



Wilton Park



Image: Brian Papantonio

Report

Preventing mass violence and atrocities

Monday 29 – Wednesday 31 October 2018 | WP1645

In partnership with:



The
Stanley
Foundation

Protection
Approaches



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Executive summary

- Mass atrocity crimes are currently occurring in six countries, according to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and populations are at imminent or significant risk of falling victim to crimes of mass atrocity in at least nine other countries. Atrocity crimes have been rising year on year since 2012, leading to an increase in civilian casualties, protracted crises, and forced displacement. The primary, secondary and tertiary effects of atrocities ‘ripple out into the world and cause massive instability and insecurity’. Effective prevention of mass atrocities saves both lives and significant resource for donor countries and yet the international community has often under prioritised prevention efforts.
- Wilton Park, Protection Approaches and the Stanley Foundation brought together a diverse group of experts and practitioners working on the prevention of mass atrocities to identify steps that states, civil society, and regional networks might take to better integrate the prevention of mass violence and atrocities in a more coordinated and systematised way. It was a conversation that sought to draw on the knowledge and capacity of local, national and international stakeholders. This meeting built upon previous Wilton Park discussions on protecting civilians, including the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), recent efforts to activate atrocity prevention in the UK by Protection Approaches, and the Stanley Foundation’s longstanding leadership in the field. This meeting was set in the broader context of increasing developments across the breadth of the United Nations (UN) system on ‘prevention’; from the Sustainable Development Goals, the Human Rights Upfront Initiative, to Secretary-General António Guterres new report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and the UN/World Bank Pathways for Peace report on ‘Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict’.
- There is growing consensus that current approaches to the prevention of violence and the protection of civilians are not working. Prevention is a matter of both national security and national interest for all States, and therefore requires state-level as well as multilateral commitment. Secretary General Guterres has called for member states to develop national mechanisms on atrocity prevention and integrate norms and tools in existing policy processes. Pathways for Peace calls for a “comprehensive shift toward preventing violence and sustaining peace” and “presents national and international actors an agenda for action to ensure that attention, efforts, and resources are focused on prevention”. In establishing the Atrocities Prevention Board, the US has articulated the challenge as a ‘vital’ national interest, while other states in Africa and Latin America are developing their own national and regional strategies for prevention. With the UN Security Council finding itself increasingly in deadlock on issues of prevention and protection, this meeting sought to build upon and learn from examples where states enhanced their national efforts. While the meeting took on a

warning signs within and at Europe's borders as well as Europe's contributions to the global challenge of rising atrocity crimes.

- The dialogue provided a platform for the sharing of evidence-based knowledge and drew upon experiences of donors and programmers, aiming to facilitate the exchange of perspective, evidence, and best practice, while also creating opportunity for intellectual interrogation of both concepts and assumptions. It addressed questions such as: how can different stakeholders, especially government, civil society and grassroots actors, work more collaboratively together to develop effective resilience agendas that support, protect and empower the communities most affected by violence? What prevention approaches and models work? How might they be transferred? How can governments and multilateral organizations ensure that future policy and commitments are rooted in robust evidence? What international, national, and local mechanisms can best initiate early preventative action?

Key points of discussion

1. **Prevention at home, and abroad.** With identity-based violence rising worldwide, including in many northern democracies, and with indicators of deeper, long-lasting division worsening across Europe and elsewhere, it has become necessary for European States and the US to refocus on prevention at home in order to protect their populations, including their migrant populations, and to uphold responsibilities abroad. Participants discussed growing responsibilities of global north and donor states and their civil society communities towards populations within and at their own national borders. These challenges were addressed alongside current crises in fragile states with many highlighting that perceptions of inconsistency in preventing and responding to identity-based violence at home and abroad ran the risk of undermining the legitimacy of the wider prevention agenda.
2. **Integration not replication.** While the prevention of mass atrocities may sometimes be seen as a very specific and often overwhelming goal, it is an agenda that straddles many global challenges. It does not necessarily mean inventing new mechanisms but rather simply applying a way of thinking to decision making, whether as an individual, as a political party, or a government. Adopting a 'prevention lens', or creating what Alex Bellamy calls an atrocity prevention 'seat' at the policy table, can improve local, national, regional, and international prevention efforts across government departments and the civil society sector relating to development, security, and humanitarian affairs (among others). Viewing issues through an atrocity prevention lens put simply means that attention is given in decision-making to how best to protect populations. Such a focus can be cost effective, or even cost-neutral. In addition, participants placed emphasis on the importance of institutionalising integration within bureaucracy and practice.
3. **Harmonising with overlapping agendas.** While mass atrocities typically occur within situations of armed conflict, this is not always the case. Atrocity prevention is still commonly associated with conflict prevention despite the fact that there are important distinctions in response, and conflict prevention measures can hinder or undermine atrocity prevention or civilian protection efforts. While participants noted the distinctions between development, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention, they also welcomed the important points of overlap, and acknowledged that, in practice, definitional differences matter very little to those most vulnerable to violence. Upstream atrocity prevention involves a spectrum of activities, including community building, addressing the roots of identity-based violence, media development, assessment and forecasting, the protection and promotion of social cohesion, human rights standards, and normative and treaty-bound obligations, among others.

