



Mass Violence and Atrocity Prevention Consultation

Discussion Takeaways

December 2020

In October 2020, the Stanley Center for Peace and Security held a Strategy Consultation on Mass Violence and Atrocity Prevention, with an emphasis on early or upstream prevention and building societal resilience. Utilizing a range of convening techniques, the center engaged with more than 60 participants from across the world to brainstorm ideas, strategies, and synergies to effectively drive policy progress and collective action over the next two to three years.

As a part of a larger process, the center regularly holds strategy consultations to inform the strategic direction of its programming efforts. While bringing direct benefit to the center, the consultations are also intended to stimulate new ideas that participants and others not directly involved could benefit from and apply to their work. This report summarizes the main discussion points from this most recent strategy consultation, including challenges, gaps, and opportunities.

The following were the goals of the Strategy Consultation on Mass Violence and Atrocity Prevention:

- **Map and analyze:** Look at the current landscape of the mass violence and atrocity prevention and related fields, highlighting key takeaways from recent analyses and mappings.

- **Recognize gaps:** Identify what has been overlooked, given less attention, or underutilized in early/upstream prevention. Consider where there have been missed opportunities for better policy approaches, for greater or new stakeholder engagement and/or collaboration, and to scale or build upon research or best practices.
- **Consider solutions:** Brainstorm ideas, strategies, and synergies to effectively drive policy solutions and collective action in the next two to three years.
- **Build connections:** Provide a space for a global group of participants to connect, ideate, and benefit from each other's thought leadership.

Strategy Consultation Methodology

The center's intent in the strategy consultation was to listen and learn in order to consider its own part in the broader effort to address mass violence and atrocities. Normally, the center would hold an in-person gathering to achieve the strategy consultation goals, but due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it instead designed a three-part virtual engagement. Deep consideration was given to who was consulted, around what questions discussion would focus, and how participants could be engaged virtually



Participants

A world map showing the distribution of French territories. France is highlighted in blue, and its overseas territories are marked with red dots. The map includes labels for major countries and continents.

Discussion Paper

- **Labels:** Key differences and similarities on upstream prevention or building societal resilience to mass violence and atrocities and related sectors such as peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals/Sustainable Development Goal 16.
- **Collaboration across policy sectors and stakeholder groups:** Effective methods of meaningful cross-collaboration and information sharing for policy development.

- **Equitable and meaningful inclusion:** Improving on or reimagining how to ensure that those most impacted by mass violence can share their knowledge, evidence, and analysis, as well as influence policy, to ensure that policies (at every level) are informed, representative, and sustainable.
- **Upstream prevention and building resilience:** While prevention and building resilience apply in every context all the time, where and how to prioritize attention, programming, and resources.
- **Evidence to inform decision- and policymaking:** Improving the channels of communication, advocacy, and collaboration between those who are gathering and analyzing evidence and those who are in policy and decision-making spaces.
- **Loss of respect for and trust in multilateral approaches:** Other promising global collective action opportunities, including existing governance institutions, mechanisms, and processes (formal or informal, top-down or bottom-up) where greater collective action by a wider range of stakeholders is needed to boost impact.
- **Hate speech and the role of the media:** Strategies for ensuring rigorous, ethical, and inclusive journalism, including investigative journalism, to counter divisive mis/disinformation, call out or diffuse identity-based dangerous speech, and increase accountability in situations with risks for mass violence and atrocities.
- **Role of funders:** Successful examples of funder collaborations oriented around a particular policy goal, outcome, or moment and ensuring that funder coordination or funder encouragement of collaboration does not exacerbate unhelpful power dynamics.

Strategy Consultation Design

The strategy consultation consisted of three parts: three live, online focus groups; a live, online plenary session; and an online platform for asynchronous, text-based thematic discussions. Each of these parts was intended to encourage a robust and dynamic conversation. Collectively, the parts were also meant to be as inclusive as possible across time zones, giving participants multiple opportunities to engage in the process.



