

Conference Report

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2020 – Online Edition

sef:

Crisis Prevention: From Ambition to Action – New Pathways for the UN

Larissa Neubauer

The United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945 in the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War, with one great ambition: to avoid violent conflicts. In recent decades, however, the impression has steadily arisen that the United Nations, as an organisation, is primarily about crisis response. In order to address this issue, UN Secretary-General António Guterres initiated a comprehensive reform process several years ago. By embracing the concept of “sustaining peace”, the United Nations should henceforth not only manage crises but also act preventively and safeguard peace in the long term.

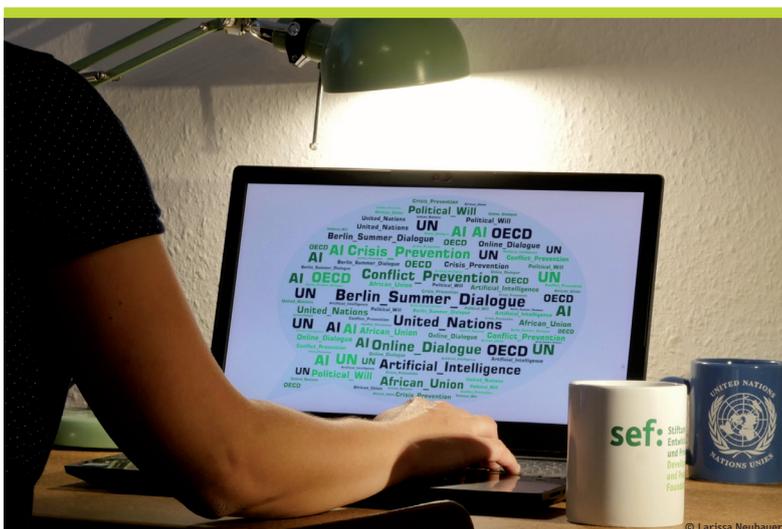
Due to the current pandemic, this year’s Berlin Summer Dialogue was organised as an online event for the first time. At four meetings held at weekly inter-

vals, experts from more than 25 countries discussed new pathways and opportunities for early detection and prevention of crises.

Teresa Whitfield, Director of Policy and Mediation in the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) at the United Nations, opened this year’s Berlin Summer Dialogue by describing the evolving challenges facing the UN. The nature of peacebuilding has changed, she said, as many conflicts no longer follow a traditional linear trajectory but are highly complex and fragmented. This was illustrated by Dr Adriana Abdenur from Instituto Igarapé in Rio de Janeiro, who drew attention to experiences in her home city. Although daily life is marked by conflict, the city is not officially designated a conflict area, she said. Such fluid transitions and categories of conflict make preventive action more difficult.

Geopolitical challenges

As Teresa Whitfield went on to explain, the number of stakeholders has noticeably increased as well, while in parallel, there is a growing expectation that diverse stakeholders and communities will be more fully involved in the process. While this is extremely important, it also heightens complexity. As a further key point, she emphasised that the UN Secretary-General’s intention, with his reform process, was also to change traditional silo thinking within the UN. The climate and security nexus shows just how important this is.



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Strengthened cooperation between individual departments within the UN and a clearer alignment of programmes towards crisis prevention are essential, and both are moving in the right direction, said Dr Abdenur. However, the UN's capacity to act is also dependent on geopolitical conditions, which are ever-evolving. Nationalist and populist movements in many countries also challenge – or stand in the way of – constructive cooperation at the international level at present.

