategies. This policy brief provides an overview of the current challenges and opportunities for conflict prevention in the country, and provides recommendations on how conflict prevention stakeholders can learn from this experience and potentially develop more innovative approaches to move the country forward.

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Key Recommendations

Design a coherent strategy: Critical and expeditious appraisal of all existing conflict prevention efforts in order to innovate a more cohesive overarching conflict prevention strategy.

Identify comparative advantages: Key comparative institutional strengths need to be clearly identified and incorporated into such a strategy in order to maximise any potential leverage.

Reassess the role of East African Community: The role of the EAC should be critically reassessed in order to understand whether the organisation is essentially fit-for-purpose to play the kind of role it needs to be playing.

Rethink the role of the African Union: the AU should reflect on what shape and form the practical application of its commitment to the principle of non-indifference needs to take in order to not unduly erode its credibility and legitimacy as the primary continental peace and security actor.

The role of the United Nations: the UN needs to clarify its objective criteria for intervention in support of conflict prevention, beyond the mere rhetorical utility of prevention at a policy level.

Need for data and evidence: Need for greater availability of current, evidence-based and empirical research in Burundi, which would go a long way in supporting the development of a more effective and context-specific conflict prevention strategy.

Need to ensure in-country access: more needs to be done to ensure access to concerned global actors, across civil society and technical official delegations, to facilitate ongoing, objective, accounts of developments on the ground.

Summary

More than three years since the onset of widespread instability and violent conflict in Burundi, following the announcement by President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term in early 2015, the country appears no closer in preventing the type of conflicts that have characterised its post-independence history. In spite of numerous international, regional, and sub-regional preventive efforts aimed at allaying the immediate conflict, every attempt thus far has failed to achieve any meaningful result. This is particularly concerning given that these failures edge the country closer toward the scale of armed conflict experienced by Burundians prior to the signing of the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, with a death toll totalling an estimated 300,000 between 1993 to 2005.

While this dire situation persists, there is no obvious window of opportunity to collectively reassess the various (and some ongoing) conflict prevention efforts that have been employed. By reflecting on the lessons learned so far, concerned international actors could possibly arrive at a much more coherent overarching conflict prevention strategy for Burundi, effectively leveraging the comparative strengths of relevant international, regional, and sub-regional actors with clearly defined goals and tangible benchmarks for progress.

The development of such an overarching conflict prevention strategy, inclusive of short-term responses and measures (grounded in effective mediation practices) alongside the establishment of longer-term structural prevention processes, ought to be seen as a necessity—and treated with the urgency this requires—in order break the current political impasse that has stood in the way of all previous attempts at finding a solution. The development of more coherent approaches is needed to address the pitfalls associated with the excessively broad idea of 'prevention',¹ by yielding a concrete plan of action that holistically addresses the various conflict fault-lines across Burundi. Ultimately, this would go a long way in supporting the mobilisation and channelling of funds (and political will) required to effectively intervene and place the country on a path toward a more sustainable and secure future.

This policy brief critically assesses recent conflict prevention efforts concerning Burundi by various international, regional, and sub-regional actors, in the build-up to, and aftermath of, the country's contested 2015 elections. These efforts will be specifically appraised in terms of the relative strengths and weaknesses associated with the various approaches that had been adopted. Key lessons will then be identified and discussed in support of the development of an innovative and comprehensive conflict prevention strategy, with an emphasis on ongoing regional processes.



Albert Shingiro, Permanent Representative of Burundi to the United Nations, addresses the Security Council on the situation in his country. Photo: UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Understanding the Conceptual and Practical Utility of Conflict Prevention

Before the development of any overarching conflict prevention strategy can be outlined in Burundi, it is important to first take stock of the recent emphasis placed on the utility of conflict prevention more broadly as an approach that could potentially yield much more significant results than those associated with current, more reactive responses. A good point of departure would be the first address given to the United Nations (UN) Security Council by the current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, who emphasised that conflict prevention ought to be one of the primary priorities of the organisation.² These comments were made in recognition of the fact that prevention, as opposed to other more reactive responses (which occur only after the onset of major armed conflict), could be far more cost-effective, and that an entirely different approach toward responding to conflict should be explored toward sustaining peace³. These comments, while not particularly novel—noting that several of Guterres' predecessors had promoted similar ideas—provided some indication of the immediate priorities of the UN. In addition, this address was provided during a period of a deep, institutional introspection concerning the organisation's approach to international peace operations as well as its peacebuilding architecture more broadly.