Focus Groups

To replicate the nature of highly interactive in-person meetings, the center organized three focus groups. During these focus groups, a limited number of the themes from the discussion paper were explored as preselected by participants through an online survey. Notably, the following three themes were ranked as top choices for focused discussion across all three focus groups:

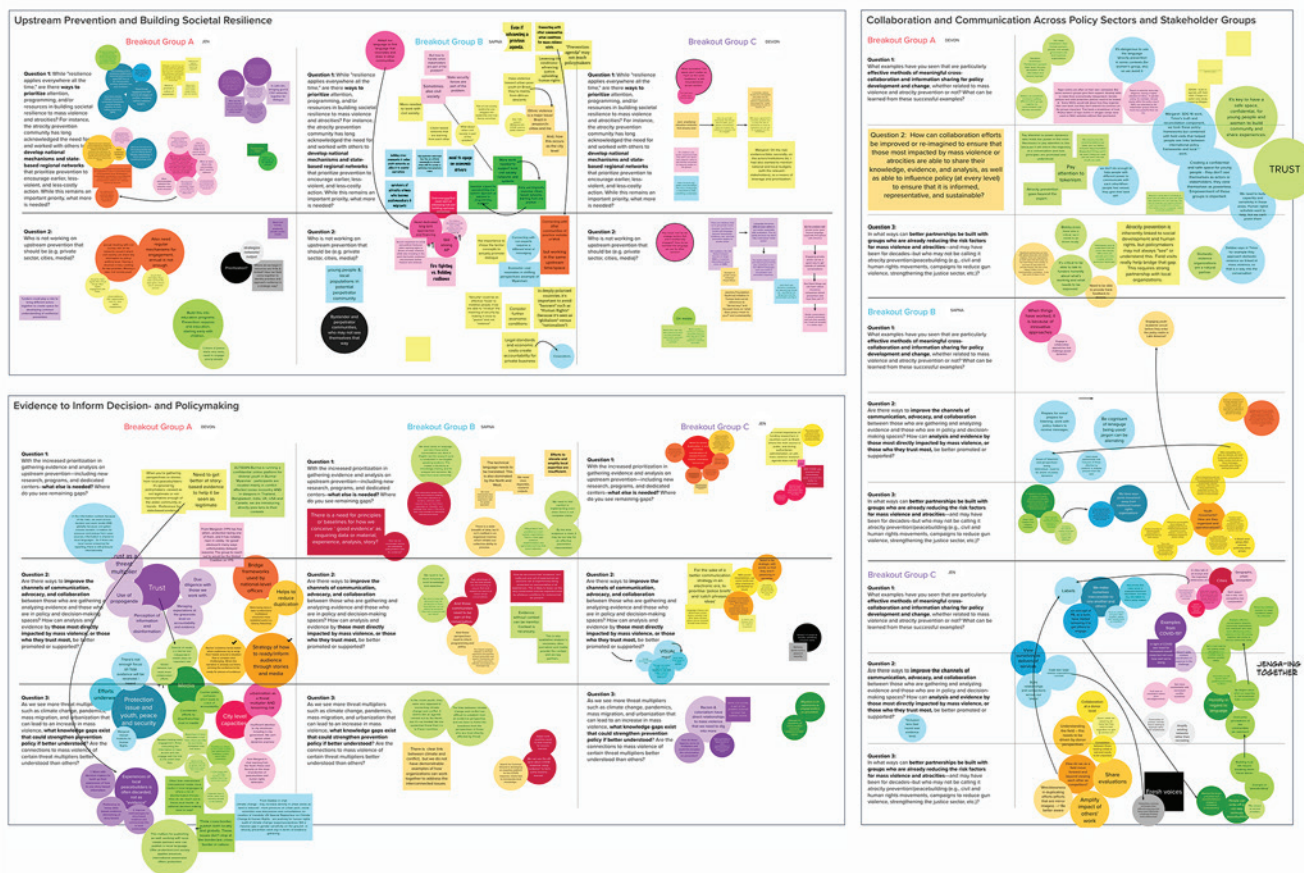
- Upstream prevention and building societal resilience
- Evidence to inform decision- and policymaking
- Meaningful and equitable inclusion

In addition to these three themes, one focus group discussed the lack of trust in multilateral approaches and another discussed collaboration and communication across policy sectors and stakeholder groups. None of the themes were discussed in isolation from one another, and other themes came up during the focus group discussions, such as funding, hate speech and the role of the media, and labels.

