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A world map with a light gray background. The regions of Latin America, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa are highlighted in a dark blue color. The rest of the world is shown in light gray.

# **Models for Prevention: Lessons from the Sahel, Horn, and Latin America**

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**Cover:** Data visualization based on those regions covered in this study.

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## Introduction

This report accompanies the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research's 2022 publication *Stress Testing the UN's Regional Prevention Approaches*. This project was designed to take stock of the UN's approaches to regional prevention several years after the introduction of interconnected UN reforms, and assess how these reforms have translated into different prevention approaches in three regions: Latin America, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. The main report found that expectations, strategies, and capacities to implement the Secretary-General's prevention agenda varied considerably across all three regions, and offered a range of cross-cutting lessons and recommendations for future regional strategy development.

Experts interviewed over the course of this study include regional leaders and members of the prevention offices in the Great Lakes, Central Africa, and Central Asia, as well as senior UN officials at UN Headquarters, Resident Coordinators, and field specialists responsible for or working in Latin America, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. Many of the study's participants indicated that there were still too few opportunities to come together and learn from contextualized regional prevention approaches and requested additional cross-regional analysis. *Stress Testing the UN's Regional Prevention Approaches* and this accompanying report respond to that request by analyzing three broad regional approaches in Latin America, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa and translating these into specific prevention models.

The authors identify three prevention models: (a) a 'cascading model' in the Sahel, where regional strategies are meant to shape national plans; (b) a 'net model' in the Horn, that aims not only to provide a platform for prevention actors to come together in a very broad and permeable configuration, but also encourages them to move in the direction of greater coherence; and (c) an 'alliance model' in Latin America built around coalitions that form on the basis of appeals between Resident Coordinators and regional actors for specific and specialist input and funding, taking into account locally-identified risks. This report argues that there could be broader application of all or parts of these models across other settings. Understanding their nuances will improve the design of future prevention strategies, identify opportunities for multi-stakeholder partnership, and support programming at the national and regional levels.

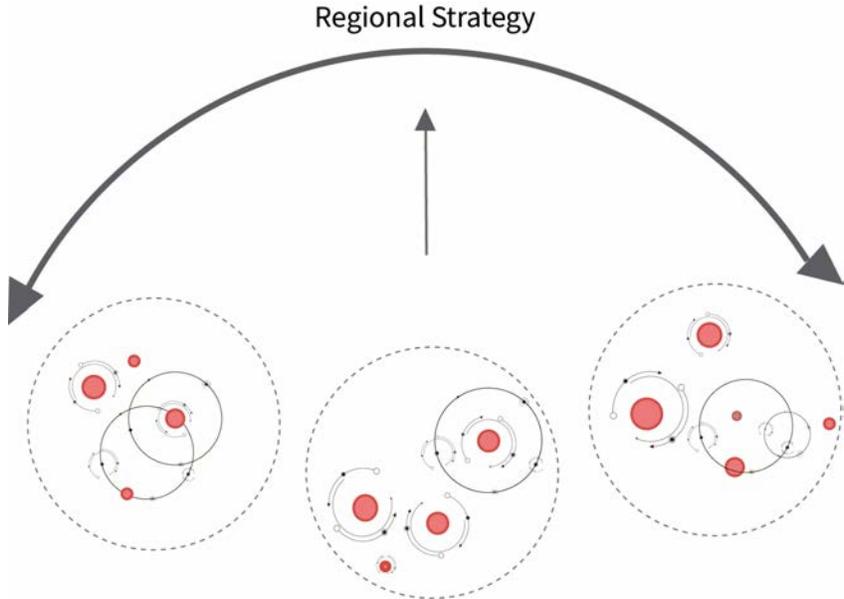
## A Focus on Models

As the accompanying report observes, the concept and practice of prevention defies simple definitions and descriptions, but some common elements tend to surface when discussing these themes. A focus on root causes of conflict, for example, is common to most initiatives considered in this study. The UN reforms paved the way for greater collaboration across the UN's traditional pillars of work to address the root causes of conflict; they have specifically led to the inclusion of development actors more systematically in prevention efforts over the last few years, helping to shift the Organization incrementally toward more integrated prevention strategies.