Indeed, in 2015, the UN took stock of three seminal peace and security review processes which, to varying degrees, pointed to the alarming reversal of the general decline in the number of global conflicts over the preceding two decades. Additionally, the reviews collectively underscored a

growing international disillusionment with the UN, based on a general sense that the organisation was being essentially outpaced by the changing nature of conflict—and that, consequently, the distance between expectation and capability was growing. The three reviews recognised the utility of conflict prevention as a general approach that ought to be prioritised, based on the significant challenges now associated with the UN's prevailing responses to global peace and security concerns.

However, the concept of conflict prevention remains excessively broad, and it remains far more often defined by political rhetoric than by objective analysis. Consequently, as argued by de Carvalho and Abdenur, conflict prevention "... remains largely... underfunded, and under-utilised within the UN and its partner organisations". Regardless, new prevention-based approaches are absolutely necessary given that more reactive and traditional UN approaches have not yielded the expected results, as comprehensively illustrated in a seminal joint study by the UN and the World Bank titled 'Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict'. The onus on the international community should therefore be to now explore new preventive modalities and strategies in order to translate the concept into practice.

In order to make prevention more concrete, it is important to first develop and deploy more effective strategies that incorporate the various normative elements alluded to in the three above-mentioned UN peace and security reviews. These strategies also need to integrate practices and policies stemming from relevant regional and sub-regional actors. Ideally, these would include the following:

- An emphasis on more flexibly employing the full spectrum of UN peace operations such that the root causes and structural drivers of conflict are better prioritised and more directly addressed over longer-term frameworks;
- An emphasis on more people-centred strategies which prioritise the agency and potential of local actors and initiatives;
- The need for international actors such as the UN to support more institutionalised and contextspecific working relationships with relevant regional and sub-regional actors such as the African Union (AU) and East African Community (EAC) respectively;
- The need for regional actors such as the AU to better rationalise a common and coherent conflict prevention strategy that is aligned to the AU's Peace and Security Architecture framework—as well as the African Governance Architecture framework—within broader international frameworks such as the UN's Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace agenda.
- And, the need to forge a common and practicable political strategy across various UN departments, agencies, partner organisations, and concerned member states.



Evaluation Mission project Strengthening community resilience through employment promotion for youth at risk. Photo: PNUD Burundi / Patrice Brizard.

Disparate Efforts, Tepid Responses

Despite the conceptual developments surrounding conflict prevention, the actual global response to the Burundi crisis has proven ineffective. A series of disparate efforts have been undertaken across the international, regional, and sub-regional spheres with inadequate levels of coherence and coordination amongst various key actors. In addition, the lack of any meaningful common approach has led to a tepid overall response to a political crisis that has the potential to escalate to levels of violence that have historically plagued the country's post-independence period.⁷

To date, the international responses to the crisis in Burundi have been divided across a number of different UN bodies and agencies, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as well as the AU and the EAC—with the latter playing the most direct preventive-based role in addressing the crisis. These actors have, to varying degrees, intervened at different stages in the unfolding crisis in Burundi, establishing largely self-contained processes which have generally lack any form of central coordinating mechanism beyond the ultimate authority of the UN Security Council.

The EAC

The most immediate and direct response to the conflict was led in by the EAC. The regional bloc, composed of member states with the most immediate interests concerning Burundi's peace and security, established an early mediation process in July 2015 between Burundi's ruling the party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) and opposition groups. The process, now referred to as the Inter-Burundi Dialogue, has thus

far been led by former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa. Mkapa has served as facilitator, while Ugandan President Yoweri Musuveni has served as the chief mediator, ultimately reporting on developments to the EAC Heads of State Summits. While both Tanzania and Uganda had played important roles in the development of the 2000 Arusha peace process that ended the country's previous civil war, the current dialogue process has consistently failed to make any meaningful progress. The reasons behind this are varied, but two critical factors in particular have stood in the way of any constructive engagements.

Firstly, the lack of any significant historical experience by the EAC, as a regional bloc, in dealing with matters concerning peace, security, and conflict prevention has become increasingly clear since the beginning of the Inter-Burundi Dialogue. As Paul Nantulya has argued, this inexperience has manifested itself in two ways: in the lack of strategic coherence amongst EAC member states, as well as the in the group's associated failure to implement key decisions put forward by the facilitator⁸. To this effect, Nantulya refers to certain EAC Summits which, in spite of adopting Mkapa's progress reports, failed to meaningfully tackle any key issues that emerged early in the dialogue process. Such issues include the need to lift arrest warrants on Burundian opposition figures, facilitating the return of refugees and political exiles, and broadening the inclusion of opposition groups in the peace process.⁹