To ensure a dynamic, participatory experience for participants, we used a platform called Mural to visually capture the dialogue in an organized way, with opportunity for participants to interact with the notes or add their own comments (see example below).

Plenary Session

The center also virtually convened a final plenary session that brought together participants from all three focus groups, as well as new participants who had not joined a focus group. The goal for this final session was to share what was discussed in the focus groups but then to step outside of what the center analyzed and prioritized as



themes for the consultation. Participants were asked to reflect on what was missing and where other opportunities may lie for policy progress and collective action in the coming two to three years. The plenary session included five small-group breakout sessions to facilitate interactive and candid dialogue.

Asynchronous, text-based thematic discussions

In addition to the focus groups and plenary session, we also designed a space for asynchronous written input on all eight themes using a platform called Basecamp. Participants from the three focus groups and the plenary session were invited to use the platform; it also enabled another opportunity for interactive feedback from participants who could choose their own availability to engage outside of the live, online sessions.

This multilayered approach to the strategy consultation provided multiple opportunities for participants to engage. It was meant to help reach a diverse swath of experts for their input and interactive feedback. In practice, there were challenges in accessibility, including internet connectivity problems and difficulty with online tools. Also, the time of day for the live, online sessions was not necessarily convenient for all time zones despite efforts to be as inclusive as possible.

Consultation Takeaways: Challenges, Gaps, and Opportunities for the Field

The consultation discussions revealed challenges, gaps, and opportunities for further attention and action. Though not exhaustive, the following section outlines major takeaways from all three parts of the strategy consultation—focus groups, the plenary session, and asynchronous written input.

A. On Upstream Prevention and Building Societal Resilience

There is often too much focus on stopping ongoing violence rather than preventing it. Policymakers tend only to pay attention when violence is imminent or has already begun, and there is pressure from funders and some within the media to focus solely on the phases where violence is more proximate. Peacebuilders need not be neutral actors; independence and nonpartisanship are important, but more can and should speak out as advocates when human rights abuses, atrocities, and injustice occur and when there are clear opportunities for preventive action.

Inclusive language can help with collaboration in prevention efforts, and it reflects the reality that labels do not matter to those experiencing violence. For example, the term “resilience” can mean many things depending on context. On the one hand, inclusive terminology like “resilience building” resonates with and draws in other communities of practice working in the same upstream time/space. Because “upstream prevention” and “atrocities risk” can mean little to those outside of the mass violence and atrocity prevention field, the ambiguity of “resilience building” provides useful connection to other sectors and actors by

dejargonizing, avoiding inflammatory or unattractive terminology, or using overly securitized language.

On the other hand, using the terminology “building resilience” can also imply that outsiders are imposing frameworks, rather than recognizing the agency of people living in those societies. Policymakers need to understand better what actions are already being taken at the national, local, and community levels to reduce the risk factors for mass violence and atrocities, and how they can support those actions, rather than assuming their own models and frameworks are somehow superior.

B. On Evidence to Inform Action by Decision- and Policymakers

As described in the discussion paper, many exciting new initiatives and programs seek to draw out, collate, and analyze evidence of what works in preventing mass violence and atrocities. Even so, more research is needed, whether on threat multipliers (such as migration, gender, climate change mitigation through renewable energy or land use, and pandemics like COVID-19) or on contributors to mass violence and atrocities (such as racism and colonialism, unethical and uncontrolled information via Big Tech platforms, and mental health and trauma). Evidence that incorporates intersectionality (e.g., women, youth, racial and ethnic) is missing. So too is a greater understanding of the motivations and factors of those who perpetrate mass violence and atrocities, the role of education in preventing mass violence and atrocities, and how trauma affects recidivism.