UN resources and experts collected and coordinated to address conflict risks can make a significant difference the UN's overall prevention posture and meaningfully support prevention objectives. While leveraging the resources and expertise across these traditional pillars makes

eminent sense, insufficient attention has been paid to the way these resources combine in practice at the regional level. Models can help clarify patterns, modes, and means of cooperation in support of the prevention agenda, surfacing dominant characteristics and features of prevention networks. At minimum these models will capture certain specific features of a prevention ecosystem and describe: (a) the strategic orientation; (b) participants; and (c) scope or ambition.

### ‘Cascading Model’ in the Sahel



The Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) is one of the most well-established and longstanding UN regional strategies in the system. Formalized by a 2013 Security Council resolution, the UNISS sits at the apex of two UN structures: the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), and the UN Support Plan for the Sahel (UNSP). As the regional prevention office, UNOWAS is headed by an Under-Secretary-General and leads on all political/good offices engagements, including coordinating international political support to mediation efforts, coordinated efforts with regional institutions like the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Mano River Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, and the regional security arrangement called the G-5 Sahel. As such, UNOWAS is considered the “political arm” of the UN’s Sahel strategy, and can be thought of as supplying the UN’s political leverage to these regional bodies. And this support can have an effect beyond the Sahel, given that the regional bodies it supports are not restricted to Sahelian countries (e.g. the Lake Chad Basin Commission covers Central African Republic and Libya).

Also headed by an Under Secretary-General, the UNSP is the “development arm” of the strategy, tasked with implementing a 12-year UN-wide set of development priorities across the region (2018-2030). The key substantive aspect of the UNSP – and what aligns it with the broader UNISS – is its three pillar approach that identifies key priority areas for support: governance, security, and resilience. This plan does not directly dictate national programming, but is meant to “align resources behind the overarching goals of UNISS” and give overall direction and support to the UN’s programmes. Indeed, we found a relatively high degree of consistency

between the priority areas laid out in the UNSP and national programming: more than 70 per cent of national programming was aligned with first- and second-level root causes identified in the regional strategy. This appears to be a growing percentage, indicating that the priorities set at the regional level may be gradually filtering down into national priorities as well.

The concept of the Sahel strategy can thus be modelled as bottom-up in terms of analysis: drawing analysis from the Resident Coordinator level upwards into the regional strategies, helping to identify common root causes of instability across the region. But the strategy is then implemented largely top down in terms of driving resource mobilization and programmatic implementation, helping to align the enormous international resources gradually with the priority areas identified in the analysis. In this regard, there is a significant (and quite logical) asymmetry in the two “sides” of the UNISS: nearly all of the resources flow through the UNSP into development and humanitarian programming, with far less going to support the political work of the UN via UNOWAS and its partners.

This heavy investment in the development plan for the Sahel has contributed to several unique aspects of the UN’s engagement in the region. First, the dedicated team supporting the UNSP has been able to draw from data of the development and humanitarian programming to produce analytical tools about the UN’s actions in the Sahel. For example, in 2021, the UN was able to track expenditures across programming, identifying gaps between stated priority areas and actual funding flows, importantly in areas like women and youth. Second, the significant peacebuilding investment has allowed for a growing number of cross-border projects aimed at reducing risks of escalation, demonstrating the real utility of a regional approach over siloed national ones. And third, the deep focus on addressing root causes has begun to give the UN a longer view of the kinds of investments that might be needed across the region – having a 12-year development plan versus two to four year plans more typical in the UN (or even none at all) is evidence of the more structural approach that is enabled by this kind of thinking.

This cascading model does not mean that the Sahel plan directly drives national programming. Indeed, it should be highlighted that Resident Coordinators remain largely focused on their own national plans, developing Country Cooperation Frameworks with their respective host governments and nationally-based UN country teams. In this respect, some nationally-based UN actors saw little relationship between the UNISS and planning at a national level, though there does appear to be a gradual alignment between the two.

