



PATHFINDERS

FOR PEACEFUL, JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES
HOSTED BY THE NYU CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

HALVING GLOBAL VIOLENCE BY 2030

JUNE 15 - 16 2021

Taskforce Meeting

The Halving Global Violence Task Force

Reports from the first meeting
and the path ahead

When adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, United Nations member states set out an ambitious mandate to “*significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere*” (SDG16.1). Six years on, we are off track. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, experts feared that the world would see an [increase in violent deaths by 2030](#) if decisive action was not taken without delay. The pandemic brought with it significant increases in violence against women and children in many households. Potential triggers of violence—such as inequality and polarization—are on the rise, as is social unrest in many countries. In order to turn things around, the international community must muster heightened ambition – and decisive leadership to enact it.

Convened by the [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#) – a group of 39 states, with international organizations and civil society – Halving Global Violence by 2030 ([HGV](#)) draws on the best available [evidence](#) and a belief in robust [partnerships](#) between member states, the UN system, and civil society to deliver on the promise of SDG16.1, the international community’s mandate on global violence reduction.

On June 15 and 16, 2021, Pathfinders (in collaboration with [Wilton Park](#) and with the generous support of the Swiss Development Cooperation ([SDC](#))) hosted the first meeting of the [Halving Global Violence Task Force](#). The meeting gathered political and civil society leaders, policy influencers and renowned experts advocating for evidence-based solutions, innovative partnerships, and new ways of financing to achieve the target of worldwide 50% violence reduction.

As the initiative’s political and strategic steering group, the [HGV Task Force](#) is currently led by four UN member states at ministerial-level (Co-Chairs from Costa Rica, Liberia, South Africa, and Switzerland), 15 Members from diverse UN agencies (SGSR VAC, WHO, UNDP) and heads of thematically and geographically-diverse civil society organizations and networks (Instituto Igarapé, ACCORD, Small Arms Survey, BRAC, End Violence Against Children). Moreover, ten [Expert Advisors](#) serve as its policy and research ‘brain trust’. In addition, the Task Force boasts representation from highly-visible youth leaders and two initiatives, [Peace in Our Cities](#) (with the Mayor of Palmira, Colombia) and the Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control ([GENSAC](#)), which ensure cross-fertilization with the arenas of urban violence and city leadership, and small arms control and gender equality, respectively.

1 | Past as Prologue

While the 2021 convening of the HGV ‘architects’ was a first occasion to begin drawing the blueprint of what we hope will constitute an unprecedented global mobilization to reduce unacceptable levels of violence globally, several cornerstones for the collective construction had been laid in the two years prior. In March 2020, Pathfinders launched the [Review of Evidence and Global Strategy for Violence Prevention](#), a foundational document for HGV in its distilling of the best available evidence of “what works” in several distinct—but often inter-connected—realms of violence, including conflict, urban violence, and forms of interpersonal violence, such as violence against women and children. Forecasts on [future trends in homicide](#) levels and [dividends of conflict prevention](#) added a much needed forward-looking perspective.

In July 2020, many leaders in the global violence reduction community gathered in a [preparatory expert-level virtual Wilton Park workshop](#). The workshop brought together leading experts across various fields of violence prevention to provide new, bold, and concrete ideas, share strategies and plan a way forward for Halving Global Violence. Based on these discussions, the Pathfinders published in August 2020, the “[Halving Global Violence: Strategy and Vision](#)” report, suggesting goals, pathways of action and next steps for the movement.

2 | Discussions ‘at’ Wilton Park

With these documents and discussions as a foundation, the HGV Task Force met virtually ‘at’ Wilton Park in June 2021 – still bereft of tea and crumpets due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but animated and focused by the shared notion that the still elusive ‘post-pandemic’ period could constitute a tipping point and offer windows of political opportunity to shift narratives and adapt multilateral solutions towards complex global problems.

Opening the substantive discussions, Daniel Mack, Program Lead on Violence Reduction for the Pathfinders, highlighted the ambition of the Grand Challenge on Halving Global Violence by 2030, while reminding participants that a 50% reduction—**particularly in lethal violence**—in a similar time frame is an achievable target, one that has been replicated in different continents at the sub-national level.

