

Atrocity prevention and peacebuilding

Key insights and lessons from a global
consultation convened by Peace Direct

Executive Summary



Višegrad Bridge: Bosnia and Herzegovina

About this summary report

This summary report puts forward analysis and recommendations emerging from a consultation on atrocity prevention and peacebuilding. In late 2017 Peace Direct held a four-day online consultation in which 96 civil society practitioners and experts from across the globe reflected on how local peacebuilding approaches contribute to preventing and halting mass violence and rebuilding communities in the aftermath of violence.

Without question, the international community, including governments, the United Nations, and regional organisations carry a primary responsibility to prevent and stop atrocities. However, as this Brief demonstrates, local civil society and locally-led peacebuilding approaches also play a critical role, one which is too often overlooked. Participants in the consultation, selected specifically because of their experience with community level peacebuilding, lend a vital, unique, and often missing local perspective from policy conversations about atrocity prevention. We hope the outcomes of this consultation will lead to increased support and strengthening for those peacebuilding efforts.

Peace Direct extends a very special thank you to our guest experts and participants for their commitment and hard work in contributing to this report, and to all those who engaged proactively in the online consultation with respect and without judgement. The viewpoints presented here represent the consensus of participants and experts.

This summary report summarizes key findings and recommendations from the consultation, but a full report can be found here: www.peacedirect.org/publications/atrocity-prevention-consultation

Summary of key findings and recommendations



Atrocity crimes – systematic violence perpetrated against civilians – continue to have devastating impacts on populations in Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and beyond. The failure to act promptly in the face of these growing crimes, despite strong international norms and legislation, reflects the limitations of the international system to prevent and stop such violence.

Robust peacekeeping and rapid interventions have shown some promise, but they are reactive, attempting to stop mass violence only once it is underway. Effective prevention requires longer term, early action that focuses on local capacity building and support for actors on the ground: those who experience the early warning signs of possible mass atrocity and genocide. Indeed, local peacebuilders have long engaged in efforts to

bridge divisions in their communities and find local solutions to conflict, despite much hardship.

The global effort to prevent and stop atrocities will require a collective, multi-sector approach inclusive of intergovernmental institutions, governments, civil society organisations and networks, academia, and local peacebuilders.

Peacebuilding approaches to preventing atrocity crimes

The peacebuilding and atrocity prevention fields of work have historically been considered different, but related fields. A key difference between the fields, and a reason the distinction is often made at the policy and funding levels, is that atrocity prevention is rooted in accountability frameworks such as international criminal justice and human rights, while peacebuilding stems from conflict resolution and prevention frameworks that seek long-term sustainable changes.

Yet, a principal finding of this consultation is that, in practice, on the ground in conflict settings, the distinction matters little. Ultimately, they share common goals, tools, and approaches. The common mission of both fields of work, to prevent violence and mass atrocity, overrides most differences. Indeed, local peacebuilders have worked to prevent genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing long before these terminologies existed. As we heard repeatedly, “It’s the work that matters, not the labels.”

Though not exhaustive, below are some peacebuilding approaches identified in this report that can contribute to the prevention of atrocities:

- **Building trust and enhancing opportunities for dialogue**, often between minority and majority ethnic and religious communities, to address the earliest stages of conflict, root causes of conflict, and long-term disputes over grievances, inequalities and trauma that can lead to atrocities.

“Because atrocities are correlated with conflict, stopping conflict may be one of the most important ways to prevent atrocities.”

Mugahed Al-Shaibah (Yemen):

- **Designing and implementing peace education programmes that seeks to tackle divisions within communities.** These programmes can, for example, contribute to diminishing hate, discrimination, bias and the “dehumanisation of the other” that can unpin the origins of atrocities, promote reconciliation and reduce reoccurrence of atrocities, and diminish the stigma of sexual and gender-based violence on victims and communities.

- **Developing non-violent self-protection strategies.** In the face of impending violence and atrocities, communities worldwide have developed innovative and nonviolent strategies – dependant on the local context and history – including by forming peace communities and neighbourhood watches (some of “ancient” origin), engaging in direct negotiations or mediation with armed forces, and developing early warning capacities to hide and flee from imminent atrocities, among others.

“Local people with valuable practical ideas are not included most of the time in policy related discussions due to their ethnic, language, religious, and geographical bias.”

Fazeeha Azmi (Sri Lanka)

- **Engaging in grassroots reconciliation and healing**, between former insurgents and their communities, to diminish intergroup tensions, deep societal divisions, systematic discrimination and societal trauma that fuel identity-based grievances, contribute to dehumanisation and exclusion, through a variety of strategies including cohabitation, building trust and tolerance.
- **Preventing sexual and gender-based violence.** This entails forming networks and coalitions to advocate for legislation, leading in early warning and response, and facilitating training and education to promote gender equality and the changing of bias and negative attitudes toward women affected by SGBV crimes.