Based on the expert consultations, the following “pros” and “cons” of the cascading model were identified:

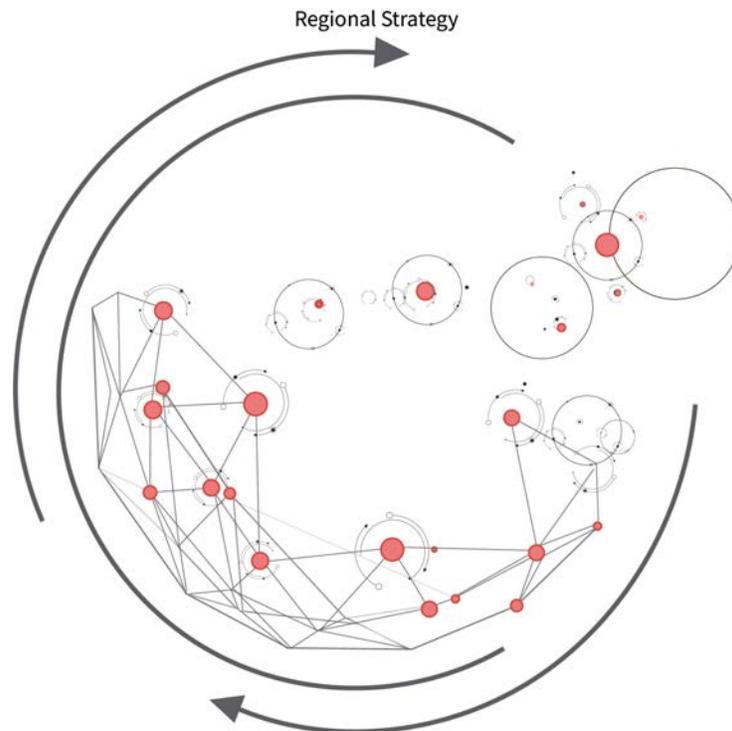
**Potential pros:**

- Ties political engagement and programmatic support into a single strategy, possibly giving the political work greater leverage.
- Has high-level buy-in, including a Security Council mandate and public recognition of the overall plan.
- Allows for large-scale funding to be aligned behind common priorities, with some influence on national programming.
- Generates significant amounts of data that can be folded back into analysis/planning.

## Potential cons:

- Creates a bifurcated structure where two Under-Secretary-Generals are implementing two parts of the same strategy, possibly causing some competition over resourcing.
- Has created significant burden on regional planning side, without necessarily generating buy-in from the Resident Coordinators.
- May obscure significant subregional diversity, given large disparities across the Sahel.

## ‘Net Model’ in the Horn of Africa



The Horn of Africa strategy is one of the newest in the UN, formed in 2018 at a moment of significant optimism about trends in the region. Unlike the Sahel, the Horn strategy does not have a separate development plan and is far more focused on the political engagement of the Special Envoy. Reflecting its political focus, the strategy was developed largely behind UN doors, and has not been published or used as the public face of the work of the Envoy. While it does provide a platform for collaboration and information-sharing across the UN, it does not purport to drive new programming or generate new resources. As such, the Horn model is more like a “net,” loosely drawing together UN actors into a common constellation.

The strategy itself is clear that it does not envisage creating new frameworks or drive new programming where such already exist. Instead, the Horn regional work is described as complementary to that of regional and subregional actors (operating under the principle of subsidiarity). In some respects, this means the strategy is relatively unambitious, focused mainly on building entry points for political interventions and providing a platform for information-sharing across the UN family. It also dedicates much less public-facing work than the Sahel strategy to addressing deeper root causes of conflict in the region, and has generated far less data on the impact of the UN’s work.

In addition to the political track, however, the Horn strategy does base itself on four pillars that roughly align with the Sahel: (1) regional peace and security; (2) resilience and socioeconomic development; (3) inclusive and responsive governance; and (4) sustainable natural resources management and climate adaptability. By creating an implementation matrix, holding regular working group meetings across these groups, and appointing special rapporteurs from the key agencies on each, the Horn strategy has gradually developed more common approaches to joint analysis, early warning, anti-criminal work, cross-border programming, climate-sensitive approaches, and regional integration.