Participants felt that the problem is not always a lack of evidence but also relates to communicating the evidence to policymakers—and arguably also to the wider public, including youth, civil society, and nonacademics—to build the political will to act or prevent. Advocates should develop broader, more-inclusive narratives about the benefits of and need for prevention. More precisely, shared narratives could help address deficient political will. Such narratives must be rooted in evidence, which in turn lays the groundwork for policymakers and leaders to better interpret new evidence and make better policy decisions over time.

The continuous exchange of evidence between policymakers and civil society/academia is essential for informed policies. But that evidence and information need to be clear, concise, actionable, and readily available in a known location. Also, where evidence for upstream prevention already exists in indicators related to inclusive economic systems, human rights, gender equality and participation, and free and fair media, it may not be recognized as such.

Quantitative evidence tends to be valued more than qualitative evidence in policymaking, often further privileging those who generate quantitative evidence and excluding those who cannot produce that type of evidence. Perception data or story-based evidence from local peacebuilders, which comes from a deep knowledge of community needs, is equally important. Too often this type of evidence is ignored by policymakers, viewed as not



legitimate or not representative enough of the wider community or trends. More work is needed to build decision makers' understanding of how to use story-based evidence, as well as to improve methodologies for capturing story-based evidence.

Evidence questions and priorities tend to be driven by actors in the West/North, who often ask for the evidence to be “provided” or “extracted” by local actors or atrocity victims for outsiders to analyze. Instead, there is a need to build long-term relationships and dialogue with local communities and experts and to include them in developing evidence agendas, informing evidence-related questions, analyzing data, and measuring impact. At the same time, there is also a need to recognize language and framing barriers: there is a demand for evidence written in English from contexts where English is not the primary language or from experts who do not speak or write in English. On top of this language barrier, there is often an expectation that inaccessible technical language be used in reporting, which unproductively undermines local expertise and limits access to evidence from certain contexts. In other words, by overfocusing on format and language, policy circles often miss the critical content and context necessary to make meaningful progress.

C. On Meaningful and Equitable Inclusion

While there has been a clear rhetorical and conceptual shift by international leaders to include more local and national peacebuilders and actors in their work, participants indicated that governments and government networks do not often have the tools, capacity, or experience to bring in local voices. Moreover, funding constraints continue to drive what is and what is not possible for inclusion, whether due to translation or travel costs or a lack of recognition of the time needed to develop and maintain genuine relationships with local communities. It is also important to acknowledge that access to discussions does not equate to inclusion.

There are some clear better practices when it comes to ensuring meaningful and equitable inclusion. To overcome language challenges and barriers, there must be greater investment in translation and multilingual conversations, dejargonizing, and eliminating what can be considered offensive language (such as the word “empowering”). It is also important to not instrumentalize or “tokenize” individuals; do not ask one person to represent a whole region or perspective or use local voices to advance a policy agenda that does not add value for local populations. The conversation around the interactions of international and local actors often becomes about geography (i.e., those in conflict-affected countries aim their advocacy toward world capitals or international forums). Instead, multilateral forums should be thought of not as the object but rather in how they serve as places, spaces, and formats for discussion. The response by many organizations to move to virtual convenings during the COVID-19 pandemic has solidified the idea that there are many more opportunities to include local expertise in policy conversations.

Survivors should not be taken advantage of. These individuals are willing to share and relive their experiences for greater learning but can be retraumatized in the process. All actors should ensure that programs are sensitive to trauma and other psychosocial impacts of conflict and violence. Building trust with survivors and ensuring participant safety is essential; these groups are often attacked by the state, called terrorists, sexually harassed, and put on state kill lists.