Welcoming the majority female and notably young Task Force, Pathfinders highlighted the exceptional group of ‘architects’ around the virtual table, gathered for an exercise of collective design and construction, as well as our faith in the power of networks and alliances to deliver increased global ambition. Pathfinders envisions that Task Force members will shape the global debate on delivering violence reduction goals by garnering action-oriented research, encouraging increased political capital, and stimulating increased levels of investment.

To do so, Pathfinders hopes to employ a ‘big tent approach’, with the HGV Task Force reflecting a broad coalition, bringing in all communities of practice tackling violence (conflict, urban violence, violence against women, violence against children, etc.), attempting to [bridge those silos](#), and creating a common ‘grammar’. As such, the distinct ‘tribes’ can connect, engage, and act, aiming to become a unified voice that will elevate the efforts of all constituting communities, with an emphasis on prevention as our unifying guiding principle. Likewise, both ‘whole of society’ (including the private sector) and ‘whole of

government' (including sub-national actors, particularly cities) approaches will be necessary to implement, with the Task Force spearheading mobilization on global violence reduction.

As such, Pathfinders reminded the participants that the Task Force has the following objectives, *inter alia*:

- **Give strategic direction and thought leadership** to the strategies of the global violence-reduction movement.
- **Establish high-level political leadership** to help the multilateral system take the violence reduction goals forward, including securing prominence for the Halving Global Violence agenda at the UN.
- Inspire national and subnational governments to make ambitious but realistic commitments to elevate SDG16.1 and reduce violence by 50% by 2030, including the strategies and resources to implement them.
- **Mobilize international and regional organizations, and multi-stakeholder partnerships**, to support the Movement to Halve Global Violence and utilize its policy agenda, language, and advocacy demands.
- **Build and showcase a global movement**, including civil society coalitions and local actors, coalescing with organizations, and individuals worldwide.

Finally, Pathfinders suggested that the international community currently finds itself at a critical juncture to act on violence reduction. The tragic and earth-shaking COVID-19 pandemic may potentially become a 'tipping point', offering political and strategic 'windows of opportunity' and perhaps even 'silver linings' in terms of demonstrating the need for joint international action on issues of human security, as people become reacquainted with the imperative role of governments, make stronger demands for social nets and investments against inequalities, and call for a greater focus on public health approaches.

The increased **risks** of violence brought by the pandemic will not necessarily translate into increased **levels** of violence if the international community acts decisively to preclude them from materializing. Thus, at a critical juncture for action it is time to be bold, and for the Task Force to help increase ambition, attention, and tools to develop and implement a shared violence reduction action plan for policymakers worldwide. The still elusive 'post-pandemic' period offers a tipping point and window of political opportunity to shift narratives and adapt multilateral solutions towards complex global problems.

Political champions aim high and share a hopeful outlook

A subsequent conversation among the Task Force's high-level 'political champions'¹ explored diverse perspectives and perceived priorities regarding the world's violence 'epidemic'. The discussion highlighted specific themes in violence prevention that should gain the full support of the Task Force, as well as national experiences that could prove useful as the international community carefully considers in 'which basket to place its eggs' at a time of pinched budgets and diverted political attention.

The need to tackle a plethora of structural problems in order **to restore peoples' trust in government and political institutions** was an overarching concern, particularly issues that could trigger violence, such as increasing inequality and food insecurity. **Concerns about inequalities and exclusion** were indeed front of mind, with one participant noting that, "building a more peaceful and inclusive society calls for concrete steps and actions to reduce inequalities and protect vulnerable groups, particularly

¹ Speakers included Amb. Dee-Maxwell Saah Kemayah (Liberia's Minister of Foreign Affairs), Fiorella Salazar Rojas (Minister of Peace and Justice, Costa Rica), Patricia Danzi (Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the mayor of Palmira, Colombia, Óscar Escobar representing Peace in Our Cities.

women and children.” Another added: “Inclusion means to hear people’s needs and address those needs; government works as a bridge, listening and understanding people and proposing solutions to their problems.”