4. **Narrowing the gap between the local and international.** The gap between international and local prevention, including protection strategies, frameworks and actors, can be better bridged through strengthening existing networks and creating opportunities for new actors and inclusive engagement. Involvement of all actors across sectors in protection and prevention from the beginning can aid in overcoming challenges in disseminating multilateral norms to national responses, and can serve to incorporate diverse perspectives in developing effective prevention. Ensuring that resilience agendas, early warning systems and prevention frameworks are developed with local actors and sympathetically to local context is vital to ensuring long term and sustainable measures for stakeholders from all levels to better predict, prevent and, when necessary, respond to mass violence and atrocities.
5. A number of recommendations for policymakers and civil society emerged from the discussions. They do not necessarily represent consensus of the participants at the meeting.

Main recommendations

6. **Integrate prevention.** From grassroots communities to state-level process, actors need to better integrate a 'prevention lens' into cross-cutting strategies that match local, national and international responsibilities. All actors can think more strategically and politically about how warning signs and risks are approached, and tailor prevention responses to specific situations. Effective prevention requires identifying specific measures and involving a diverse set of 'prevention actors', often outside of formal states.
7. **Prioritise national approaches.** There is strategic and normative impetus for states to prioritise and integrate strategies of preventing identity-based violence, including mass atrocities, into their domestic and foreign policy. At the same time there are rising calls for actors at the national and international level to assign dedicated prevention positions within governments and international organisations to offer advice and prevention assessment summaries for the level of general policy development. Participants emphasised that developing such strategies would not require additional budget; the US atrocities prevention board was established as a mandate without a budget and has integrated key principles and working methods across departmental implementation. However, participants also drew attention to the need to measure expectations; states should see developing national strategies for prevention mechanisms as a means of enhancing their national contributions to a shared challenge.
8. **Promote an inclusive, whole of society approach.** Effective atrocity prevention and promoting human rights requires genuine engagement between global leadership and local communities and groups. Working to narrow this gap would help address structural imbalances within much of the prevention field. Considerable progress could be made through more effective mapping of activity and expertise on the regional, national, and local level, and by creating greater opportunity to facilitate genuine strengthening of connections across sector and background. Donors, States, institutions, NGOs and community leaders can all contribute to these efforts. While better integration does not have to be expensive, even modest expenses too often unintentionally exclude already marginalised perspectives and should be factored into prevention budgets. To facilitate multi-stakeholder understanding and engagement, it is also important to effectively translate 'information, best practices, evidence, and other communications into relevant sectoral languages'.
9. Key principles of developing prevention approaches:
 - **Be evidence-led.** Clarity of trusted documentation and timely mapping of violations and violence, both open source and discrete, is integral to effective, sharp-end prevention and protection while the dissemination of existing evidence

related to upstream prevention, including from untraditional fields, academic disciplines, and across sectors should be more systemically prioritised.

- **Collaborate and share space.** The responsibility to help protect vulnerable populations from the threat of identity-based violence, whether hate crime or identity-based atrocities, should not fall upon one country, region, or one sector alone; rather, effective and timely prevention relies upon closer collaboration between civil society, international institutions, and States.
- **Be intersectional and inclusive.** The inclusion of perspectives, expertise, and networks that represent a full range of views is integral to effective prevention. Principles of ‘nothing about us without us’ are important but should be seen as a baseline rather than an aspiration.
- **Be flexible with language.** Competing and contrasting conceptualisations of prevention exist and may sometimes be a challenge. In many contexts, the lexicon of atrocity prevention may be useful while in other contexts the language of discrimination, marginalisation, human rights, equality, or community may be preferable.