Artificial intelligence for more accurate forecasting

Analysis and evaluation of existing data and information are playing an increasingly important role in the timely detection and early management of emerging or resurgent conflicts. As the volume of useful information – from climate, mobility and economic data to information about populations' ethnic composition and posts on social media – has vastly increased, new technology is needed if it is to be evaluated meaningfully. This topic was addressed at the second dialogue event. Today's highly efficient technologies enable all this information to be evaluated and linked far more quickly than could be achieved by the few highly skilled experts capable of performing this task. Professor Weisi Guo from Cranfield University and the Alan Turing Institute is therefore engaged in research, some of it government-commissioned, exploring how artificial intelligence can be deployed to support networking of this data and how learning systems can be used to forecast conflict potential at an earlier stage. He identified two distinct types



Sarah Bressan

of event. “White swan events” can be predicted using statistical analysis and are based mainly on previous experience. “Black swan events” are more challenging: these are conflicts that emerge without any previous comparator events. Using artificial intelligence, Professor Guo is attempting to find ways of predicting these events more accurately, with some success: he and his team were able to forecast early on that conflicts could well break out along Myanmar's border.

A particular challenge, however, relates to the funding of this crisis and conflict prevention research. Weisi Guo criticised the wide funding gap here, especially in comparison to government-funded research in other areas, such as space.

Opportunities for practical use of artificial intelligence in crisis prevention were outlined by Dr Paula Hidalgo-Sanchis, Innovations Advisor at UN Global Pulse. Over recent years, UN Global Pulse has been studying hate speech from various sources, e.g. on social media, using artificial intelligence. One advantage of this approach is the ability to analyse a large quantity of texts, videos or language files very quickly, even across a range of dialects and languages. UN Global Pulse also analysed radio programmes in Uganda to pinpoint topics where local people were particularly engaged and to identify possible tensions, e.g. in relation to the refugees from South Sudan who had arrived in Uganda in 2016. In collaboration with Dataminr, an AI platform, UN Global Pulse has also released Global Alert, a tool that assists in identifying early conflict risks and facilitates faster action where possible.



Weisi Guo

Better forecasting does not necessarily lead to faster action

Donata Garrasi, Director for Political Affairs, Office of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, dampened hopes of a more rapid response, however. Speaking at the third dialogue event, she pointed out that while good indicators for the early detection of conflict already exist – such as a surge in human rights violations or negative changes in the economy, resulting in higher food prices – the UN, by its very nature, is not set up to mobilise a genuinely rapid response in all cases. Nevertheless, her task at the local level is to filter and analyse this information in order, at least, to identify key developments at an early stage.

At this juncture, Sarah Bressan from the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) in Berlin drew attention to the prevention paradox. There is, she said, a general consensus that it is worthwhile investing in crisis and conflict prevention. Preventing violent conflict not only saves lives; it also avoids the high costs of rebuilding basic and social infrastructure. This is what success in conflict prevention means, but it is not visible, she said. However, being able to point to results is very important in politics, so more recognition for this kind of success would provide a major incentive.

More lobbying and practical policy recommendations are required

Dr Hannah Neumann, a Member of the European Parliament, wanted civil society organisations, in their discussions with MPs, to be more specific in their demands: they should make it clear which policy measures are needed and what politicians can and should achieve.



Hannah Neumann

The fact is that in politics, time and monetary resources are not deployed until a problem becomes particularly pressing. In these circumstances, it is often difficult to give early conflict prevention the attention it deserves. She herself is therefore working to ensure that there is a separate line for conflict prevention in the EU's new budget. This would increase the pressure to spend these funds by October every year at the latest.

Darynell Rodriguez Torres, Executive Director of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) in The Hague, called for funds earmarked for conflict prevention to be genuinely spent on this area of work, not on crisis management, for example. However, he also issued a word of warning: there are, he said, no quick wins in conflict prevention; these processes usually take years. He also called for more public awareness of the importance of conflict prevention. He drew comparisons with the climate and sustainability agenda, which has now entered the wider public debate. To that end, civil society organisations should ensure that they have good arguments justifying why policy-makers should advocate for conflict prevention as well.



Darynell Rodriguez Torres

Videos of the four dialogue events, short clips of the speakers and further publications are available on the event website <https://www.sef-bonn.org/en/events/berlin-summer-dialogues/2020>.

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