Further investment in data capacities was likewise posited as essential, given a need for a deeper understanding of the current dynamics of violence, with a particular emphasis on more up-to-date and disaggregated data to allow for proper analysis and programming. Such efforts, of course, come with a price tag, so in addition to increasing political will, one participant noted, increasing financial capacity to invest in violence prevention—particularly through robust investments in youth—is crucial. As such, a moment of crisis is a tremendous opportunity to invest in violence prevention. This argument, however, must be ‘won’ in a moment where many governments are experiencing decreased or diverted budgets, given the world’s current health emergency.

Without ignoring the tremendous challenges ahead, a **hopeful tone** permeated the shared messages. In the words of one leader, “there’s a lot of energy where there is violence. We need to **invest in ‘unblocking’ opportunities for youth** to channel this energy into productive political and social demands, creating peaceful communities”. Finally, as noted by one participant, Halving Global Violence, “is not beyond our reach; collectively, we can summon this challenge. Our motivation to be a part of this determined movement to prevent and reduce violence is anchored in our **unwavering commitment to multilateralism and cooperation.**”

Task Force members pinpoint challenges and opportunities ahead

Turning to the current dynamics and challenges of global violence trends, Task Force members analyzed and discussed the main bottlenecks to action that violence reduction practitioners are encountering globally, and how some of these have become even more momentous in pandemic times.

Notwithstanding the sober notes—an already serious international crisis would certainly not be made easier to tackle by the COVID-19 pandemic and its health, social and economic aftershocks—participants kept the **discussion future-looking and action-oriented.**

Regarding upcoming challenges, a member’s early intervention noted **the trend towards authoritarian governance and repressive responses to internal dissent** in some countries around the world. These nations are undergoing a decline at least in the quality of their democratic norms and institutions, a trend that may have potentially chilling impacts in terms of State violence on their citizens, in addition to dynamics such as greater access to firearms and reduced respect for the rule of law. Relatedly, an **erosion of international norms and external constraints to State behavior**, as seen particularly in the realm of arms control and arms transfers, seems to have crept into our current realities. Further, the **impact of the pandemic on growing inequality**, rising unemployment, reduced government services, and the potential for further social fragmentation could all foment grievances triggering increased conflict and violence. Therefore, global violence prevention efforts are situated within a moment of major contradiction, with a huge accumulation of systemic challenges occurring at a time when international cooperation is at its lowest ebb.

Another potential challenge was the need to **maintain the political will** embedded in a movement such as ours over a long period time, which is after all the time frame in which significant and sustained violence reduction can occur. Even maintaining political will in the medium-term, however, is insufficient: there is likewise a need to **translate political ambition into concrete action.**

Another challenge highlighted by participants regarded strategic decisions on where to set the focus of our collective efforts. Should fragile States with high levels of violence (but low capacity for reform) be

the priority? Or rather would it be best to invest energy in less turbulent but higher capacity countries, or to focus on places where there is a political (and thus fleeting) opening to be impactful? A similar way this dilemma was verbalized: is it best to attempt to **tackle the world's violent hotspots, or seek potentially 'low-hanging fruit'**, with lesser levels of violence but higher chances of impact? What if more attention and investment into the world's violent hotspots actually exacerbates their problems, with external intervention giving the upper hand to certain groups in 'political marketplaces' bent on perennial violence? Some of these choices are also most germane to issues of strategy and messaging: should the focus be on the 'dark side' or rather on 'bright spots' (where progress is being achieved, allowing for a positive narrative)? Of course, several of these questions are not actually binary: the chosen strategy may well be a combination of both 'choices', with the careful choice of the relative weight of each an essential determinant to potential success.

While several examples of cities (particularly from the Americas) reducing levels of homicide in a comparable time frame by even 70% were lauded, some participants also suggested potential limitations to how much headway can be made on violence reduction by focusing solely on subnational units, as in some countries municipal or state authorities have more limited authority over issues of violence prevention and security.