Conclusion

10. No one actor, country or sector shoulders the burden of prevention alone. Successful prevention requires holistic, consistent and persistent efforts, maximising the capacities and strengths of diverse actors in preventing mass atrocities.
11. The significance of the 2005 adoption of the Responsibility to Protect signalled a shift in the international community’s expectations of and for a global rules-based system. Today, at a time when the multilateral system is under strain, there is a clear need to match international commitments on a state level, both within domestic and international policy. Moreover, the responsibility to protect populations from identity-based violence and atrocities does not lie solely on the shoulders of the international community but rather is a shared responsibility across the community, local, national, regional, and international levels, as articulated by participants. This meeting broke new ground, tackling atrocity prevention as an intersectional global challenge impacting those who are most marginalised and/or at risk, drawing on contemporary examples from across the global north, major crises facing the global system, and contexts of acute concern such as Myanmar, Cameroon, Syria, and Venezuela.

The Responsibility to Protect in a changing world: integrating the three pillars

12. The low human and financial costs of early, ‘upstream’ atrocity prevention should lead inevitably to greater emphasis on preventative rather than reactionary strategies. However, current rises in atrocity crimes, protracted violent crises and identity-based violence tell us current approaches are not working.
13. ‘Prevention’ has now come to the forefront of how we think about global challenges, and is being prioritized across the United Nations (UN) system, from the Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights Upfront Initiative, to Secretary-General António Guterres new report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and the UN/World Bank Pathways for Peace report on ‘Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict’. At the same time, many States have acknowledged the prevention of mass atrocities as ‘vital’ to national as well as international interests, with many developing their national strategies for domestic and international prevention.

14. The unanimous adoption of the Responsibility to Protect in 2005 signalled a global commitment to three pillars: first, the responsibility to protect populations at home; second, to assist other states to protect populations within foreign borders; and third, the commitment to assume responsibility to protect populations abroad when states are unable or unwilling. To uphold the responsibility to protect effectively requires constant and consistent implementation of all three pillars.

I. Pillar one – The responsibility of States to protect populations within their borders

A recent article on rising hate crime in Europe by Adama Dieng, the UN Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide and now leading the Secretary General's drive against hate speech, provided a useful framing for these discussions. Several participants from Europe and outside drew attention to existing European civil society efforts to respond to rising populism, threats to particular identity groups, and to broader challenges to European and national social cohesion; however there were calls for greater collaboration across European borders, particularly from British civil society preparing for the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Mapping existing prevention efforts taking place inside and outside of Europe by European actors and identifying continental champions was put forward as a concrete step forward in strengthening regional coordination. Likewise, examples of effective network-building and information sharing within states as well as on the more local level illustrated the significant uplift in advocacy efforts that can be achieved with little resource. As the same time, some civil society participants from the United States, Europe and Africa cautioned against a fractionalisation of domestic civil society prevention, and reminded of the need to be sensitive to parallel and at times contrasting objectives from different at risk communities. The capacity for parliaments and parliamentarians to show leadership within national conversations was highlighted with examples from Argentina; Tanzania and the creation of the National Committee on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes and All Forms of Discrimination; and of the publication by the UK Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee on Britain's Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention.

Some expressed concerns that perceptions by recipient countries of an uneven commitment from donor countries to the three pillars serves to undermine or undercut the norm's (perceived) legitimacy. Instead, prevention at home and prevention on the other side of the world should be viewed as part of the same global challenge. Moreover, the emphasis on the need for donor States to address more seriously warning signs within and at their own borders, particularly with the rise of identity-based violence, was seen to reflect recent global shifts in how global challenges to human rights and the values of the multilateral system must be tackled.

