

The prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities is not needed in some places some of the time but everywhere all the time. The Covid Pandemic should underline this truism, not undermine it. An established lesson of atrocity prevention is that moments of acute stress exacerbate existing structural risk factors of atrocities and create new ones. The coronavirus crisis will be no exception; without timely and effective preventative measures, the economic, social, and political consequences will likely take more lives than the virus itself.

Every country in the world will experience identity-based violence as a result of the Covid Pandemic. This already includes widespread documentation of hate crime against people of Chinese and east Asian appearance across the global north, increased attacks against Muslims in India, and a worldwide rise in domestic violence.¹ Some states have been quick to mobilise the crisis to justify, or distract attention from, authoritarian power grabs. Hungary's government moved to freeze refugee applications within days of the virus reaching Europe and is seeking to end the legal recognition of trans people.² In Brazil there are concerns that indigenous communities in the Amazon are in danger of being "wiped out" by the disease as the President continues to deny its dangers.³ In Myanmar and Syria there are concerns that the virus will be weaponised by the state against vulnerable displaced communities.⁴

The atrocity prevention community and its associated architecture must now be leveraged to ensure that the Covid-19 response has at its heart what decades of practice have taught us: Intersectional, inclusive communities are where resilience of all kinds comes from –whether in the face of a pandemic, economic crisis or identity-based division. This is as true on the global level as it is the national and local. We are therefore presented with a once in a century opportunity to respond to a worldwide challenge with a genuinely global and prevention-oriented response.

This short brief sets out how the atrocity prevention community can activate their expertise amid the Covid-19 pandemic and proposes recommendations for states and donors.

No community, society or country is immune to identity-based violence; rather, constant and consistent effort is required from local grassroots to political leaderships to ensure that the fundamental rights and freedoms of all are protected and respected. In times of political, economic, or social crisis, all societies become more vulnerable.

The Covid Pandemic is now the stress test our already stressed communities do not need. In the last decade, more middle-income countries, including those with relatively strong institutions, experienced rising violence, including mass atrocities, calling into question 'the long-standing assumption that peace will accompany income growth and the expectations of steady social, economic, and political advancement that defined the end of the twentieth century.'⁵ The globalisation of hate-based networks and growing polarisation in democratic politics has likewise upended the belief that the prevention of identity-based violence is only required in some parts of the world but not others. These trends could well be accelerated by the pandemic and its ripple effects.

1. [A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Violence Rises Worldwide, New York Times, 14 April 2020](#)
2. [Hungary seeks to end legal recognition of trans people amid Covid-19 crisis, Guardian, 2 April 2020](#)
3. [Coronavirus 'could wipe out Brazil's indigenous people', BBC, 6 April 2020](#)
4. [Covid-19 will massacre prisoners on the Syrian regime's behalf, New Statesman, 9 April 2020; One of the world's most vulnerable groups now finds itself confronting covid-19, Washington Post, 2 April 2020](#)
5. [Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, UN-World Bank, October 2018, p.iii](#)

The principles of atrocity prevention teach us that moments of stress can lead to rapid fracture and sharply increase the vulnerabilities of already marginalised groups as well as groups that may previously have considered themselves 'safe.' Toleration for the suffering of one group render others more vulnerable and undermines social and political resilience to division, propaganda, and fear.

Unless identity-based violence prevention are integrated into local, national and global responses to the worldwide health crisis, the pandemic risks accelerating these trends.

Effective prevention, whether of disease or violence, requires an ecosystem. As communities, national governments, and international organisations wrestle with current challenges and prepare for worse to come they must do so together and holistically across issues rather than pivot to a narrow health-only response. It is essential that the instinct to firefight does not come at the expense of longer-term interventions that will help prevent consequences of Covid-19 that we can predict and those which we cannot yet see.

Organisations with expertise in preventing risk factors of identity-based violence, including mass atrocities, should mobilise to work with local, national, and regional actors implementing Covid responses. Funders should support cross-sector thinking as well as doing, recognising that social, political, and economic consequences of the pandemic will usher a new era for human rights. State and inter-governmental mechanisms tasked with upholding contributions to prevent marginalisation, hate crime, violent extremism, and mass atrocities must not be deprioritised but be explicitly included in wider Covid decision-making and scenario planning. Cross-cutting networks, such as the Strong Cities Network and the Focal Points for the Responsibility to Protect should be activated to elevate, connect, and communicate identity-based violence prevention 'at home' and 'abroad' as mutually reinforcing essential obligations.

Changing how we work

Having to discover new means of everyday communication, convening, and working hold opportunities to overcome problems of geography and resource that have hindered having truly global conversations about atrocity prevention for too long. While language barriers, access to stable internet connection and computers, and structural privilege will persist; the geography of our conversation has changed. State and civil society actors are already adapting their programmes for the new reality. This opens possibilities for creative communication channels that are more inclusive and intersectional, and therefore help to break down barriers of bias, and better connect local, national, and international perspectives.

There is a chance for the atrocity prevention community, particularly organisations based in the global north, to learn from the very experts who are too frequently absent from the decision-making tables. Many colleagues, and many of the communities that the atrocity prevention sector has worked with and on behalf of, already possess the expertise and learnings of how to navigate acute strain, collective grief, home schooling, food shortages and chronic anxiety – often while also implementing effective preventative and protective activities.