Another oft-repeated challenge: **acquiring robust, timely, and disaggregated data** beyond that on homicides (which in itself is incomplete and patchy in some regions). It was noted that there is a current perception that violence levels are increasing, but in actuality we lack the updated data to be able to confirm or deny this – an ability that is essential to properly analyze trends and instill confidence in the public. Likewise, more robust knowledge regarding the historical evolution of violence would be beneficial in terms of putting our current 'epidemic' in a longer context.

A final challenge: how **to link the movement to Halve Global Violence with other major topics of our time**—or 'big ticket items'—such as pandemic recovery, the 'green transition' and climate change, and the growing groundswell to reduce inequality? And while doing so, searching for co-benefits with other transformational initiatives and finding strategic opportunities for linking priorities.

Notwithstanding these significant challenges, Halving Global Violence will also have many opportunities to seize on, some systemic or historic, but others circumstantial to the moment we are living. On the latter, one participant noted that despite worrisome baselines and trends during the pandemic, the very **pandemic forced a heightened awareness about several forms of violence, and nudged innovations** in terms of ways of working, new collaborations, and particularly through the use of online tools, which now can become permanent fixtures to our collective activism toolbox. In a systemic context (not contingent on the pandemic), new technologies developed in recent years can be employed for violence prevention and better targeting of interventions.

Another opportunity, in the opinion of some participants, comes from the world of resourcing: **increased investment**—both from multilateral and bilateral (foreign assistance) sources—in fragile countries, with major new thrusts from international banks but also national initiatives such as the US's Global Fragility Act. Likewise, an increased appetite for systemic investment in evidence-based prevention policies and programs may be emerging among the philanthropic community, particularly foundations. Moreover, participants were also optimistic in terms of leveraging the massive **resources of the private sector** for financing investments in violence reduction, in an era of the search for positive social impact investment.

'Standing on the shoulders of giants' - the many individuals and organizations that have toiled in the violence prevention community over decades – participants noted that current efforts have benefits of the times. First, an **actual international mandate**, provided by SDG16.1, that compels governments and

concerned stakeholders to prioritize and expend efforts on violence reduction. Second, a **critical mass in terms of a body of evidence and experience of ‘what works’** in violence reduction. In other words, the Task Force can benefit from a solid political framework and a good evidence base to further its mandate.

Finally, several participants noted a **significant opportunity in the Task Force itself**. Participants throughout the discussions praised the, “sense of excitement,” “...enthusiasm, energy, and intelligence,” and the diversity and breadth of the individuals and organizations represented at the meeting, rendering a coalition that could be, “an expression of networked multilateralism at its finest,” as not State-centric, horizontal, and layered. In the view of one participant, the Task Force could become an “impact hub with enormous potential,” through its focus on prevention and its inclusion of expertise on multiple forms of violence. Indeed, a gathering of the “crème de la crème” in the violence reduction space.

Outside perspectives: learning from successful agents of change

In addition to the energy of its members, the Task Force benefitted from a burst of inspiration ‘from the outside’, as leaders of impactful international movements shared their insights with our participants. Focusing on lessons-learned and case studies that could benefit the HGV efforts, civil society leaders shared necessary building-blocks and ingredients for success for an effective global mobilization, tips on how to achieve cooperation, and suggestions on how to successfully mobilize international pressure.

Each leader had specific recommendations for human security initiatives such as HGV:

Beatrice Fihn, Executive Director, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)

- **Ensure diverse stakeholders shaping the movement’s aims and strategy**, including civil society, governments, academics, and international organizations.
- Craft the mobilizing message in a way that it is ambitious yet achievable, iterative, and inclusive of other existing partners. At times, one can ‘hijack’ other agendas by demanding that they “talk about your issue.”
- **The aim of the initiative needs to be narrow** enough not to be overwhelmed by dozens of different priorities and perspectives, it must also be concrete and achievable.
- **It is important that said aim cannot be blocked by one entity, institution or country**, and cannot be dependent on specific actors, but rather it must be open and able to adapt if circumstances change.
- **Even if seeking long-term, complex solutions, the basic message to the public needs to be fairly simple and understandable** as, “something that somehow leads to the improvement of something,” in order to ensure enough popular mobilization to put pressure on governments.
- Primacy of civil society actors in mobilizing people, media attention, social media hype in order to create political pressure. This needs to be through storytelling that makes people believe problem can be fixed.
- **Within civil society, the huge spectrum of actors—from para-diplomats to radical activists—must be rallied and engaged**, allowing for all to focus on their areas of strength and interest, keeping their own identities while they come together for the top-line aim.
- Rather than scaring people, noting how terrible certain realities are, showcase momentum, victories, and a notion that things are progressing, as these positive messages galvanize, engage, and empower the public, giving them a needed sense of agency.

