



Overcoming Barriers: Civil Society Perspectives on Implementing R2P

Ali Badran, a 14-year-old Syrian, uses a walkie-talkie at an observation post to locate the positions of forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and monitor their movements in Jabal al-Zawiya in the Idlib countryside September 7, 2014. Badran quit school two years ago to become an observer after his father taught him the relevant skills. (Reuters/Khalil Ashawi)

Event Summary

Hosted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP), and the Stanley Foundation
September 8, 2016, at the Church Centre of the United Nations

This event was convened as a follow-up to the September 6, 2016, United Nations General Assembly dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Opening remarks were delivered by Bettina Luise Rürup, executive director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's New York office. Ms. Rürup noted that the event sought to provide a forum for civil society to illustrate how R2P is translated into practice on the ground, to share the innovative measures local communities take to protect populations from atrocity crimes, and to show how actions taken by local communities can actively buttress international efforts to uphold R2P. Furthermore, the conversation sought to identify and consider recommendations for the international community to implement to enhance preventive measures for civilian protection.

Speakers

Moderated by **Bridget Moix**, Peace Direct's US senior representative

Dismas Nkunda, co-founder and chief executive officer of Atrocities Watch-Africa

Gus Miclat, executive director and co-founder of the Initiatives for International Dialogue and ICRtoP steering committee member

Evan Cinq-Mars, United Nations advocate and policy adviser for the Center for Civilians in Conflict

Role of Civil Society in Preventing Atrocity Crimes

This year's report of the UN secretary-general (UNSG) on R2P recognized the essential role of civil society in assisting efforts to protect populations from atrocity crimes. In paragraph 51 of the report, the UNSG brought attention to the diverse actions undertaken by civil society to uphold R2P, including the strengthening of early warning and monitoring mechanisms, leading advocacy initiatives to support victims of atrocities, providing direct legal and support services to affected communities, overseeing mediation efforts to ease tensions, and providing lifesaving humanitarian assistance. The UNSG urged member states to support the breadth of contributions made by civil society to preventing and responding to atrocities.

Bridget Moix, Peace Direct's US senior representative, used the UNSG's articulation of the crucial impact of civil society as a starting point for the day's discussions, first turning to the panelists to ask them to share their own experiences in the field of atrocity prevention in their respective countries and regions.

Civil society strengthens early warning and monitoring mechanisms, advocates for and directly supports victims of atrocities, mediates conflict, and provides lifesaving humanitarian assistance during times of crisis.

Reflecting on the work of Atrocities Watch–Africa, Dismas Nkunda, co-founder and chief executive officer of that organization, outlined three core goals of his organization: to support better understanding of the drivers that lead to conflict, to monitor situations of concern so as to advocate for early warning to prevent atrocities, and to take action in a preventive manner before a crisis erupts. Additionally, Atrocities Watch–Africa seeks to ensure the participation of underrepresented communities, particularly women and youth, in prevention and response processes. Presently, the organization focuses on the simmering crisis in Burundi, where Atrocities Watch–Africa is working with the European Union to develop an early warning system in the country. Additionally, the organization's prior efforts directly supported the formation of a committee by the East African Community that led investigations on the situation in the country. As Mr. Nkunda is also the chair of the Ugandan National Committee for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and all forms of Discrimination, he shared details on the work of this body as it seeks to prevent atrocities in Uganda. This included discussion of early warning efforts led by the committee, which has created a system for the weekly gathering and assessment of information from regions at risk of violence. This information is then used to inform decision making on measures to be taken and to determine what actors are best suited to implement tools to prevent the escalation of a situation.

Gus Miclat, executive director and co-founder of the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) and ICR2P steering committee member, then talked about the efforts of his organization to protect populations in the Philippines and throughout Southeast Asia from conflict and atrocity crimes. IID emerged 28 years ago as a solidarity organization that sought to share its movement-building experience through its work at the regional level, with a particular focus on engaging with affected

communities in areas of conflict, such as in East Timor. However, following the start of an “all-out war” declared by the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao in 2000, IID refocused and expanded its work to include domestic conflict prevention and peacebuilding actions. Mr. Miclat noted that IID’s programming is centered on the importance of networking and coalition building as a means to have the greatest impact for change. A key goal of IID’s work is to translate rhetoric into action; the organization strives to work directly with and magnify the voices of affected communities. In this way, the organization seeks to ensure the participation of local actors, particularly communities directly affected by the risk or commission of atrocities, in regional and global processes. Mr. Miclat called this type of inclusion working “glocally.”