The threats posed by the coronavirus and its consequences are so wide ranging in scope and scale there is an opportunity to reset popular as well and national engagement with local responsibilities, national politics, and global governance.

What can states do?

1. Support a global ceasefire

Most immediately and for a sustained period, states should throw their weight behind the Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire. These calls are supported by a coalition of over one hundred NGOs, many of whom work on the prevention of mass atrocities and towards positive, sustainable peace.⁶ The goals of the ceasefire are urgent and seek to ensure communities are prepared to mount an effective response to coronavirus; allow life-saving humanitarian aid to meet escalating needs on the ground as the virus spreads to the most vulnerable communities; and protect humanitarian and healthcare workers risking their own health and safety.⁷ If momentum can be sustained, and this unprecedented moment in world history can bring a pause to conflict then it also will open longer-term opportunities for peace, cooperation, and multilateral reform.

2. Integrate monitoring of identity-based violence indicators into Covid-19 responses

The consequences of weak resilience in the face of the Covid Pandemic and the economic crisis that will follow are difficult to predict. Atrocity prevention teaches that certain processes and warning signs signal a society's vulnerability to divisive and hate-based behaviours. These indicators of hate are used all over the world to assess resilience of states and societies.⁸ Risk factors and indicators therefore need to be closely monitored, not only in countries where atrocities are already ongoing or considered more likely, but in all states.

The integration of atrocity-specific analysis into Covid-19 policies and decision-making processes will help maximise and coordinate contributions towards effective prediction and prevention as states respond to the pandemic and its consequences. This should include the insertion of indicators of risk particular to identity-based violence, including violent extremism and mass atrocities, into horizon scanning, next stage scenario mapping, and strategic planning.

3. Leverage existing atrocity prevention and R2P mechanisms

States that already have national mechanisms or frameworks tasked with implementing commitments to predict, prevent and respond to mass atrocities can ensure that covid-19 related scenario planning and risks assessments are included in working processes.

The global network of R2P focal points is now made up of over 60 senior-level representatives from countries in all regions of the world.⁹ The European Union and Organization of American States also have appointed their own R2P Focal Points. This is a ready-made mechanism to coordinate national, regional, and multilateral coordination to ensure that responses to the coronavirus crisis integrate the principles of atrocity prevention. They can convene within their own governments, raise questions, and share information, ensuring that those tasked with responding to Covid-19 and its consequences are applying an identity-based violence and atrocity prevention-sensitive approach.

6. www.globalceasefire.org

7. [Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council's Full Support, Crisis Group, 9 April](#)

8. These are drawn from Protection Approaches' risk analysis framework and global best practice including: 'Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes; A tool for prevention', United Nations 2014; and 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity' UNDP, 2016

9. [Global Network of R2P Focal Points, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect](#)

What can donors do?

1. Support new means of convening and virtual dialogue

New means of communication could significantly impact common understanding of identity-based violence and atrocity prevention, help to narrow the gap between early warning and timely response, and even dismantle misconceptions of atrocity prevention and the responsibility to protect as exclusionary or ‘western’ agendas. In addition, establishing virtual ways of working could dramatically reduce the atrocity prevention sector’s carbon footprint, reconciling how we work with our shared mission. This might mean channelling funding into providing internet connectivity to those who live and operate without internet access, which some studies have shown is a primary indicator of an increase in positive peace.¹⁰

2. Champion prevention everywhere all of the time, rather than only in some places some of the time

Donors can help practitioners to push at the boundaries of what we mean by identity-based violence and atrocity prevention. And of where we consider it is needed. While recognising that it will always be vulnerable and marginalised communities in the most fragile and insecure contexts who are most at risk, and therefore require our utmost attention, the principles of atrocity prevention and peacebuilding hold important lessons for all societies. If we can accept that prevention is more effective the earlier it begins, and we recognise that there is not a region in the world that is immune to identity-based violence or atrocity, then prevention is not something needed in some places some of the time but everywhere all of the time. Moreover, in so doing, reorienting prevention activities to include where they are needed in the global north could simultaneously work to dismantle real and perceived biases embedded within, and therefore holding back, atrocity prevention, the principle of a collective responsibility to protect, and the wider human rights agenda.

3. Ensure psychosocial support for grantees

While even the immediate impacts of the pandemic and its consequences are not yet clear, Covid-19 is already presenting unique challenges to the work of NGOs working in this field. Our mental health and our resilience, as individuals, as teams, and as a sector, is under strain. Even before the coronavirus crisis hit, large parts of the atrocity prevention community were already ill-equipped to adequately support the double burden endemic within the human rights civil society of poor mental health and overwhelming work load. In light of the Covid Pandemic, NGOs are now worried even more worried about the vulnerable communities they work with and to support, and about their own staff and families. Big questions about how to fundraise during and in the wake of Covid-19, how to adapt programming, and how to uphold charitable objectives are likely to occupy hours of valuable time for the foreseeable future.

10. [Positive Peace Report, Institute For Economics & Peace, 2019](#)