David McNair, Executive Director, Global Policy, One Campaign

- **Stick to values no one can disagree with;**
- **Have evidence no one can dispute; and**
- **Build a diverse coalition which cannot be ignored by decision-makers.**
- **Following these three overarching principles, the biggest enemy is complacency,** so we need to build momentum, identify (and sometimes ‘manufacture’) urgent moments, building a sense of jeopardy.
- **Use the media, celebrities, different forms of communication to get your message across,** but most importantly, first have robust policy, ensure the evidence is strong and has been tested with people who might disagree.
- **Credibly illustrate that your problem needs to be solved, and that you have the solution.**
- **Localize the message:** what’s the impact of the global problem on the local community, and how can they help solve it?
- **Importance of being perceived as reasonable and realistic, but also partner with progressive activists** that can bring the urgency, shifting the Overton Window, as feasible.

Mahesh Mahalingam, Director, Communications and Global Advocacy, UNAIDS

- **Reminded of the power established institutions (such as the UN Security Council) have** to elevate the prominence of an issue, while urging not to forget engaging with communities who organize and march in the streets for a cause.
- **Indeed, the history of response to AIDS might have been different** had it not first affected gay men in North America 40 years ago, as it spurred in that community an activism—starting with basic picketing against stigma—before bureaucrats, the UN or foundations made it a global issue.
- **Both the success and failure of the AIDS response:** bringing services (drugs, condoms, educational films, needles) but unable to change the external environment that facilitates transmission, particularly given the taboo nature of HIV’s association with sex and drug use.
- **HIV made it into the Security Council in 2000 by being presented as a security issue,** a turning point in terms of political engagement that the campaign systematically leveraged going forward.
- **Importance of showing ambition** and pushing countries to adopt bold targets through community organizations.
- **Importance of using data and science that is seen as valid and credible,** but also taking risks with data and integrating it into ways of communicating that are accessible.
- **Need for a clear framework for action.**
- **Look long and hard at your failures as a movement,** the barriers to success (including complacency), and learn from them to go forward stronger and towards issues/aspects you have not yet been able to tackle.

Finding paths forward

Following the plentiful food for thought from prominent activists and strategists, Task Force members broke into working groups to deliberate about future scenarios and ways forward. Among the questions posited by facilitators: what priority solutions, actions and investments can general political wins and demonstrate change is possible; what initiatives can the Task Force support to generate public demand for Halving Global Violence; and who else needs to be brought into the fold to achieve concrete progress on violence reduction?

Potential ways forward suggested were plentiful and rich; groups suggested to explore the idea of pursuing a **political declaration** for the SDG Summit in 2023, as well as **national action plans**—mandatory but sovereign/respectful of national realities—for violence reduction. Such national action plans—avoiding a cookie cutter approach both because of the political sensitivities and factual complexities—could become steppingstones for our efforts, establishing that every country needs a violence reduction plan over a certain time frame with clear targets, with each country, or perhaps even sub-national unit, being able to establish more specific and stringent targets, germane to their local circumstances. Others considered the pros and cons of pursuing a **UNGA resolution** on global violence reduction.

In terms of plugging gaps and aspects that are still missing, participants highlighted not only setting forth a very precise definition of “violence” as will be tackled by the Task Force (and backing it up with data), but also clarifying the added value of this initiative in terms of not overlapping or competing with what already is done by other organizations. For example, is the issue of state-sponsored or police violence already adequately covered by several of the large human rights organizations? As such, are there parts of the very broad portfolio of “violence reduction” that should be set aside by the Task Force, focusing on a more limited thematic scope? Indeed, some participants posited that the Task Force should thematically **coalesce around three high-level priorities** on violence reduction, namely urban violence, violence against women, and violence against children.