Challenges Facing Atrocity Prevention and Response

The UNSG’s report on R2P highlighted three core challenges that remain with regard to the prevention of atrocity crimes. The UNSG brought attention to the growing disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law, denounced the failure to act early and decisively when there are clear warnings of possible mass atrocities, and expressed his concern at the growing presence of nonstate actors as perpetrators of atrocity crimes. Participants reflected on these challenges, sharing more on how they manifest in their countries and regions, and they brought attention to additional issues adversely impacting efforts to prevent atrocities.

Failure to Act on Information

A central issue that was raised was the failure to act on early warning information and the inefficient use of existing national, regional, and international monitoring mechanisms. Reflecting on regional and continental capabilities in Africa, Mr. Nkunda stated that there are various early warning tools and bodies within the African Union, East African Community, and Southern African Development Community; however, these tools have yet to be fully triggered and utilized to protect populations such as those who have been at risk or victims of atrocities in the Central African Republic, Burundi, or South Sudan. Mr. Cinq-Mars raised the cases of the Central African Republic and Burundi as tragic examples of the failures of actors at all levels to respond to situations in which there was extensive early warning information about the risk of conflict and atrocity crimes. He noted that such crises illustrate that R2P is only as strong as those who work to uphold it, as atrocity prevention is “fundamentally a human enterprise.” Thus, the problem is not necessarily the need for more complex early warning systems but rather that those responsible for upholding R2P act on information received to ensure that civilian protection needs are prioritized.

Lack of Inclusivity in Decision-Making Processes

An additional challenge identified revolves around the decision-making processes for implementing preventive and reactive measures. Mr. Miclat noted that civil society remains on the outskirts of such processes and that

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affected communities and civil society actors are not routinely included when assessing risks or determining courses of action to respond to unfolding crises. This in part stems from a lack of understanding of the diverse activities of civil society. Those who make up civil society are directly working with those impacted by conflict and are sometimes victims themselves. Such issues do not just exist at the national or regional levels but extend to civil society access to meetings of the United Nations, where participation remains limited. It was noted that understanding the complexity and diversity of civil society activities and working to institutionalize partnerships with those who comprise civil society are imperative for developing holistic processes for prevention.

Growing Need for Civilian Self-Protection

The failure to prevent atrocity crimes, including through the implementation of poorly informed response measures, has led to the creation of environments in which civilians and other local actors have to develop self-protection measures, with Syria serving as a primary example. On this point, Evan Cinq-Mars, United Nations advocate and policy adviser for the Center for Civilians in Conflict, noted that the that group has led extensive work documenting how civilians are self-organizing to deliver on the protection needs of their communities because of the lack of international support in the areas of prevention and response. Mr. Nkunda also highlighted examples of cross-border support provided by Atrocities Watch–Africa to those fleeing persecution in Burundi, which illustrate the efforts being undertaken by civil society to address the needs of individuals at risk. His organization has sought to assist youth activists targeted for participating in antigovernment demonstrations, resulting in these individuals fleeing to Uganda for refuge. While they have been able to receive shelter and support, it is uncertain when they will be able to return home because of the continuing instability in Burundi.

Overall Disregard for International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law

While international humanitarian and human rights law articulates clear obligations for states and other actors, participants agreed with the UNSG’s report in its assessment that there continues to be a growing disregard for such standards, resulting in increased violence toward civilians. When considering the plight of displaced and refugee populations, Mr. Nkunda stated that the 1951 Refugee Convention articulates the responsibilities of states receiving those fleeing conflict; however, the international community continues to see efforts to deny rights to those seeking refuge. Moreover, when displaced and refugee populations are received, the focus remains on addressing their immediate humanitarian needs, with agencies and actors providing necessities such as food and shelter; little is done to integrate these communities into the host society or to reintegrate them upon return to their countries of origin. If more concerted action is not taken in these areas, then the risk of breeding future conflicts increases.

