



# Policy Memo

**DATE:** April 2, 2015

**SUBJECT:** The Responsibility to Protect in the Next Decade

---

## Summary

Ten years after the 2005 World Summit, an international effort is under way to review progress and chart a path forward for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). While taking stock of R2P's evolution is vital, attention must also be given to developing an ambitious vision for the decade ahead.

In support of this evolving dialogue, the Stanley Foundation convened a diverse group of diplomats, policymakers, and experts for its 46th annual United Nations Issues Conference held March 25–27, 2015. Participants considered the prospects and challenges for R2P implementation ten years after its adoption by UN member states. Focused on the future, the dialogue sought to identify forward-looking priorities and concrete recommendations for R2P's second decade.

This policy memo offers highlights of the discussion and recommendations of roundtable participants.

## **R2P at Ten: Taking Stock of Progress and Challenges for Implementation**

Emphasizing the forward-looking focus of their dialogue, participants in the Stanley Foundation's 46th annual United Nations Issues Conference, titled "The Responsibility to Protect in the Next Decade," first reflected on the key lessons to be drawn from R2P's conceptual, political, institutional, and operational evolution since 2005. They underscored striking progress in terms of both conceptual and political development. R2P, they asserted, has been firmly established as a norm, rooted in solid political consensus and a shared understanding of the principle's conceptual parameters.

While participants noted some remaining conceptual and political gaps, institutional and operational development were considered the natural progressive focus of R2P's second decade. Assessing this progression, participants suggested that acceptance and understanding of R2P has yet to translate into the institutionalized approaches and processes necessary for full operationalization. Participants described R2P as an integral part of a wider protection agenda. Operationalization of R2P objectives thus required full integration within existing conflict

prevention and resolution processes accompanied by broader bureaucratic acceptance of the relevance of R2P across UN organs, offices, mechanisms, and mandates.

### **Building on Progress: Next Steps for Advancing Existing Initiatives and Integrating all Relevant Actors in R2P Efforts**

Looking forward, participants considered the range of actors with roles to play in R2P operationalization, the degree to which such actors recognized their role, and how to further embed R2P within their mandates, approaches, and mechanisms.

#### **At the United Nations**

Within the UN system, the dialogue focused on the potential to enhance the engagement of the principal organs—the General Assembly and the Security Council—as well as opportunities to mainstream R2P across the system and mobilize existing bodies, offices, and programs for implementation of R2P objectives.

Participants noted that R2P was a product of the General Assembly and highlighted the importance of the assembly’s continuing engagement on the concept. Referencing the role that annual informal interactive dialogues within the General Assembly have played in solidifying political consensus on R2P principles and a shared understanding of their parameters, participants asserted that it is time to formalize the General Assembly’s consideration of R2P. In particular, they advocated for the assembly to adopt a resolution reflecting on ten years of R2P implementation and setting priorities for the coming decade. Formalization of R2P within the General Assembly’s agenda, they argued, could also reinforce broader institutionalization across the UN system by providing regular requests for follow-up and reporting.

Participants considered the role of the Security Council—and means to build on its engagement—as multifaceted. Participants reflected that the role of the veto as a potential barrier to collective action had been part of discussions on R2P implementation since the earliest considerations of the concept. Such discussions have become more prominent and open, furthered by a French proposal for restraint on the use of the veto. Participants noted this proposal as a compromise that has advanced the dialogue and promoted transparency. They stressed, however, that advancing R2P principles requires broad and inclusive buy-in among all Security Council members, which also necessitates reflection on other important determinants of Security Council engagement, including elections, agenda setting, and implementation of existing mandates.

Participants emphasized that R2P is a framework with implications across the UN system and that numerous UN organs, bodies, and offices offer important entry points to advance R2P objectives. The Peacebuilding Commission received particular focus as both a preventive tool and a mechanism for postatrocity reconciliation and rebuilding. Highlighting its potential to enable political-level support and engagement with states under stress, participants noted it has yet to integrate an atrocity-specific lens in its ongoing work. It was also suggested that the commission has struggled more broadly to complement its political support with the operational expertise and resources required to fully mobilize its assistance potential.

Turning to the Secretariat and the United Nations' operational bodies, participants discussed growing efforts to engage across the system with departments, offices, and programs with a role in the United Nations' protection agenda. While dialogue on R2P and atrocity prevention is increasing, participants noted that many of these offices, departments, and agencies are charged with executing large, well-established mandates. Many remain skeptical that R2P adds value to existing approaches or are concerned about how R2P branding might impact their ability to meet their established objectives.

Participants stressed that mainstreaming R2P requires clarifying the concept's added value, making the case for the distinctive questions it raises, and communicating the reasons why applying its principles is in the interests of all stakeholders. In general, with all UN bodies and actors, participants suggested that the objective should be to normalize the presence of an R2P lens in ongoing discussions and processes.

### **Beyond the United Nations**

While noting the importance of UN organs and mechanisms, participants underscored the point that R2P is a universal norm with responsibilities shared by the international community, states, and individuals that extend beyond the United Nations as an institution.

R2P attributes the primary responsibility to protect to the state. Decisions to provide assistance or join in collective action are national prerogatives made through national-level processes. National internalization of R2P principles and atrocity prevention policies is therefore critical to advancing R2P operationalization in its next decade. Participants voiced their support for ongoing efforts to root R2P in national-level processes through focal points and other appropriate mechanisms, noting that effective national institutionalization requires adaptation to unique domestic systems.