The net model has allowed for a fairly loose constellation of UN actors, possibly reflecting the quite fragmented politics of the Horn more generally, but has gradually brought them together into more collective activities. Particularly in the areas of analyzing regional risks and development cross-border programming, the matrix has proven an important locus for the UN. However, this loose group has also meant some UN agencies operating nationally see little value in the regional strategy, preferring to pursue their own mandates and only superficially participate in the matrix process. At the same time, the lack of large-scale resource mobilization via the matrix may well have minimized some of the tendencies towards competition witnessed across the Sahel.

Based on the expert consultations, the following “pros” and “cons” of the net model were identified:

**Possible pros:**

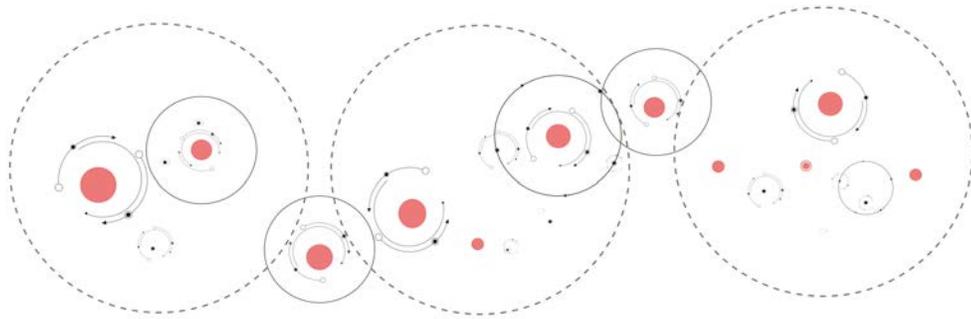
- The low-profile, internal development of the strategy may work well in regions that are “allergic” to international intervention, or where sovereignty barriers are particularly high.
- The loose constellation of UN coordination gives greater flexibility for agencies, funds, and programmes to respond to needs at the national level.
- The absence of regional resource flows may reduce the sense of competition across the UN.
- The relatively low ambition level of the strategy could be more realistic in settings where the UN is unlikely to achieve significant traction.

**Possible cons:**

- The production of a strategy entirely behind closed doors means very limited buy-in from national and regional bodies, and limited scope for building collaboration with them.
- The light-touch matrix approach may mean UN agencies, funds, and programmes see little value in deeper participation in the four clusters, potentially undermining its purpose.
- Without significant resources attached to the strategy, the UN has fewer sources of leverage to elicit action by others.

## ‘Alliance Model’ in Latin America

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In contrast to the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, Latin America does not have a dedicated senior official responsible for prevention, nor is there a single reference strategy or framework that guides prevention activities in the region. Prevention strategies are scattered across a network of actors in the region. Some adopt the language of prevention to describe their work, while others still struggle with the amorphous terminology and, specifically, the broadened definition of development as prevention. The result is a decentralized system of actors that cooperate but only opportunistically collaborate on explicit prevention activities, most of which are located at the subregional level in Latin America.

Similarly, resources for prevention activities are not mobilized and directed by any single senior UN official in the region, though in some cases a subregional thematic initiative is led and championed at a senior level, such as in the case of the Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and south-southeast Mexico (CDP), which the Secretary-General has asked the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to lead; or the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) which is coordinated by a Joint Special Representative for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants appointed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration.<sup>1</sup> Funding for prevention activities is typically mobilized through dedicated single agency initiatives (e.g. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ *Equipo de Respuesta a Emergencias* ERT in Central America) or joint agency thematic initiatives (e.g. R4V), coordinated by the agency regional directors or respective headquarters’ offices.

The absence of a single coordinating figure has created space for Resident Coordinators to play a more directive role in regional prevention. Inspired by the Secretary-General’s vision of a UN system coming together to “do everything [it] can to help countries avoid the outbreak of crises [...] and undermine the institutions and capacities necessary to achieve peace and development,” some Resident Coordinators have spearheaded national prevention strategies with support from specialists working under a UN Development Programme (UNDP) Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) initiative, integrating new multidimensional prevention analysis as dedicated chapters of their Comprehensive Country Analysis (CCAs).<sup>2</sup> Resident Coordinators

have also reached across country borders to mobilize interest and support from other country teams and neighbouring Resident Coordinators to address cross-border challenges identified through such analyses. Their efforts to advance the UN's prevention agenda has resulted in some notable successes in resource mobilization, adding a third useful pathway for resource mobilization on regional prevention, complementing single-agency or joint-agency fundraising initiatives.