Moreover, the lack of coherence amongst EAC member states has been clear from the outset, as highlighted by the initial decision of the group's heads of state to remain silent in spite of the legal opinions of the EAC Attorneys-General that Nkurunziza's bid for a third presidential term was in fact unconstitutional.¹⁰ The additional boycotts of consequent EAC Emergency Summits by member states such as Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya¹¹ concerning Burundi also indicates a lack of common understanding and approach in dealing with the country. While the principle of subsidiarity (with respect to the need to leverage the comparative institutional strengths of relevant sub-regional actors) is important in that it forms a basis for stronger international, regional and sub-regional partnerships, with particular respect to the ongoing operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the heterogeneous nature of these entities also needs to be taken into account when developing holistic conflict prevention strategies. In other words, the experiences and capabilities of sub-regional actors to lead and implement conflict prevention strategies varies widely across the continent's respective regional economic communities and regional mechanisms -- as they are constituted within the policy framework of the APSA. Accounting for these critical differences is a significant issues that warrants greater attention by continental and international peace and security stakeholders moving forward.

The second major factor that has stood in the way of the Inter-Burundi Dialogue has been the largely uncooperative and intransigent approach adopted by the CNDD-FDD toward all external actors. From the outset of the EAC-led dialogue process, Burundi's ruling party has effectively boycotted various Summits of the EAC, whilst ignoring numerous requests for concessions to be made in order for a sustainable peace process to be established. Even prior to the onset of violence and Nkurunziza's formal announcement to run for a third term, the ruling party rejected the recommendations of a 2014 joint EAC-Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Panel of the Wise which intended to identify issues for discussion and diffuse tensions in Burundi leading up to the country's 2015 elections. This approach appears to have only strengthened over time, possibly as a result of the EAC's failure to effectively leverage a common regional strategy that would force the ruling party to make meaningful concessions at the negotiating table.

Indeed, the ruling party has not only side-lined the initial concerns of opposition groups in exile, such as the National Council for the Respect of the Arusha Agreement (CNARED), but has

further established processes to make sweeping changes to the country's constitution, possibly allowing Nkurunziza to run for a fourth term following the 2020 elections and beyond. A May 2018 referendum which sought to validate these changes was supported by a majority vote in the country—in spite of concerns surrounding the conduct of the process which had been mired by the repression of dissenting voices, as well as the banning of various international media agencies. Specifically, the proposed bill concerning the constitutional amendments was pushed through during a Cabinet meeting on 24 October 2017, which would replace the current two five-year Presidential term limits with two seven-year limits, whilst discounting previous terms served before the 2020 elections. In

Amongst other proposed constitutional changes, the government has also recently declared that a 'fundraising' drive for the next elections will soon take effect. This will entail, in practice, greater taxation of public servants and ordinary citizens, in light of the absence of international aid and funding.¹⁵ In sum, Nkurunziza and his supporters within the CNDD-FDD appear intent on retaining and consolidating power by completely circumventing regional and international preventive processes aimed at facilitating a more sustainable and inclusive future for the country.

These events occurred against the backdrop of the final fourth round of the Inter-Burundi Dialogue, which took place from 27 November to 8 December 2017, and which was boycotted by CNARED on the basis of a lack of a consensual agenda, amongst other issues. Consequently, no binding document was produced, and no plenary sessions were held due to stated 'irreconcilable differences' amongst the parties¹⁶. Instead of some form of binding agreement and path forward, a summary of the proceedings was expected to have been presented by Mkapa to Musuveni, who was in turn expected to have tabled this at the next 19th Ordinary EAC Heads of State Summit in late February 2018. The Summit's Joint Communique subsequently did express an acknowledgement of the work done by Mkapa and Musuveni, but remained vague on tangible steps moving forward. This was all the more telling, given reports that suggested that the Burundian government stakeholders would only re-engage with the dialogue process following the outcomes of the May referendum (in spite of expressed concerns by the UN Security Council on the slow pace of progress)¹⁷.

The AU

Beyond the EAC, the AU has remained largely absent in proactively responding to unfolding developments in the country, since the 5000-strong African Prevention and Protection Mission in Burundi (MAPROBU) peacekeeping force that had been authorized by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) in December 2015 (along with 100 human rights and military observers previously authorized in May of that year) was never deployed. While this deployment could have presented a considerable opportunity for the AU to act upon the principle of non-indifference, enshrined in Article 4(h) of its Constitutive Act, Burundi did not grant consent and threatened to view and treat the mission as an invasion force¹⁹. In light of this non-consent, MAPROBU would have signalled the first instance in which an AU-mandated peace operation would have deployed without the buy-in of a host-state. This, however, proved to be too politically challenging and MAPROBU subsequently fell to the wayside as the AU Assembly (the highest decision-making body of the organisation) failed to uphold the ultimatum issued by the PSC through the deployment of MAPROBU—in spite of clear provisions in the AU's Constitutive Act that allows for such types of intervention.²⁰