The rise in impunity for atrocities was also identified as an example of the disregard for international standards, such as the Rome Statute

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of the International Criminal Court. Mr. Nkunda raised the case of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, who is wanted for many crimes, including genocide, yet remains in power and is able to visit other countries and maintain diplomatic relations with other governments, some of which are parties to the Rome Statute. Mr. Nkunda stated that such examples show victims and perpetrators of atrocity crimes that there is no accountability for those responsible.

Moving Toward Solutions

While the challenges that remain may seem daunting, it is essential to identify and articulate solutions so that collective measures can be taken to enhance prevention and response capacities. The discussion focused on two core areas: building partnerships for implementing R2P and learning from past practices.

Building Partnerships for Implementing R2P

Moving R2P forward into its second decade will require increased efforts at all levels to establish and strengthen partnerships for atrocity prevention. Mr. Nkunda brought attention to the need to enhance coordination across institutions—such as the UN Security Council, African Union Peace and Security Council, and East African Community—so that there are established processes in place for sharing early warning information and involvement in planning processes to respond to emerging crises.

Mr. Miclat and Mr. Cinq-Mars noted the need to engage with civil society and affected communities when assessing risks and developing strategies to prevent and respond to atrocities. It is imperative to do more to work directly with local actors in the design of responses to benefit from their extensive knowledge and experience. Mr. Miclat also encouraged civil society actors to work to identify potential champions within national, regional, and international institutions who can serve as key partners for the advancement of an atrocity-prevention agenda. Further institutionalizing such partnerships, including through financial support—especially for core funding—to the work of civil society organizations will serve to establish more holistic and successful policies for operationalizing R2P.

Enhanced partnership building is also needed within civil society communities. Mr. Miclat gave

an honest assessment of the work of civil society, stating that such actors are not immune from working in silos, which results in missed opportunities for network building and coordination. To move forward, more action is needed to build understanding of R2P across sectors and to develop practices for linking and learning across organizations and existing networks.

Learning From Past Practices

Mr. Cinq-Mars noted that in the international community, not enough is done to examine past practices for atrocity prevention and response. The international community should review past examples and publish case studies so more can be learned about measures and partnerships that protected populations from atrocities. He raised the efforts taken in Guinea in 2009 and 2010—with Mr. Nkunda highlighting the coordinated response to the deteriorating postelection situation in Kenya in 2007—as positive examples of upholding R2P. Mr. Cinq-Mars also reminded participants that even in a case like Syria, we can identify measures taken by a range of stakeholders that have shown steps to implement the norm. Therefore, it is essential to analyze what measures have worked and what has proven unsuccessful in various situations.

Conclusion

The event ended with Ms. Moix noting that two main themes emerged from the day's discussion: the crucial need to include those most affected by atrocities and their responses and the fact that R2P is a "fundamentally human enterprise" and is thus only as strong as the actions of those who seek to uphold it. It is central, then, to develop and strengthen efforts for partnership building and coordination so that collectively, actors at all levels can implement holistic measures to prevent these most horrific crimes.

The Stanley Foundation

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a nongovernmental organization providing and supporting civic education, research, and international cooperation from its headquarters in Bonn and Berlin as well as through its international network of offices in more than 100 countries. The New York office of the foundation is part of Dialogue on Globalization, a program that contributes to the international debate on globalization through conferences, workshops, and publications.

Furthermore, the office serves as a liaison between the foundation's field offices and partners in developing countries with the objective to strengthen the voice of the Global South in multilateral bodies, particularly the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions. Online at www.fes-globalization.org/new_york/.

The International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP)

The International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect convenes and collaborates with civil society, member states, and regional and subregional organizations to strengthen normative consensus for RtoP, further the understanding of the norm, push for strengthened capacities to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing, and mobilize nongovernmental organizations to push for action to save lives in RtoP country-specific situations. Learn more at www.responsibilitytoprotect.org.

The organizers prepared this summary following the event. It contains their account of the panel presentations and dialogue with participants. Panelists and participants neither reviewed nor approved the report. Therefore, it should not be assumed that they subscribe to the recommendations, observations, and conclusions included.