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Assisting States to Prevent Atrocities: Implications for Development Policy, Stabilization Assistance, and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as affirmed at the 2005 United Nations World Summit detailed a series of shared commitments to protect civilian populations from mass-atrocity crimes—among them the responsibility of the international community to “assist states under stress” to “build capacity” to prevent and protect at the domestic level. Since 2005, the concept of reinforcing state responsibilities through international assistance has enjoyed consistent political support but lacked clear policy directives for implementation.

As part of its 53rd annual Strategy for Peace Conference, the Stanley Foundation convened some 30 government and international officials, mass-atrocity specialists, and civil society representatives near Washington, DC, on October 17–19, 2012, to explore the strategic and policy dimensions of assisting “states under stress” to prevent atrocity violence. Participation reflected a diverse range of global perspectives and incorporated voices from across the Global North and South.

Chaired by Johanna Mendelson Forman, the dialogue aimed to link conversations gaining momentum in national capitals and key multilateral organizations on building “state protection capacity” and the role of international assistance in supporting such efforts. Participants were invited to consider how an atrocity lens might focus broader objectives for structural prevention and to share experiences in navigating the political and institutional challenges of applying atrocity priorities to development assistance, crisis stabilization, and peacebuilding policy.

Participants identified the following next steps in the process of developing a shared global vision of what it means to “assist states under stress” and help them “build capacity” to prevent atrocity violence:

- Further explore the incentives and motives that encourage perpetrators to target civilians, and the core governance deficits they most readily exploit.
- Seek to fully integrate this atrocity-focused lens within broader discussions on conflict prevention, development, stabilization, and peacebuilding, encouraging dialogue across silos.

This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by rapporteur Michael Graybeal, conference organizer Rachel Gerber, and chair Johanna Mendelson-Forman.

Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

- Broaden dialogue among the core stakeholders necessary to develop a shared global vision of how global assistance might reinforce domestic efforts to build capacity to prevent atrocity violence.

Defining State Protection Capacity

Participants agreed that a state's capacity to protect civilian populations from atrocity violence lies in the quality of governance and institutional guarantees—defined in terms of legitimacy, equity, and effectiveness—provided in core areas of:

- Rule-of-law, justice (judiciary, police, and prisons), and security sectors.
- Constitutional guarantees, political systems, power sharing, and participation.
- Resource management and economic governance.

Isolating which elements of governance in these core areas relate most directly to atrocity risk requires evaluating existing governance approaches and deficits against the incentives that drive perpetrators to target civilians. Participants questioned whether this relationship is fully captured in current conflict-analysis frameworks and evaluations of aid effectiveness. They suggested that greater clarity is required to identify the key priorities that should drive domestic and assisted efforts to build local capacity to prevent atrocity violence.

Understanding and Anticipating Atrocities

Addressing elements of this greater challenge, participants highlighted conventional assumptions of conflict analysis that bear consideration (and potentially reassessment) in elevating atrocity prevention as a core priority of domestic policy and international engagement.

Looking at ways the international community could better understand situations that have the potential to produce mass atrocities, participants examined the differences between conflict risk and atrocity risk. Distinguishing between atrocity violence and broader categories of conflict can be challenging—and potentially problematic—as many variables that point to conflict, such as regime consistency or neighbors in conflict, also lead to mass atrocities. It is precisely this ambiguity that creates an urgency to assess conflict risk more systematically through an atrocity-focused lens.

Participants noted that some commonly assumed conflict and atrocity triggers—such as contentious

political transitions—may not be the most direct indicators of the potential for civilian-targeted atrocity violence. One participant suggested that incidents of atrocity violence correlate more closely with the findings of indices that assess quality of governance and “state presence” than with those that measure the potential for abrupt changes in ruling regimes or elite power distribution.

Several participants noted that while it remains difficult to distinguish between indicators of conflict and indicators of mass atrocities, various methodologies are currently used to evaluate political and governance dynamics in fragile states. Such evaluations are often translated into internal watch lists that draw policy focus to particular situations and potential crises.