The UN

Similarly, the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 2303, authorising the deployment of a police component of 228 officers to Burundi in July 2016, remains unimplemented following the country's non-consent—in conjunction with the government's insistence that it is effectively managing its own peace and security affairs. Beyond this, the UN Security Council has remained appraised of developments in the country through regular briefings from the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Michel Kafondo. However, these briefings have not led to significant action on the part of the Council, given divergences amongst its permanent and non-permanent members on whether Burundi should be treated as a pressing concern for global peace and security.²¹ It is unlikely that this deadlock within the Security Council will change in the foreseeable future, in light of broader power dynamics between the permanent members (particularly noting the significant differences in opinion between China and Russia with the other three permanent members on whether Burundi's political crisis warrants any form of intervention from the Security Council)²², unless a much more concerted fact-finding effort is made whose results warrant intervention.

The Human Rights Council

Official investigations into the nature, scale, and scope of the conflict in Burundi have been mired in challenges associated with the uncooperative approach adopted by the country's government toward external actors. For the most part, the OHCHR has led such recent investigations, in spite of the government suspending its office in the country on 11 October 2016. Following the release of the HRC-mandated report of 20 September 2016 (A/HRC/33/37), which provided evidence of gross human rights violations by the government—which could possibly amount to crimes against humanity—the HRC further adopted a resolution²³ to establish a one-year Commission of Inquiry to investigate violations in Burundi starting in April 2015. On 4 October 2017, in light of the government's continued refusal to cooperate with the Commission, the mandate of the Commission was extended by a year. A telling indicator of this non-cooperation has been the recent public statement by Burundi's Ambassador to the UN, Albert Shingiro, arguing that members of the Commission should be brought to justice and claiming that members were responsible for defamation and attempted destabilisation of the country's institutions.²⁴ In spite of this, over 500 interviews have been conducted with refugees and displaced Burundians, leading to the documentation of evidence pointing to arbitrary arrests, acts of torture, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and rape and other forms of sexual violence, among other violations.²⁵

The International Criminal Court

In addition to severing ties with the OHCHR, the Burundian government became the first nation to formally withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 26 October 2016. The decision became effective one year later, according to the stipulations of the Rome Statute. ²⁶ Despite this withdrawal, on 9 November 2016 the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber III decided to establish a preliminary and formal investigation concerning crimes by Burundian nationals between 26 April 2015 and 26 October 2017. ²⁷ The decision noted that the presentation of evidence, largely mirroring that of the OHCHR, that provided a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation with respect to crimes against humanity. ²⁸

The Need for Greater Coordination and Cohesion

A central coordinating mechanism across the UN, ICC, OHCHR, AU, and EAC, amongst other concerned international actors, has therefore been lacking. There is, however, a degree of commonality of interests as far as preventing greater conflict is concerned. Indeed, the fault-lines of the Burundi conflict remain largely unaddressed, and the preconditions for mass atrocities will remain in place as long as power becomes increasingly centralized within a regime that refuses to be held accountable not only to its own citizens, but also to the various international organizations, instruments, and mechanisms to which it is party. While greater coordination across international, regional, and sub-regional actors remains inadequate, the Burundian government has maintained its uncompromising commitment to non-cooperation.

Regional Implications of the Crisis

At the other end of the conflict prevention spectrum, as these disparate efforts to find a solution to Burundi's crisis continue into 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees / the Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has made considerable progress in attempting to establish an overarching regional refugee response plan. Based on an appraisal of the impact and implications of the human insecurity associated with large refugee outflows into neighbouring countries, the agency has developed a detailed plan for 2018²⁹ that focuses on the trends, response requirements, state-level coordination, and support needed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Tanzania, and Rwanda. While the direct utility of such plans may not be immediately clear in the establishment of a broader conflict prevention strategy for Burundi, peace and security stakeholders would be wise to consider the regional human security implications of refugee outflows into neighbouring countries. In so doing, the effectiveness and sustainability of a potential long-term and more structural conflict prevention strategy for Burundi could be significantly bolstered, by better accounting for potential spill-over threats and spoilers across the region's relatively porous borders.

Moreover, the UNHCR 2018 response plan makes it clear that there is considerable discrepancy between the scale and scope of political instability in Burundi and, on the other hand, the international commitment toward addressing the crisis. As noted by the agency's regional coordinator, the country's 2017 response plan only received dedicated funds to cover a meagre 17% of its needs—making it one of the most under-funded such plans in the world. In light of the fact that conflict prevention efforts ought to take into account humanitarian assistance and development, this chronic underfunding—coupled with the tepid international response—is a bitter indictment on the failures of an overarching global response on Burundi.