II. Pillar two – The responsibility to assist other states in protecting populations

A key question for discussants was of how actors can initiate conversations about prevention during a time of peace or in situations of recovering from atrocities. The importance of a flexible lexicon was again emphasised, and throughout the meeting many used the language of identity-based violence as a useful catch-all, encompassing hate crime, violent extremism and identity-based atrocities such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. However, there was some disagreement from representatives who considered their work to respond to or prevent hate speech, anti-discrimination or to reduce violence as wholly separate from atrocity prevention. Some participants responded that how this work was framed internally by policy makers was less important than the effectiveness of its delivery, while others highlighted that in countries such as

such as Myanmar, development activities related to hate speech should have been far better connected to objectives of atrocity prevention. Here, the opportunities to bolster Embassy resources, even through basis training on atrocity prevention, were highlighted as a concrete recommendation for donor States. Resistance to human equality and to building cohesive, inclusive societies is common and can be exacerbated when perceived outsiders of any kind are seen to advocate social change; are more fundamental challenge in upholding pillar two responsibilities can be ensuring appropriate programme conceptualisation as well as its delivery. Here calls were repeatedly made for greater local leadership, increased dialogue between local communities and civil society with state-level and international actors, and a reminder of the cost-effective, preventative capacity of local networks. Emphasizing the importance of the local does not reduce any responsibility for donor states to integrate the prevention of identity-based violence and the promotion of positive peace into the internationally facing departments. In fact, there is a need for external states, whether in bilateral or multilateral activity, to narrow the gaps between grassroots expertise and global efforts. As one discussant representing a big international NGO put it, how can we all be better allies?

III. Pillar three – the responsibility to protect abroad when States are unable or unwilling to do so

Participants addressed a number of non-military measures governments and the international community can take once the threat of violence has been reached. Discussions in relation to all three pillars focused on the challenge of retraining attention on necessary long-term measures when the perceived needs are most frequently presented as immediate or short term. This was returned to by many participants as a major obstacle in times of crisis to securing funding, political backing, and implementing effective prevention programmes that are urgently needed even once the threat or even point of violence has already been reached. The absence of more holistic, joined-up prevention strategies in national and multilateral responses to recent major atrocity crises was highlighted through examples of Libya, Myanmar, and Central African Republic.

Several US-based discussants spoke about the need to measure expectations when talking about preventative or protective policy, again underlining the recommendation that the prevention of both identity-based violence and mass atrocities should be integrated across departments and portfolios, including trade, foreign affairs, development, and defence.

Participants also addressed the growing need to better understand prevention and protection in situations where the perpetrators and/or armed defenders include non-state actors. It was argued that where there is the presence of non-state armed groups, it is challenging for many in the prevention community, including the UN, to conceptualise responsibilities of the international community; this can hinder effective advocacy, policy development, implementation, and legal prosecution.

Meeting outcomes

- 15. Mapping and network-building.** During the meeting a mapping exercise took place, in which participants were asked to share how their work or their organisation contributes to the prevention of mass atrocities. In the final session of the meeting, several participants explored concrete next steps that could strengthen national and local civil society, including the creation of or bolstering of networks, brokering dialogues between both policy makers and international civil society and the national and local actors, and the capacity to take forward further mapping activities.

16. **Give prevention a seat at the table.** During the close of the meeting there was consensus that when atrocity prevention is not explicitly on the agenda –or at the table– it usually means that it is missing and not addressed. Adding atrocity prevention to frameworks, agendas, dialogues, and assessments does not necessarily have to increase financial or human resource burdens. In fact, as discussants shared throughout, there are strategic and practical reasons why both state and non-state actors should prioritise this integration. Focal points for the responsibility to protect should not be limited to the national level but adopted, formally or informally, throughout state and non-state architectures, and tasked with viewing departmental or organisational decision-making through the lens of prevention, or indeed at times through the lens of protection.

A note from the authors

“When we talk about the importance of prioritising prevention, it does not mean it is easy or that we should not continue to be innovative, bold or think far beyond the status quo. Nor does it mean that once prevention has been successfully integrated into the mindset, bureaucracy and decision-making of existing structures that the vast and complex histories of atrocity will suddenly come to an end. Prioritising prevention, especially when considered against global horizons of rising atrocities, worsening climate change, and deepening identity-based divisions, may be seen as a too modest or a less urgent goal. But it is only by meeting these swelling upheavals collectively and inclusively, led by the evidence rather than assumptions, that they can be overcome.

This meeting was premised on the concept of a shared responsibility to protect people, to contribute to conditions and to make choices that are more likely to save lives than to lose them. This responsibility stretches from the very grassroots of communities, to civil society, to states, and to global leaderships. No single country, institution, sector can or should shoulder this burden alone, but effective prevention and protection will always require cross-cutting participation from the local community to the global.”

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