Participants stressed the importance of engagement and collaboration with regional organizations, particularly in developing collective approaches to specific contexts or situations of concern. Several participants noted that the cases in which R2P has been most successful have often been those in which the international community worked closely with the existing regional architecture and developed effective partnerships with regional and subregional organizations. Many regional organizations have already assumed roles and mandates in R2P-relevant areas such as conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding. While these mandates and efforts may not always be framed in the language of R2P or atrocity prevention, they provide important entry points for raising questions to address atrocity risk and advance protection principles.

### **Addressing New, Persistent, and Evolving Challenges**

Discussing a range of issues arising from the application of R2P principles to real world dynamics, participants focused on the following:

#### **Building Consensus and Political Will**

Participants emphasized that R2P is a naturally aspirational concept focused on behavioral change of all actors who bear responsibility under the framework, including states, individuals, and the international community. Given its focus, R2P inherently raises questions with which the international community struggles, in particular parameters for the use of force. At the same

time, R2P is often measured against a higher standard of performance than that applied to other norms framing these same difficult questions.

Participants argued that these tensions are natural and should be anticipated in dialogue about R2P's future. In broadening and deepening consensus, particularly around applications of the principle, contention should be expected and the principle should remain assertive and "revolutionary."

### **Countering Atrocities Committed by Nonstate Actors**

Assessing recent and evolving atrocity threats, participants considered the unique challenges presented by armed nonstate actors unwilling to respect their responsibility to protect civilian populations. They argued that nonstate perpetrators often seek the attention garnered by committing atrocities and are rarely interested in compliance with international norms. At the same time, the threats they pose are largely transnational in scope.

These specific characteristics shift dynamics for international engagement in significant ways, requiring a different set of tools to counter atrocities. While reaffirming that the R2P principles apply where nonstate actors threaten mass atrocity within states, participants stressed the importance of thinking more critically about how to deny the means to execute violence against civilians and stemming the support provided by third parties, including the private sector.

### **Ensuring Responsibility is Exercised Across all Phases and in all Aspects of Protection**

In considering case-specific applications of R2P in its first decade, participants identified the frequent and notable absence of atrocity prevention in mission assessment and planning for postmission peacebuilding. Participants argued that this absence stems in part from remaining conceptual challenges in distinguishing atrocity prevention from related protection and prevention objectives. They reinforced the need to clarify the added value of atrocity prevention and its relationship to other agendas in order to ensure R2P principles receive the required attention across all phases and in all aspects of protection.

### **R2P's next decade: Priorities and next steps**

Participants recognized that R2P is now an established norm rooted in broad international consensus. They outlined the following priority recommendations to advance the conceptual, political, institutional, and operational development of R2P as it enters its second decade:

#### **Conceptual Development**

- Address remaining conceptual gaps that create barriers for R2P's institutional and operational development, in particular clarifying the relationship between atrocity prevention and conflict prevention.
- Communicate clearly the added value of atrocity prevention as a distinct lens applied to a wider prevention and protection agenda.

#### **Political Development**

- Deepen consensus through continued dialogue and engagement while retaining the concept's aspirational, striving, change-oriented focus.
- Normalize the presence of an R2P lens in relevant contexts and forums.

- Encourage discussion on R2P between governments and their own constituencies.
- Demonstrate political leadership on R2P at all levels:
  - Mobilize the R2P Group of Friends to serve as champions for R2P principles and objectives in all membership spaces, both within and beyond the United Nations.
  - Identify and engage regional champions that can inspire regional dialogue.
  - Encourage political statements by national leaders emphasizing R2P as a political priority and national security interest.

### **Institutional Development**

- Reinforce the key role played by the Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect through enhanced resourcing, appropriate staffing, and formalization of the post of special adviser on the Responsibility to Protect.
- Promote a General Assembly resolution to formalize consideration of R2P and lay a foundation for deeper institutionalization within the Secretariat.
- Support mainstreaming of R2P principles across the UN system and encourage all actors and entities to see their mandate and objectives through an atrocity prevention lens.
- Look beyond the United Nations for opportunities to deepen institutionalization of R2P at the regional and national levels.

### **Operational Development**

- Shift focus from doctrine to outcomes, learning from effective practices taken by responsibility holders at the national, regional, and global levels.
- Elaborate the range of options available to advance R2P objectives with assessments of effectiveness in specific contexts and combinations, in particular nonmilitary options for collective action.
- Make full use of the analytical framework developed by the Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and invest in assessment, planning, and operational guidance for the implementation of protection-focused policies, programs, and missions.
- Identify entry points to bring an atrocity prevention lens to discussions that determine the deployment of resources.
- Support the role of civil society as an operational partner and source of social resilience.

The analysis and recommendations in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

*For further information, please contact Keith Porter at the Stanley Foundation, 563-264-1500.*

#### **About The Stanley Foundation**

The Stanley Foundation seeks a secure peace with freedom and justice, built on global citizenship and effective global governance. It brings fresh voices, original ideas, and lasting solutions to debates on global and regional problems. The foundation is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation located in Muscatine, Iowa, that focuses on peace and security issues and advocates principled multilateralism. The foundation frequently collaborates with other organizations. It does not make grants. Online at [www.stanleyfoundation.org](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org).