Likewise, it was deemed essential to be mindful of the tensions between often very complex findings of research and knowledge and how these are communicated to a broader audience, not only in simpler terms, but also finding messages that are positive and can be replicated across different local circumstances, cultures, and languages.

Finally, as per actors that still need to be brought into the fold, a **list of potential partners** was amassed, with particular emphasis on the private sector (demonstrating with data that violence reduction has a high return on investment, or that “it’s good for business”); celebrity champions (“who is our Greta or our Malala?”); experts in the psychology of violence; more youth engagement; survivors or violence and affected communities; as well as experienced media hands that can help shepherd our complex issue into the public consciousness.

The future awaits: looking forward

Returning to plenary for a final session, Task Force members and participants discussed areas of convergence and priorities for the road ahead, albeit still full of uncertainty given pandemic realities. One participant suggested it would be important to ‘frontload’ the parts of the violence reduction agenda that are ‘non-threatening’ to state authority and power – in other words focus at first on themes such as violence against children and women as opposed to the internationalization of conflicts and terrorism.

Moreover, the Task Force's uniqueness was noted as per involving networks, communities of practice, expertise, and political influence across a range of different types of violence, a set up that—given the infamous silos that make up the violence prevention arena—does not exist elsewhere and should be the center of our collective identity. We can share a positive, non-fatalistic message for all different forms of violence, which is: violence is not an inevitable reality of the human condition but rather can be minimized, mitigated, and precluded. According to one member the Task Force, “is a unifying platform. I think that’s what this is. That’s who we are... Ultimately none of our agendas will succeed until all of our agendas succeed.”

In a similar vein, another participant highlighted the need to construct not only the aforementioned framework for action, but also the accompanying narrative that allows us to have both a sense of urgency and possibility, while still respecting the reality that there will be a ‘long-haul’ commitment and efforts to achieve the goal.

A collective ‘to do list’

At the close of the meeting, answers of ‘what’ the Task Force is and wants to achieve, may have gained consensus, but specifics on ‘how’ it will deliver its ambition over the next two years were still left to further clarify and validate. An important call from participants is that **the Task Force gives itself an imperative for concrete action**, as discussions could extend for years. A concrete road map for the next two years was deemed an essential component of eventual success. In this respect, one participant noted it is essential that the Task Force does not become “another talk shop” but rather **spurs programs and policies that can directly affect violence levels on the ground.**

Another call was to clarify and consolidate the proposed theory of change: “the special alchemy of data, evidence, messaging that will change State behavior, private sector commitments, and citizen action.” The next iteration of Task Force plans need to deeply delve into the details, diagraming, and design of the entire process to completion. Finally, an outstanding question that demands clarification is, what should be the Task Force’s metrics of success? Exactly which forms of violence will we propose to focus on and thus reduce by 50% by 2030? Should the focus be solely on lethal violence? On all forms of (physical) violence, from spanking to assault to sexual violence to mass atrocities? Or perhaps, as suggested, our collective should focus on a more limited subset of types of violence, particularly those that currently gain underwhelming attention from the international community (such as urban violence, violence against children, and violence against women, for example)?

As the Halving Global Violence Task Force and the Pathfinders endeavor to answer these and other seminal questions in the period ahead, in terms of communications it is clear that we will need to collectively devise a ‘simple message, but with a complex strategy’, customizing messages to different constituencies (broader public, national leaders, mayors, international policy makers, private sector, etc.), but also bespoke strategies. We will need to put in place strategies fitting to each agent of change (e.g. national action plans for state, strategies to leverage financing for cities, ways for business to enhance commitments and foundations to increase support for violence reduction, and citizens to shift values/norms/behaviors around violence).

While neither a short nor simple ‘to do list’, the spirit of collective commitment and enthusiastic engagement that animated the discussions ‘at’ Wilton Park should serve the Task Force well on the road ahead.

3 | Annex – Task Force Composition

Task Force Co-Chairs



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