More should be done to recognize and include agents of change who have traditionally been ignored, not seen as important enough, or left outside of existing power structures. These include:

- **Youth:** Youth may lack trust in formal institutions, which can impact how they engage and wish to be included. More needs to be done to go to their tables rather than simply inviting them to the traditional ones.
- **Local journalists:** Journalism and media are struggling financially and are increasingly restricted by governments. Supporting and connecting with local journalists and ensuring local voices/media are picked up in international news outlets is crucial.
- **National civil society networks:** Civic spaces should be built to the point that governments at any level of policymaking cannot ignore them.
- **Disempowered voices:** When trying to dismantle power structures, those who do not need additional power are often granted it and those who need to be elevated are often disempowered.
- **Informal change agents and social movements:** It is important to include those that fall outside of more-established nongovernmental or civil society structures.

Finally, the movements to decolonize peacebuilding and decolonize aid provide inspiration to find better approaches to inclusion in the institutions, fields, and communities focused on this work. In addition to widening the range and sources of participation in internal convenings, those working to prevent violence should seek opportunities to participate and share perspectives in new venues that others organize. Moreover, spaces must be expanded for greater inclusion, and those with influence must consider what they need to give up for others to have a place. More consideration should be given to whether funding opportunities may be better suited for others, if traveling or speaking opportunities should be passed to those left outside of existing power structures, and how to make all feel comfortable by building trust and using inclusive language.

D. Collaboration and Partnerships across Policy Sectors and Stakeholder Groups

In addition to enhancing meaningful and equitable inclusion with the above groups, participants also expressed the need to continue and deepen collaboration among a broader set of actors who



are already working on building societal resilience and upstream prevention. These include:

- **Youth**, including through childhood education programs, educational institutions that train the next generation of leaders, and online youth networks that are countering hate speech.
- **Women**, from the women, peace, and security community and those tackling the role of masculinity and patriarchy in contributing to conflict.
- **Survivors and migrants/asylum seekers**, who are part of diasporas.
- **Social movements**, from those tackling systemic inequality, such as Black Lives Matter, to those combating climate change and gun violence.
- **Social media influencers, artists, and media makers**, whose impact may be more emotive and culturally relevant for vast populations.
- **Indigenous leaders and communities**, who have historical knowledge and tools for communicating, including through poetry and song, what preventing violence and peacebuilding mean to them.
- **The mediation community**, which is working at all levels to address the root causes of violence and bring fractured groups and societies together.
- **Legal and justice systems**, which establish the truth and uncover the facts, as well as courts, which have addressed hate speech.

The danger, however, is that in many fields, including violence prevention, communities of practice continue to duplicate rather than amplify or build on each other's efforts. Competition among those who lead collaboration or who build networks is a growing and unhelpful trend that needs to be called out. More is needed to enable effective cross-sectoral collaboration, foster conversations, and create space for trust and relationship building.

Looking Forward: Priorities for the Next Two to Three Years

Though time-bound restrictions on what is needed and attainable were not considered in the strategy consultation discussions, especially given the long-term generational endeavor of building resilience and upstream prevention of violence, four stakeholder groups were seen as especially important to prioritize engagement with over the coming two to three years:

1. **Cities:** Seen as more agile and nimble service providers who have identities outside of and beyond the national, cities can connect to regional and multilateral forums in different

ways than national governments. There is little competition between them and more of a sense of community grounded in a commonality, such as identity and end goals. The Peace in Our Cities initiative aims to halve urban violence by 2030, and there may be other opportunities to further prevention through cities and city groupings.