There are examples of regional prevention initiatives in Latin America originating from the local, regional, and AFP headquarters (agency, fund programmes) levels. Many subregional prevention initiatives spring from immediate or perceived medium-term risk analysis. Local coalitions form out of necessity and issue appeals to regional actors – such as the Regional Collaborative Platform and its Issues-Based Coalitions – and headquarters teams (typically mediated through regional AFP directors) for specific and specialist input and funding. One Resident Coordinator described the mode of engagement with the Regional Collaborative Platform as one where “Resident Coordinators need to incentivize and mobilize” the UN's regional assets, and not the other way around.

These bottom-up prevention initiatives are difficult to develop and sustain, as they do not benefit from the visibility and resources that a regional prevention champion can command. This is a notable hurdle for Resident Coordinators attempting to translate prevention analysis into concrete activities. One key challenge to resource mobilization is the lack of a standing funding mechanism that can rapidly support upstream prevention activities in a middle-income country context. This challenge is exacerbated by the shift from predictable core funding toward earmarked funding, which in the prevention context tends to favour downstream *conflict* prevention over upstream prevention activities.

The three absences described here are dominant features of the prevention landscape in Latin America: absence of a single senior representative for prevention in the region, absence of a guiding prevention strategy, and the absence of predictable upstream prevention funding. The alliance prevention model is a direct outgrowth of this operating environment. The strength and impact of prevention activities in the alliance prevention model therefore depend on parallel investments across *ad hoc* alliances. This drives both competition for attention and resources, but it can also generate innovative networked prevention initiatives.

A useful example of the alliance prevention model in Latin America is the Gran Chaco Americano initiative. It is not the largest prevention activity – the CDP and R4V initiatives are both significantly larger and better resourced – but it is among the most innovative and demonstrates how alliances among Resident Coordinators can lead to impactful cross-border prevention analysis, even in the absence of significant investment from the UN's regional assets.

Based on the expert consultations, the following “pros” and “cons” of the alliance model were identified:

**Possible pros:**

- The flexibility of the model allows Resident Coordinators to respond to their country's needs, empowering them as the main prevention actors.

- The lack of a top-down regional plan may allow for more locally-derived coalitions and initiatives to flourish.
- The development focus of the alliance model may help in regions with high sovereignty barriers, and/or a resistance to more security-focused engagement by the UN.

**Possible cons:**

- Without an overarching conflict prevention framing, issues that could lead to instability may lack the necessary profile in terms of generating attention and resources.
- Sustaining subregional and local initiatives can be difficult without a higher-level plan to pitch to donors, and can lead to competition between the UN and others for resources.
- The UN’s impact depends almost entirely on the resources and engagement of other actors, many of whom may have different focuses or mandates.

## Key Considerations When Building a New Regional Model or Strategy

The three models detailed above reflect the specific trajectories of the Sahel, the Horn and Latin America, the grouping of UN actors in each region, and the analysis of the UN leadership of what was needed at the time. The Sahel strategy was born at a moment of significant and overlapping crises in the region and has evolved to become more development focused over time. In contrast, the Horn strategy was developed at a moment of regional rapprochement and has had to adapt to successive shocks including the coups in Sudan, the war in Ethiopia, and a deterioration in relations across the region. The Latin America strategy reflects the strong focus on development-led interventions by the UN, though it has had to grapple with emerging security risks and the need for more conflict prevention focus over time.

The UN has reached a moment when many of its regional strategies are at a midway point, while others are due for renewal. During this, UN leadership will need to make decisions about the configuration of the UN and the appropriate process to develop new or revised regional strategies.

Drawing on the above models and the pros and cons identified, the following questions and considerations should drive that new strategic development:

### 1. What are the regional politics?

Often, a strategy will be based upon a thorough analysis of conflict drivers, socioeconomic trends, and risk factors, which are important in developing the UN’s approach. However, across the strategies reviewed, there was relatively little analysis of the specific regional political dynamics, how regional organizations functioned (or failed to function), and what barriers to effective regional engagement might be presented by these relationships. Having a good understanding of the regional politics, including a mapping of actors and their relationships, will allow the UN to design a model that fits.

