

Partnerships in Conflict Prevention: China and the UK

Project update: Issue 4

The Conflict Prevention Working Group (CPWG) was in London in early September for the fourth round of meetings looking at UK-China cooperation on conflict prevention.

CPWG activities have been broadly structured around three central pillars of the UK Government's Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS). After introductory meetings in September 2014, the CPWG focused on crisis response in November 2014 and early warning in April 2015 (see project updates [Issue 1](#), [Issue 2](#), and [Issue 3](#)). The most recent meetings, which are detailed in this project update, addressed *upstream conflict prevention*, defined by [Saferworld](#) as "a long-term approach that seeks to understand and respond to the underlying causes of conflict and instability before they result in violence". As the project starts to draw to a close, the CPWG have also begun to consider their recommendations.

CPWG Workshop IV: Upstream Conflict Prevention

During this workshop the CPWG looked at the different perceptions and modalities of upstream conflict prevention, and sought to identify synergies between the UK and Chinese approaches, and potential opportunities for cooperation.

The CPWG recognised that upstream conflict prevention is an elusive and constantly evolving term, and debated whether the term is useful, or whether it is just existing peacebuilding terminology which has been repackaged to suit a new fashion. It was acknowledged that upstream conflict prevention sets out to promote 'positive' peace by focusing more clearly on the root causes of conflict. However, questions were raised about the extent to which the upstream conflict prevention agenda should come into play even when conflict is not ongoing or imminent in order to better promote positive peace and prevent conflict. These are timely questions for the UK Government as it reviews its existing policies

and priorities ahead of the new National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, which are both due to be published later this year, and which will require various actors across government to both define both upstream conflict prevention, and their role within it.

Chinese conflict prevention efforts tend to be underpinned by the idea that development leads to peace; as opposed to the common Western stance that peace is a precursor to development. For this reason, China's principles of international engagement tend to remain constant, with an overriding focus on economic development and with 'no strings attached', regardless of whether there is peace or ongoing violent conflict. Western or UK approaches in comparison are often concerned that development efforts can be detrimental if they are not 'conflict sensitive'. It was suggested during the workshop, however, that in practice (as opposed to in theory) there is not such a great difference in approach. China's conflict prevention efforts are often compatible with the ideal of upstream conflict prevention because, in focusing on economic development, they tend to address one of the most common root causes of conflict. Similarly it is increasingly understood in Western policy-making circles that economic development needs to underpin relatively short term efforts towards 'stabilisation'.

Complementarity between the approaches of the UK and China was therefore evident and there was also consensus amongst the CPWG that there is scope for China and the UK to cooperate more in this area. It was suggested that the prospect of cooperation would likely appeal to the Chinese Government given their ambition to make their own development efforts more effective while understanding how to minimise any negative side effects, such as those linked to corruption.

With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a potential unifying framework, it was suggested that the two countries may be able to increase their cooperation in a number of different areas, although given their differing starting positions and that China

has domestic development targets to meet, this may not be that straightforward. In contrast it was felt that there were very few obstacles to further, more wide ranging dialogue in this area.

In general terms, multilateral channels such as the UN are thought to be more suitable entry points for cooperation given the unease with discussing approaches involving third parties on a bilateral basis.

It was also suggested that China's existing framework of engagement with Africa through the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the developing, African Union-sponsored Common African Position (CAP) on the post-2015 process may be a point where common interests intersect and opportunities for collaboration arise.

Beyond the more formal government to government route, there are other significant opportunities for cooperation and dialogue in upstream conflict prevention. One area that came up in discussion was the potential for cooperation between economic actors in conflict-prone contexts, where the development of conflict-sensitive business practices are vital.

Further suggestions for how this cooperation could be operationalised are discussed further in an upcoming briefing on Upstream Conflict Prevention and the Sustainable Development Goals, authored by the CPWG.

About the project

Through a series of workshops, roundtables, policy seminars and the publication and dissemination of joint briefings and policy recommendations, this project – *Partnerships in Conflict Prevention: China and the UK* – aims to promote greater levels of awareness and expertise and increase levels of dialogue on conflict prevention within the Chinese and UK policy communities. It does not aim to advocate for one approach over another, but to facilitate understanding and explore potential areas of collaboration where China, the UK and other international actors, including those states affected by conflict, might be able to cooperate together more closely in the future.