In considering the utility of such watch lists to anticipate atrocity violence, participants agreed that they are useful in demonstrating change over time and isolating situations in need of policy focus based on the trajectories revealed. However, they cautioned against overreliance on such indices for early warning or policy development, noting the lag time between data collection and evaluation and the difficulty in usefully capturing key rapid changes in specific indicators.

One participant noted that national-level indices typically obscure regional variations. Others suggested that such indices are generally more diagnostic than predictive, pointing out, for example, that even with such evaluations, few in the international community anticipated the rapid collapse of Mali's government in the north in early 2012.

Structural Versus Operational Prevention

One point that generated debate among participants related to the existing dichotomy between “structural” and “operational” prevention. Some suggested that in recent years the distinction between these two approaches to conflict prevention has blurred and become less relevant. As an example, one participant noted the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti's blended role providing immediate-term security assistance while also working with the Haitian government in realizing longer-term structural goals to develop the country's institutions.

Participants argued that the increasing overlap between structural and operational policies requires a rethinking of conventional categories of

preventive action and assumption of a more systemic approach. Such an approach would be driven by continuous assessment and reassessment of governance gaps to drive the development of a range of short-, medium-, and long-term engagement measures, incorporating (and prioritizing) both structural and operational elements as appropriate.

Taking a different view, some participants suggested the distinction between structural and operational prevention remains important, particularly in communicating the relevance of atrocity-prevention objectives to stakeholders (such as development or humanitarian actors) who currently conceive of their roles in such terms.

Assisting States Under Stress

All states must proactively evaluate any internal risks for atrocity violence and capacities to protect their populations. In considering how international assistance might support this process, participants identified three simplified categories of host states across a spectrum of “openness” to international assistance and engagement:

- States willing to build, or dedicating themselves to building, capacity to prevent atrocities.
- States lacking the will or capability to prevent atrocities.
- States actively inciting or perpetrating violence against their civilian population.

Of course, few states will fit neatly into any of these categories. As governments are not monolithic actors, some segments or individuals may show greater willingness to work with the international communities than others. However, this simplified framework could assist the international community in thinking through policy approaches available under certain general conditions, identifying the scope of the necessary intervention (national, regional, local), as well examining how the intervention can identify, prevent, and mitigate further risks against civilian populations. One participant noted that this framework is better suited to examples of nations facing imminent or ongoing crisis than perhaps long-term structural issues. Overall, however, participants agreed that the framework provided a necessary starting point for international actors considering intervention.

Participants also stressed the need for local solutions in any intervention by the international

community. By adapting solutions to the local realities of each nation, efforts at preventing atrocity can gain necessary legitimacy and buy-in, particularly in fragile states that are sensitive to intervention in their internal affairs. One participant pointed out the need to “destigmatize” such types of engagement and recognize the need to build on existing structures and processes. Others noted the consistency of such focus on domestically defined needs and capacity deficits with the principles outlined at the 2011 Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness.

Moving beyond general principles, participants pointed to the National Peace Council developed in Ghana as an example of successful efforts to build capacity to prevent atrocity violence. Although Ghana has little history of mass atrocities, electoral violence in 2004 highlighted a range of structural risk factors that required proactive national self-assessment. Created in the wake of this violence, the council played a vital role in reconciliation by creating dialogue between the country’s political parties.

The council’s mandate has since evolved and broadened, and it now plays a continuous and proactive role in supporting the development of stable institutions and preventing the eruption of future conflict. The council was developed in response to country-specific circumstances and needs, but its focus and approach provide models that might be considered for states facing similar governance challenges and atrocity risks.

Evaluating Current Assistance Trends and Gaps

Concerning challenges to articulating the scope and core elements of an atrocity-focused prevention agenda, participants noted that considerable progress has been made since 2005 in building frameworks that can inform such efforts.