Key Lessons for Innovation

If current approaches toward the crisis in Burundi remain unchanged, it is likely that the status-quo associated with the uncooperative, unaccountable, and increasingly emboldened nature of the government will become further entrenched. The human security costs of this situation, within Burundi as well as across the Great Lakes Region, will likely expand as spill-over effects increase in various neighbouring states. Most significantly, however, the preconditions for mass atrocities—which have been witnessed in Burundi and across the region—remain largely unaddressed by any current conflict prevention efforts.

What is required, therefore, is a critical appraisal of all existing conflict prevention efforts in order to develop a more cohesive and better coordinated structural conflict prevention strategy with clear and tangible common aims, objectives, and benchmarks for progress. Such a strategy should incorporate certain existing elements from the UN (with particular regard to the central role of the Security Council, the peacebuilding architecture, and the OHCHR and HCR), the AU, EAC, and ICC. Key comparative institutional strengths need to be clearly identified and incorporated into such a strategy in order to maximize any potential leverage with which to break the current political impasse and bring the Burundian government to the negotiating table to offer meaningful concessions.

The role of the EAC, for example, should be critically reassessed as part of such a strategy, in order to understand whether the organization is fit-for-purpose. Similarly, the AU should reflect not only on its commitment to the principle of non-indifference, but also on what shape and form this commitment needs to take in order to maintain its credibility and legitimacy as the primary continental peace and security actor. The UN similarly needs to clarify its objective criteria for intervention in support of conflict prevention, whilst additionally reaffirming its commitment to this idea in practical terms—beyond merely restating the need for prevention.

Lastly, all concerned international actors need to support greater efforts aimed at impartial information-gathering as well as in-country peace and security research—work that has become all the more urgent given the government's suppression of civil society and news media since early 2015. The greater availability of up-to-date, evidence-based research in Burundi would go a long way in supporting the development of a more effective and context-specific overarching structural conflict prevention strategy aligning the disparate efforts thus. A more immediate priority involves ensuring some basic level of universal access to the country by relevant international actors, from international civil society to more technical delegations from concerned intergovernmental organisations. Indeed, access to the country to allow simple engagements with ordinary citizens, as well as observation, monitoring, reporting, and analysis should be seen as a critical cornerstone of any meaningful conflict prevention strategy for the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the crisis in Burundi is now well into its fourth year, it is clear that disparate responses at the international, regional, and sub-regional levels have not yielded any meaningful results. All efforts thus far have been critically challenged by the uncooperative approach adopted by the Burundian government toward external actors, and the inability of regional, continental and international actors to arrive at a common overarching conflict prevention strategy. Innovation is therefore critically needed to generate the necessary political will and funding required to implement such a strategy. The central question confronting all concerned stakeholders now is whether a ripe moment for change can be created through a process of critical appraisal and reassessment of existing practices so that an innovative preventive-based approach may be launched moving forward. To this end, the following steps are recommended:

Design a coherent strategy: Critical and expeditious appraisal of all existing conflict prevention efforts in order to innovate a more cohesive overarching conflict prevention strategy.

Identify comparative advantages: Key comparative institutional strengths need to be clearly identified and incorporated into such a strategy in order to maximise any potential leverage.

Reassess the role of East African Community: The role of the EAC should be critically reassessed in order to understand whether the organisation is essentially fit-for-purpose to play the kind of role it needs to be playing.

Rethink the role of the African Union: the AU should reflect on what shape and form the practical manifestation of its commitment to the principle of non-indifference needs to take in order to not unduly erode its credibility and legitimacy as the primary continental peace and security actor.

The role of the United Nations: the UN needs to clarify its objective criteria for intervention in support of conflict prevention, beyond the mere rhetorical utility of prevention at a policy level.

Need for data and evidence: Need for greater availability of current, evidence-based and empirical research in Burundi, which would go a long way in supporting the development of a more effective and context-specific conflict prevention strategy.

Need to ensure in-country access: more needs to be done to ensure access to the country to concerned global actors, across civil society and technical official delegations, to facilitate ongoing, objective, accounts of developments on the ground.

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About the ICP Initiative

Innovation in Conflict Prevention (ICP) is a project aimed at identifying promising approaches, responses, and practices in the prevention in armed conflict, focusing on six country case studies in Africa.

The initiative is led by Instituto Igarapé, a think and do tank based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and funded by Global Affairs Canada.

Our partner in Africa is the Institute of Security Studies (ISS).

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