

# Policy Memo

**DATE:** October 25, 2012

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

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## Summary

The Responsibility to Protect 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.

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 “build state capacity” and “assist states under stress” 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.
- 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 sector
- 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.

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.

For example, great focus has been placed on elections and political transitions as triggers of atrocity violence. Without dismissing the role of political instability in elevating atrocity risk, one participant suggested that incidents of atrocity violence correlate more closely with situations highlighted by 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.

Participants also debated the utility of the existing dichotomy between “structural” and “operational” prevention. Some participants suggested the distinction 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. Others suggested the dichotomy has become restrictive as governance—a blend of politically defined approaches and institutional capacities—is further recognized as the core determinant of atrocity risk. They asserted that atrocity-prevention efforts would be better served through a frame of “systemic prevention” in which continuous assessment and reassessment of governance gaps drives prioritization of a range of short-, medium-, and long-term engagement measures, incorporating both structural and operational elements as appropriate.

## **Assisting States Under Stress**

Participants agreed that international assistance to prevent atrocities must be driven by domestically defined needs and focus on the core capacity deficits that reinforce perpetrator incentives and reduce or deflect the costs of targeting civilians. This view is consistent with the principles established in 2011 at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness that reinforce the need for international assistance to be driven by domestic development and governance priorities.

Participants considered existing political and operational challenges that might limit the effective execution of these priorities as they become more appropriately defined and elevated. One significant challenge lies in the varying degrees of capacity and will across and within regimes that might

consider reforms. In this context, participants highlighted the core importance of domestic leadership in defining the governance agenda and engaging with external actors.

Assistance is a consent-driven mode of engagement. Yet, the very governance deficits that invite support are often those that make consent difficult to ensure. Priority areas for atrocity prevention lie at the nexus of power, politics, and national security and are highly sensitive. States are far from monolithic, and eagerness for reform in some areas does not guarantee equal openness to adjustment in others. These issues set the parameters for external support, and global actors must navigate carefully to determine appropriate entry points for external assistance.

### **Evaluating Current Assistance Trends and Gaps**

Noting the added value that will come from more precise application of an atrocity-focused lens, participants considered some of the existing assistance frameworks, programs, and policies relevant to implementing an atrocity-prevention agenda.

Participants cited great progress with the contributions of the 2011 *World Development Report: Conflict, Security and Development* and the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness's *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States*. The New Deal's five Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs)—inclusive politics, security, justice, economic foundations, and revenue services—were deemed particularly relevant to atrocity-prevention objectives.

In spite of the leverage potential of these frameworks, participants highlighted ongoing tensions between theory and practice that frustrate translation of their principles and priorities into assistance policy and program development.

While widely touted in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding literature as the core priority of governance-support initiatives, rule of law and justice-sector support rarely receive the attention and emphasis demanded by these frameworks. Equitable governance that effectively manages subnational diversities has been linked not only to atrocity and conflict prevention, but also to sustainable development and state/nation-building imperatives. Yet, many governance-assessment tools continue to operate solely on nationally aggregated data and indicators. The United Nations Women, Peace, and Security agenda has acknowledged the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, and systematic sexual violence is known to be one of the most pervasive and consistent forms of atrocity violence. However, these recognitions have rarely prompted targeted programs that respond to the incentives that drive perpetrators to target women, or address the implications of widespread sexual violence in terms of reconciliation and social resilience.

Policy development and implementation also suffer from political, institutional, and resource constraints that skew assistance flows, siphon impact away from intended objectives, and create disincentives to properly sequence and invest in short-, medium-, and long-term initiatives. Little evaluation tends to be made of past efforts, with execution often judged by money spent rather than investment outcomes.

One participant noted that these implementation gaps make it virtually impossible to distinguish poor policies from poorly implemented policies, complicating efforts to determine the degree to which existing theoretical frameworks satisfy core governance and atrocity-prevention objectives.

## **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 should 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 terms of global assistance actors, 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. Greater thought should also be given 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 how the work of these various actors can best be coordinated.

## **Full Report to Follow**

A more comprehensive report about this conference and its major recommendations will follow in a few weeks.

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.

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