Recent analyses, publications, and policy agendas have furthered the international community’s understanding of contemporary assistance needs and priorities. The World Bank’s 2011 *World Development Report: Conflict, Security, and Development* highlighted the relationship between conflict, instability, and underdevelopment. One participant noted that the very inclusion of conflict prevention within a development framework reflects increasing recognition of the interdependence of these agendas that was largely absent in the development and conflict-prevention communities a decade ago.

Also discussed was the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States*, which was endorsed by 41 countries and multilateral organizations in 2011. In particular, participants agreed that the five peacebuilding and state-building goals of the New Deal—legitimate politics, security, economic foundations, justice, and revenues and services—provide a useful framework not only for states in conflict but also for informing atrocity prevention.

Within the New Deal, participants noted the importance of the role of the “G-7+” countries. This set of countries initially consisted of a core seven often described as “fragile” or “failing” states, including Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Haiti. The group has since expanded to a total of 17 countries representing roughly 350 million people, and has been a leading voice in the New Deal process. One participant described G-7+ engagement in the New Deal as a declaration of its members’ self-prescription for overcoming fragility, setting the terms for international engagement on this agenda.

In spite of these conceptual and political advances, many hurdles remain in implementing the principles they outline for good governance, conflict prevention, and sustainable development. In particular, participants highlighted extreme differentials in international funds available for assistance to different “fragile” states within and beyond the G-7+, with some awash with funds from international donors while others receive little attention. Participants agreed, however, that states in need of assistance must drive the agenda to ensure national solutions address national problems, increasing the likelihood of legitimacy and successful outcomes.

Considering gaps in current assistant efforts, participants agreed the international community’s support for rule-of-law, justice-sector, and security reforms requires deeper and more consistent focus. Participants agreed that this remains one of the most fundamental governance support needs but is often neglected or poorly implemented in practice.

One participant noted that part of the problem—particularly in post-conflict settings—lies in disagreements over the perennial challenge of balancing peace and justice. Within the conflict-resolution community, there is a greater acceptance for some form of amnesty, though with strings attached, such

as exclusion of perpetrators from participating in politics. However, the human rights community has often pushed for greater accountability for perpetrators, believing that without liability, a culture of impunity is created and future crimes become more likely. Other participants noted that these reforms take decades, and that more effort to incorporate long-term views into planning is needed to ensure more positive outcomes.

National-Level Agendas to Prevent Atrocities

Over the last several years, numerous governments have considered how to translate their R2P commitments into policy development at the national level, reflecting on internal atrocity risks and state capacities, as well as national policies for international assistance and collective action to prevent atrocities on a regional and global level. Many of these governments have begun to link themselves through regional and global networks intended to create communities of commitment to atrocity prevention as a policy priority, and to provide mutual support for national policy implementation.

At the global level, such links have been established through an R2P Focal Points Network, driven by the governments of Costa Rica, Denmark, Ghana, and Australia, with the facilitation of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. This Focal Points Initiative encourages governments to appoint an official at the national level to coordinate intragovernment measures on atrocity prevention and facilitate exchanges with counterparts across the network.

Since its inception in September 2010, the initiative has grown to include 17 nations from the Global North and South. Participants reflected on how this network might contribute to national, regional, and global efforts at atrocity prevention, providing a mechanism through which members could share challenges and lessons learned. Including countries from the Global North and South, the network allows diverse opinions to be shared and more holistic responses to common challenges ensured. At the national level, a dedicated focal point enables a more sustainable national commitment to build internal capacity for atrocity prevention.

One participant noted that many challenges remain for the Focal Points Initiative—in particular expanding the network from 17 members while ensuring a genuine depth of commitment to atrocity prevention policy development and implementa-

tion. Yet participants agreed it assists in creating an international culture around atrocity prevention and shows its members' depth of commitment to the issue.