2. **The private sector and the corporate accountability community:** Though there is existing research on the economic value of investing in prevention rather than postconflict response and rebuilding, more is needed to highlight for companies the economic consequences of mass violence and atrocities. Demonstrating to corporate leaders how their bottom line may be affected could impact their interest and investments in operating in environments where there is government-perpetrated violence. Those who engage the private sector often focus on multinational enterprises, whose leaders have low levels of will in changing their behavior. Targeting small-to-medium-sized enterprises that have a greater interest in supporting community building and prevention could be a path to pursue for local communities. Also, connecting with the corporate accountability community, which has long engaged in advocacy around human rights abuses, should be considered, whether through engaging with corporate leaders and board members, global boycott campaigns, strategic litigation, or other avenues. There is also an opportunity to learn from the insurance industry and climate community on how they quantify risk and “sell” prevention.
3. **Local media and journalists:** Recognizing that populations often rely on local and community-based media (including informal media such as blogs and other social media platforms) for their news, there are opportunities to further support, train, and amplify the work of local journalists and local media outlets, especially at a time when they are under such financial stress. It is important to note that local media platforms often operate in local languages and are sometimes organized or “tribalized” around ethnic lines, and they can be where mis/disinformation and propaganda thrives. At the same time, local journalists (like other local actors) also face risks to their safety when reporting information and attempting to hold power to account, and therefore precautions should be undertaken. There are also opportunities to engage with journalism and media networks that can serve as bridges to local media.
4. **Big Tech, especially social media companies:** Offline conflict is often started or fueled online, and tech and social media platforms are used to spread hate and mobilize, repress, divide, and instigate violence. The digital rights community, committed to combating disinformation and hate/dangerous speech, has been working to identify which Big Tech companies have the resources, power, and interest to address human rights violations after their occurrence and assess mistakes in hindsight. While Big Tech generally progresses



quickly, more thinking is needed on the role these companies can play for prevention. Beyond their use in inciting violence, new technologies (facial recognition, surveillance, and other forms) are a frontier for exploitation and repression of human rights defenders. Technology itself is not inherently good or bad, and it holds the potential to be used for effective prevention as well.

Many participants in the strategy consultation highlighted distinct opportunities and risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 may be an extinction event for many organizations working in this area, as the financial crisis that has accompanied it has had an extended impact on civil society and nongovernmental organizations through reduction or elimination of funding. This will, without question, result in a loss of capacity globally to address these issues.

This Discussion Takeaways captures the major discussion points and recommendations from a Strategy Consultation on Mass Violence and Atrocity Prevention that will inform the Stanley Center's work in the field.

Participant List

Organizers

Jessica Kline, Program Associate, Mass Violence and Atrocities, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Kelsey Paul Shantz, Program Officer, Mass Violence and Atrocities, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Jai-Ayla Quest, Program Specialist, Mass Violence and Atrocities, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Kelly Smits, Program Assistant, Journalism and Media, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Jennifer Smyser, Vice President and Director of Policy Programming Strategy, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Devon Terrill, Program Officer, Journalism and Media, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Facilitator

Sapna Chhatpar Considine, Director, Strategy for Humanity

Participants

Paige Arthur, Deputy Director and Director of Prevention and Peacebuilding, Center on International Cooperation, New York University^

Jenny Aulin, WILPF Membership and Project Manager, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Liz Baker, Senior Manager, Independent Journalism and Media, Humanity United

Sara Batmanglich, Senior Operations Officer, Fragility Conflict and Violence Group, The World Bank***^

Alex Bellamy, Director, Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies, The University of Queensland

Annie Bird, Program Officer, Atrocities Prevention and Response, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund*^

Ariela Blätter, Program Officer, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund^

Rachel Brown, Founder and Executive Director, Project Over Zero

Friederike Bubenzer, Senior Project Leader, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation

Cathy Buerger, Director of Research, Dangerous Speech Project

Eugenia Carbone, Director for Latin America, Latin American Network for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention, Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation**^

Mark Clark, Chief Executive Officer, Generations for Peace***^

Lesley Connolly, Global Policy Advisor and Team Lead, Inclusive Peace in Practice, Life and Peace Institute**^



Cedric de Coning, Senior Advisor, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) and Research Professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) ^

Don Deya, Chief Executive Officer, Pan African Lawyers Union ^

Roberta Dirosa, International Policy Officer, European External Action Service ** ^

Julian Egan, Head of Advocacy, International Alert ***

Camille Eiss, Chief of Global Partnerships and Policy, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project ** ^

Martine Kessy Ekomo-Soignet, Founder and Executive Director, URU ^

Luke Errington-Barnes, Strategic Advisor, Life and Peace Institute * ^

Jack Farrell, DME for Peace Project Manager, Search for Common Ground ** ^

Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director, Protection Approaches ** ^

