

Comparing Conflict Prevention & Atrocity Prevention

This policy brief is a synopsis of a longer report by the Alliance for Peacebuilding currently underway.

False notions of what constitutes conflict prevention abound in literature on atrocity prevention. Much of the literature on genocide and mass atrocities attempts to de-link extreme cases of violence from “regular” armed conflict. Yet most, but not all, cases of genocide and mass atrocities happen within a context of armed conflict. And *all* cases of mass atrocities happen within a context of structural violence. Clearly, there is more work to be done to link conflict prevention theories and practices to the emerging energy to prevent and respond to genocide and mass atrocities. The US government should view atrocity prevention as a moral and strategic imperative illustrating US willingness to invest in preventing atrocities through robust diplomacy even when its short-term economic and political interests are not at stake.

What is the difference between atrocity prevention and conflict prevention?

Both atrocity prevention and conflict prevention stem from a constructivist approach - viewing violent conflict and mass atrocities not as inevitabilities –but as a result of human choices and social structures. Atrocity prevention grows out of a human rights paradigm that most often looks to rule of law and coercive institutions (ICC) and coercive actions (sanctions, armed force) that focus on specific individual targets that are perpetrating atrocities. Conflict prevention grows out of a structural, relational, cultural and psychological paradigm that pursues the values of human rights through identifying and addressing the structural root causes, the psychological and identity-based drivers of conflict through approaches that are primarily, but not exclusively, persuasive and transformative rather than coercive. *Most*, but not all, cases of genocide and mass atrocities happen within a context of armed conflict. But *all* cases of mass atrocities happen within a context of structural violence. It is possible to identify through a conflict assessment process those countries with structural violence that are most prone to experiencing genocide and mass atrocities.

How should they fit together in practice for most effective results?

There are many ways the US government’s atrocity prevention efforts could learn more from the field of conflict prevention. A few are outlined here.

a) **CONFLICT ASSESSMENT:** The field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding has already set up a variety of early warning and early response structures at all levels: global, regional, and local. In some place, there are robust ongoing conflict assessment processes underway that could identify potential escalation of violence toward mass atrocity. Robust, multi-stakeholder, ongoing conflict assessment is essential to both conflict prevention and genocide/mass atrocity prevention. However, currently, many of the new atrocity

prevention assessment processes are not connected to longstanding conflict prevention and peacebuilding programs. And there is not enough robust conflict assessment going on to pick up the potential signals of impending mass atrocity in many places.

b) **WHOLE OF SOCIETY:** In countries such as Ghana and Kenya, there is already a “Infrastructure for Peacebuilding” in which government, military and civil society are working in partnership to prevent mass atrocities and violent conflict. The field of conflict prevention has learned that prevention efforts work best when leaders at all levels of society are mobilized and coordinating with each other in a “whole of society” approach. Current US government efforts suffer from a lack of understanding and recognition of the vast civil society infrastructure to prevent and respond to conflict (and atrocities).

c) **LEGITIMACY:** The capacity to assess and conduct early warning assessment has never been the primary problem in conflict prevention. The primary problem is mobilizing political will to address the problem from countries that are seen as having a legitimate interest. Foreign populations regularly question the motives of US interventions. This is a major obstacle to finding legitimacy and partnerships for intervening to stop mass atrocity.

d) **SECOND ORDER EFFECTS:** In the rush to “do something!”, policymakers may be tempted to intervene without adequate assessment about potential second order effects. Good intentions often lead to destructive and counterproductive impacts. In some cases intervention may:

- Cause significant civilian casualties,
- Undermine longer term efforts to create democratic governance
- Infuse a surplus of weapons into a region that then fall into the hands of insurgent in neighboring countries, causing regional instability
- Fuel a narrative that colonial powers want to extract resources and impose political dominance on smaller countries.

In response to decades of lessons learned, the field of conflict prevention has developed extensive tools to identify and avoid potential second order, unintended impacts. Widespread training in “conflict sensitivity” and “Do No Harm”¹ methodologies are impacting how organizations go about reducing potential harms. The US government should do more to train and prepare for these scenarios.

e) **PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY:** The US government’s new atrocity prevention initiatives could learn more about preventive diplomacy and how conflict prevention addresses human rights violators via principled negotiation. Conflict prevention does not take a position of moral equivalency between groups, as has been suggested by other authors. Perpetrators may use diplomatic efforts as a distraction. But conflict prevention experts advise that maintaining communication or diplomatic channels with all stakeholders, even those perpetrating atrocities, is essential. Communication is necessary to understand the motivations and interests of these actors. Communication through negotiation is not a justification of their acts. An impartial mediator may relate to all stakeholders in an attempt to find a solution via negotiation. This does not suggest the mediator conveys moral equivalency on all stakeholders. The US government’s Foreign Service Institute should do far more to support Foreign Service Officer’s capabilities to conduct principled negotiation with human rights perpetrators.

¹ See for example www.conflictsensitivity.org. and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects Do No Harm Training and research products at www.cda.org