In a case study of one member of this global network, participants discussed the progress the United States has made in recent years in developing a comprehensive atrocity-prevention framework for national policy development. With the creation of an interagency Atrocities Prevention Board in April 2012, the United States has committed unprecedented resources to the issue. The design and mandate of the board drew heavily from the findings of Presidential Study Directive 10. Participants highlighted that the directive declared atrocity prevention to be a matter of US national security and suggested that presidential interest has given the issue greater resonance across the government and within national policy.

Noting that the Atrocities Prevention Board remains in its infancy, participants offered their views on how it might be strengthened. For example, one participant suggested that the board has struggled with drawing lessons from past crises and prevention efforts. Unlike the military, for which self-correction is necessary to survival, they suggested that existing incentives discourage civilian agencies from reflecting on their failures. Participants agreed that more effort is needed to create "safe spaces" to encourage review of policy failures to ensure they are not repeated.

Looking Forward

Recognizing the existing barriers to articulating and implementing concrete policy directives to build state protection capacity, participants considered priority areas for future focus to develop a global understanding of how the international community might best assist states under stress to prevent atrocity violence.

First, participants reaffirmed the need to collectively refine an atrocity lens that can assess gaps in governance and social resilience against the incentives and motives that drive perpetrators to target civilians, and thus identify the areas with greatest potential to reinforce domestic capacity against such threats.

To accomplish this, participants suggested efforts be made to broaden discussion and more effectively incorporate stakeholders relevant to developing a

shared vision of what assistance to prevent atrocities should look like in practice, as well as to executing the policies identified in that agenda. At the national level, participants noted the need for state authorities to more fully engage with key constituencies, including women, youth, sectarian and religious leaders, the business community (local and international), and the media.

In discussing the role of women's groups in preventing and responding to atrocity violence, participants asserted that the prevalence of sexual violence has not yet been met with sustained efforts to fully understand this dimension of mass-atrocity violence. What, for example, are the drivers and incentives that make sexual violence the most pervasive form of atrocity crime? Why do perpetrators target women and use sexual violence as a key mode and tactic? How can such choices be discouraged through the development of specific internal capacities, or in the course of international engagement? Such questions must attract greater policy focus if state capacities to protect against atrocity violence writ large are to be appropriately identified, and the role of international assistance is to be better defined.

Participants also reflected on the lack of attention paid to the role of religion when examining conflict situations and the potential for atrocity violence. One participant highlighted the sensitivities inherent in discussing religion as either a factor in conflict or a tool for prevention and resolution. The participant suggested that neglect of these issues in policy discourse has made it more difficult to address ground realities, since in many fragile states, religious organizations fill governance gaps and are highly active in the provision of basic services. The lack of attention to religion has begun to shift in recent years, as some countries have reintroduced religion in foreign service training. The Netherlands, in particular, has started to examine the role of religion in fragile states. Some participants suggested such attention must become more systematic.

Participants suggested that greater outreach should be made to the private sector. One participant noted that in many fragile states, private companies have begun to take more proactive roles in long-term economic and infrastructure development. Such work should be sensitized to and leveraged for atrocity-prevention objectives.

Participants encouraged efforts to bridge conceptual, institutional, and operational silos between

communities focused on conflict prevention and management, human rights, development, humanitarian relief, stabilization, and peacebuilding. They also agreed that greater attention should be paid to the roles, capacities, and comparative advantages of particular assistance partners (bilaterals, the United Nations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, and others) in the funding and implementation of assistance efforts, as well as to how the work of these various actors can best be coordinated.

For example, one participant noted that the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank could be an ideal nexus for increased cooperation with the private sector. Others highlighted the key role played by some regional and subregional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States, particularly in areas of crisis response. The United Nations continues to hold the greatest legitimacy in electoral reform and election monitoring.

Implementing the commitments outlined in the Responsibility to Protect, including the responsibility to assist states to build domestic capacity to prevent atrocity violence, will ultimately require a global approach to international assistance that focuses conflict assessment and program design on atrocity-specific risks and mobilizes all relevant stakeholders toward atrocity prevention as a core policy priority.

Participant List

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Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.

The Stanley Foundation

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