Maria Fernandez-Garcia, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Internews Network ^

Gabriela Ghindea, Director, Mediterranean Basin Programs, Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities *** ^

Caleb Gichuhi, Senior Specialist, PeaceTech Lab *

Rebecca Hamilton, Associate Professor of Law, American University Washington College of Law (AUWCL) ^

Saba Ismail, Founder, Aware Girls *** ^

Mike Jobbins, Vice President of Global Affairs and Partnerships, Search for Common Ground

Dia Kayyali, Program Manager, Tech + Advocacy, WITNESS *** ^

Naomi Kikoler, Director, Center for the Prevention of Genocide, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum *** ^

Rachel Kleinfeld, Senior Fellow, Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *

Giovanna Kuele, Researcher, Igarape Institute *** ^

Rachel Locke, Director, Impact:Peace, University of San Diego **

Khin Maung, Founder, Rohingya Youth Association ^

Peter McBride, Director, The Cohen Center *** ^

Gus Miclat, Executive Director, Initiatives for International Dialogue *** ^

Bridget Moix, United States Executive Director, Peace Direct **

Noel Morada, Director, Regional Diplomacy and Capacity Building, Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and Director (Regional), School of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Queensland

Win Naing, Media and Communications Manager, Search for Common Ground Myanmar ^

Landry Ninteretse, Burundi Local Expert, Peace Direct

Dismas Rugason Nkunda, Chief Executive Officer, Atrocities Watch Africa ^

Sarah Noble, Director of External Relations, The New Humanitarian ** ^

Michael Oghia, Advocacy and Engagement Manager, Global Forum for Media Development *** ^

Savita Pawnday, Deputy Executive Director, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect * ^

Gilberto M.A. Rodrigues, Professor and Head, International Relations Graduate Program, Federal University of ABC *

Thiago Rodrigues, Associate Professor, Fluminense National University ** ^

Darynell Rodríguez Torres, Executive Director, GPPAC Foundation, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict ^

Nadia Rubaii, Co-Director, Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention, Binghamton University *** ^

Megan Schmidt, Quaker Representative, Quaker United Nations Office, New York



Renata Segura, Deputy Director, Latin America and the Caribbean, International Crisis Group**^

Ashad Sentongo, Director, Africa Programs, Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities^

Andrei Serbin Pont, Director, CRIES***^

Conor Seyle, Director, One Earth Future Foundation*^

Graeme Simpson, Principal Representative (New York) and Senior Peacebuilding Adviser, Interpeace USA and Adjunct Lecturer in Law, Columbia University School of Law*^

Bryan Sims, Senior Manager, Peacebuilding, Humanity United***

Karen Smith, Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect, United Nations*^

Debbie Stothard, Founder/ Coordinator, ALTSEAN–Burma**^

Sarah Taylor, Director, International Policy Strategy and Women, Peace, Security, InclusivePeace***^

Margaret Williams, Independent Consultant**^

Kyaw Win, Executive Director, Burma Human Rights Network^

Uzra Zeya, Chief Executive Officer and President, Alliance for Peacebuilding

Stanley Center Governance Members and Leadership Team

Brian Hanson, Chair, Board of Directors, Stanley Center for Peace and Security and Vice President of Studies, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Cassie Mathias, Director of Finance, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Patty Papke, Vice President and Director of Operations, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Keith Porter, President and Chief Executive Officer, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Mark Seaman, Director of Communications, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Jennifer Smyser, Vice President and Director of Policy Programming Strategy, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Joseph Stanley, Director, Board of Directors, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

Lori Zook-Stanley, Director, Board of Directors, Stanley Center for Peace and Security

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

**Participated in Focus Group 1 on Thursday, October 1, 2020.*

***Participated in Focus Group 2 on Tuesday, October 6, 2020.*

****Participated in Focus Group 3 on Thursday, October 8, 2020.*

^Participated in the Plenary Session on Thursday, October 15, 2020.



About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.

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