Obstacles peacebuilders face in their efforts to prevent atrocities

- **Limitations of working in the context of active atrocities**, especially in communities where groups who are already marginalised and socially and economically disenfranchised cannot organise, advocate or defend themselves.
- **Big-power proxy wars**, where civilians are caught in violent conflicts supported and fuelled by international actors positioning for regional and global influence, coupled with negligent attention and action by regional actors, mean that civilian protection is simply not a priority. The sale of weapons by big powers, and the trade in small arms, only fuels violence further. Local peacebuilding efforts are dwarfed, derailed, and often overwhelmed in these contexts.
- **Insufficient or weak institutional governance** is a common challenge, therefore there may be a lack of policies and programmes to address the deep social divisions that communities face with respect to their religious and ethnic identities, especially in certain countries and contexts where atrocities have previously taken place. In many cases, governments are actively involved in perpetrating atrocities and may perceive local peacebuilding efforts as a threat.

- **The constraints on civil society are ever increasing** with some governments imposing legal barriers on civil society to operate as well as some making direct threats on the physical security of organisations, including harassment, intimidation, attacks, and even death.

“If locally-led civic organisations actively engage the youth, women, children, and community leaders in building trust and cohesion, then conflicts become locally owned and local knowledge is harnessed in preventing major atrocities.”

Qamar Jafri (Pakistan)

- **The prevalence of non-state armed groups**, who may be motivated by local disputes and use them to compel violence against civilians, and recruit children and youth to their forces.
- **Hate speech in the media** heightens tensions and anger and capitalises on social and economic divisions within a society.



Recommendations

- **“Stopping violent conflict can stop atrocities”** is what we heard from consultation participants. Peacebuilding addresses the earliest stages of conflict, root causes of conflict and inequalities that can lead to atrocities. Peacebuilding reinforces atrocity prevention.
- **Take advantage of the early-warning capacities of local communities.** They are especially well prepared to prevent violence before it breaks out and prevent atrocities (in peace or war times). They can be counted on for access to critical information in real time and for observing and documenting signs of impending violence.
- **Engage directly with local communities in the design of atrocity prevention and peacebuilding efforts.** Local communities should lead the design these efforts. Governments and donors should therefore engage in participatory conflict analysis, where “key people” and not “more people” is a priority, and which ensures that there is a proper baseline assessment of the local context.
- **Include all voices in prevention strategies, peacebuilding activities as well as dialogue and peace processes.** This inclusion, especially with the most marginalised groups, is critical to assuring lasting peace. In this same spirit, including government and military (who are often perpetrators of violence) is also important.
- **Improve the funding structures for peacebuilding and atrocity prevention in a way that is not limiting.** Donor funding structures – governmental, intergovernmental and private foundations – should be focused on local capacity building for atrocity prevention by investing in longer-term programming, core organisational support and rapid response funding instruments in the full cycle of conflict, from its root causes to ongoing atrocities to its aftermath.
- **Raise global awareness of massive violations of human rights.** The international community should increase efforts to raise awareness in intergovernmental forums. These efforts should be paired with support to victims, families, and human rights defenders speaking out about the risk of atrocities and SGBV crimes.
- **Undertake advocacy where the Global North is playing a role in fuelling atrocities.** Civil society in the Global North should address its advocacy efforts to the role the private sector plays in fuelling atrocities, shine a light on war profiteering and the trade of small arms and weapons, lobby politicians to ensure their governments’ proposed policies do not escalate conflicts, and back solidarity campaigns that support the messages and hopes of local peacebuilders.
- **Provide incentives for governments to reform institutions and address disputes that could lead to conflict and mass atrocities.** This will include; prosecuting the perpetrators of atrocity crimes and bring them to justice; and encouraging warring parties to come to the table through mediation.

What is atrocity prevention?

Atrocity prevention refers to a broad range of tools and strategies which aim to prevent the occurrence of mass killings and other large scale human rights abuses committed against civilians. The terms “mass killings” or “mass atrocities” do not have formal legally accepted definitions but are commonly understood to refer to large-scale, intentional attacks on civilians.

What is peacebuilding?

A variety of official and unofficial definitions can be elaborated for peacebuilding. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, defined peacebuilding as action to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict. The 2000 Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (also known as the Brahimi Report) defined it as “activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war.” In 2007, the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Committee agreed on the following conceptual basis for peacebuilding to inform UN practice: “Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritised, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives.”

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Craig Funnell

About Peace Direct

Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts, and this report is the third in a series canvassing local views on violent conflicts around the world in an effort to highlight local capacities for peace and local expertise.

For more information on this series of reports, please contact us.

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