The project explores contemporary approaches to conflict prevention, with a particular emphasis on crisis diplomacy, early warning and response systems, and upstream conflict prevention (i.e. addressing the root drivers of fragility and conflict). Over the course of two years, a series of workshops conducted in London and Beijing focus on each of these specific components. International experts, including those from conflict-affected states, attend the workshops to provide tangible examples of how efforts at conflict prevention have played out in specific countries.

Upstream Conflict Prevention in Sierra Leone

A roundtable was co-hosted with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) addressing upstream conflict prevention in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone was chosen as a relevant case study for the CPWG given the extended period of UK involvement in security and justice sector reform in the country and because it has recently been highlighted as a success story by Wang Min, China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, in a call for a more integrated strategy in security sector reform in post-conflict countries¹. Whilst the Chinese Government have traditionally adopted a non-interventionist approach to these kinds of issues, there are signs that their practise is beginning to shift as their involvement in Africa becomes more extensive. This dialogue sought to critically examine the different approaches adopted by the UK and China, and, if appropriate, to identify potential areas for collaboration in future upstream conflict prevention efforts.

In the first session a Senior Analyst from the Danish Institute for International Studies gave an overview of the UK's engagement in Sierra Leone and its efforts in upstream conflict prevention. He suggested that upstream conflict prevention is not new, and that elements of it have been evident in the UK's security sector reform efforts in Sierra Leone over the past 15 years, which were rebranded as upstream conflict prevention after the UK's Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2010 and Building Stability Overseas Strategy in 2011. Three key principles of upstream conflict prevention were highlighted:

- **Context sensitivity:** it is important to acknowledge that the drivers of conflict vary from situation to situation.
- **Being holistic:** integrating defence, police, intelligence and justice reforms, encompassing broader concepts of development, i.e. the economy, and consolidating democracy, human rights and good governance.
- **People-centred approaches:** success depends on active support from local populations rather than buy-in from the elite alone.

The Chinese respondents suggested that people-centred approaches are also important to the Chinese Government's approaches in conflict affected and fragile states in order to identify the needs of the people. They value the need for a top-down approach to be balanced by a bottom-up approach to ensure the development of a more sustainable peace, however, whilst the UK aims for a parallel approach to

¹ Shanghai Daily (21 August 2015) *China calls on integrated strategy in security sector reform in post-conflict countries: envoy* [online] Available from: http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/article_xinhua.aspx?id=298872

support both the government and the people separately and meet in the middle, Chinese attempts try not to be divisive. There was also more divergence between the approaches of China and the UK concerning context sensitivity. Whilst it was argued that the UK has preconceptions which shape its engagement, it was suggested that China does not let value judgements about specific situations and conflict drivers inform its policies or practices in other countries and chooses not to interfere, except when invited by the country or region in need of support.

Whilst there are differences in the approaches of China and the UK in Sierra Leone, and direct cooperation between the two countries may not seem natural, there is a complementarity in their efforts. During the roundtable, social cohesion was highlighted as central to ensuring a sustainable peace and development trajectory for Sierra Leone, particularly given the divide between the state and its citizens. This was evident when the Ebola crisis emerged, highlighting a lack of trust in central government and the indication that there has been too much emphasis on state centred reform. Infrastructure building is one approach for developing social cohesion. For example, building roads can help governments to ensure that their services reach more remote areas. This is an area in which the Chinese Government has invested significantly. It has also supported education in Sierra Leone, and it was suggested during the roundtable that this builds the capacity of the people of Sierra Leone to help them to manage their own resources and enforce policies, thus making the UK's efforts more sustainable.

CPWG Recommendations

The CPWG met to discuss project recommendations, which are currently being drafted into a report that is expected to be launched in Beijing in December.

Outline recommendations were presented to various members of the British policy community, including the Department for International Development, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global Security and Non-Proliferation and the APPG on China, who all echoed support for the idea of China-UK cooperation in conflict prevention.

The CPWG is composed of:

- Mariam KEMPLE, Head of Humanitarian Campaigning, Oxfam International
- Col (ret.) Christopher LANGTON, Head, Independent Conflict Research and Analysis; Advisor to CPWG
- David NYHEIM, Chief Executive of Europe Conflict and Security Consulting (ECAS) Ltd.
- Rob PARKER, Director of Policy and Communications, Saferworld
- Dr SHENG Hongsheng, Professor of Public International Law at the School of International Law, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law
- Dr XUE Lei, Research Fellow, Institute for World Economy Studies, Centre for Marine and Polar Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS)
- Dr ZHANG Chun, Senior Research Fellow; Deputy Director, Department of West Asian and African Studies, SIIS

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

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