## **2. How much is this a strategy for the UN, versus for the region?**

Some strategies are developed entirely behind closed doors, others are very public and/or built-in collaboration with regional bodies. Having a frank discussion about the role of regional and national leaders in the development of a strategy is an important early step that seems to have been somewhat ignored in past strategies. And having a plan to ensure regional organizational buy-in is necessary regardless of whether they are directly involved in the strategy.

## **3. What are you trying to accomplish?**

Typically, a strategy contains an organizational goal and a set of activities meant to help achieve that goal. Strikingly, many of the UN's strategies remain extremely fuzzy on goals, instead employing proxy terms like "supporting resilience" or "support to inclusive development" that speak more to the UN's activities than to any meaningful goal. While of course cognizant of the limited scope of the UN to deliver on its own, a more concrete description of the UN's goals would enable greater focus in strategy development, including by allowing for a discussion of the very long timeframe for some of the more ambitious goals (e.g. long-term governance reforms).

## **4. What is the value added of the UN in the region?**

This research has surfaced very distinct roles and weight of the UN in different settings. Yet in the strategies, there is seldom any clear understanding of the particular contribution the UN will make, alongside or in partnerships the other actors in the region. As earlier policy research<sup>3</sup> on this issue has outlined, analysing the contribution of the UN in the context of the other key actors with leverage is a crucial step.

## **5. What is the theory of change?**

In addition to understanding the value added of the UN, it is crucial that the UN's regional strategies articulate a theory of change over time. This can be expressed as a series of if-then statements, but any theory of change requires significant analysis and a solid understanding of the specificities of the region. Indeed, building a regional theory of change may be the most complex aspect of a strategy, but it is indispensable if the UN is to become more serious about tracking the impact of its activities.

## **6. Should the regional analysis drive the national programming?**

Repeatedly, UN experts lamented the lack of connection between regional analysis and national programming. Indeed, this study found few instances where a national programme was directly driven by a regional plan. More often, regional approaches attempted to corral actors generally in the same direction, help to establish common priorities, and allow for a more organic evolution towards integration between the regional and the national. In many cases, this might be sufficient, and it certainly appears a more realistic relationship than one where regional strategies have a direct role in shaping national programming. But there may be an exception for cross-border programmes, where the value-added of the regional analysis was much clearer.

## 7. What if things change?

A simple question, but an important one. The Horn strategy, for example, was developed at a moment when nearly all trends in the region appeared positive, but only 18 months later it was engulfed in a series of conflicts. On the one hand, this may point to the need to be more risk sensitive in designing a strategy, but one should also be wary of overly cautious approaches that could miss opportunities. Instead, a strategy should contain within it certain triggers for review, along with the ability to change course quickly. For example, the UN already has a Policy Committee decision on unconstitutional changes in government, which generates a high-level decision in the case of coups or other such events. A regional strategy should likewise be able to shift course quickly and nimbly when needed, taking on board the increasingly accepted notions of adaptive peacebuilding as a central aspect of its work.

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<sup>1</sup> International Organization on Migration, “Joint statement by UNHCR and IOM on the appointment of Mr. Eduardo Stein, as a Joint Special Representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the region,” 19 September 2018, <https://www.iom.int/news/joint-statement-unhcr-and-iom-appointment-mr-eduardo-stein-joint-special-representative-venezuelan-refugees-and-migrants-region>.

<sup>2</sup> António Guterres, “Afrontar el reto de la prevención,” *United Nations Chronicle* 53, 3 (2017), <https://www.un.org/es/chronicle/article/afrontar-el-reto-de-la-prevencion>.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Day et al., *Assessment Framework for UN Preventive Diplomacy: An Approach for UN Mediators and International Policymakers* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2018) <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/2729/UN-Preventive-Diplomacy-Assessment-Framework.pdf>.



**The UN country teams from Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay - including Bolivian Resident Coordinator Susana Sottoli (right) - during a mission that toured various communities in the Bolivian and Paraguayan Gran Chaco.**

Photo: Morelia Erósteguo / UN Bolivia



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