

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Reducing the Risk of Mass Atrocities

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Statement of Jai-Ayla Quest
Program Officer, Mass Violence and Atrocities
The Stanley Foundation

Introduction

To the co-chairmen and the members of this commission, thank you for the invitation to testify here today and thank you for your commitment to protecting human rights and preventing mass atrocities.

My name is Jai-Ayla Quest, and I am the Program Officer for our Mass Violence and Atrocities team at the Stanley Foundation. We are a nonpartisan operating foundation based in Muscatine, Iowa, since 1956. For over sixty years the foundation has been committed to improving multilateral and collective action for a secure and just peace. My team focuses specifically on informing policy decisions that help strengthen societal resilience to mass violence and atrocities. We do this by working with diverse stakeholders to strengthen institutions and mechanisms for preventing atrocities. Today I'll discuss the work we have done exploring the role of the private sector in helping to prevent atrocities.

Prevention is a process. Long before the outbreak of atrocities, there are structural conditions that may make institutions weak and society more vulnerable to atrocities, including institutional and social discrimination against particular groups, horizontal economic inequality, and unequal protection for marginalized groups under the law.

As our focus in this hearing is on early or upstream prevention – actions that can be taken before the threat of violence and atrocities to address these structural issues in order to increase resilience, reinforce stability and secure peace. During this phase there is time to build partnerships, to analyze the local context and to develop prevention plans. This is also the phase where atrocity prevention and peacebuilding actions overlap; both contribute to a society's ability to deal with pressures and shocks and reduce the risk for mass violence or atrocities.

The Private Sector and Prevention

Although private sector actors do play negative roles in both the commission and enabling of atrocities—and as such require oversight and accountability—our focus at the foundation has centered primarily on the positive role the business community can have in peacebuilding and strengthening societies to avoid atrocities.

What have we learned about prevention and the private sector? A few things are clear. First, prevention is far more cost-effective than response. “Even in the most pessimistic scenario...the average net savings is close to US\$5 billion per year. In the most optimistic scenario, the net savings is almost US\$70 billion per year.”¹ Second, the health of the economy is directly tied to a country’s level of peacefulness. Third, there is not just a moral reason for the private sector to be involved in atrocity prevention, peace is good for business. “The economic impact of violence on the global economy in 2017 was \$14.76 trillion in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. This figure is equivalent to 12.4% of the world’s economic activity (gross world product) or \$1,988 for every person.”²

Importantly, private sector actors and atrocity prevention experts do not share expertise and language. Therefore, it’s important to be clear about critical prevention measures that all actors must participate in to strengthen societal resilience. These measures include:

- Ensuring that the rule of law is respected and that all human rights are protected, without discrimination
- Establishing legitimate and accountable national institutions
- Eliminating corruption
- Managing diversity constructively
- Supporting a strong and diverse civil society and pluralistic media³

For the private sector, commitments to “do no harm” are a step in the right direction. However, private sector actors can be more proactive in contributing to prevention and strengthening societal resilience. We know there’s a strong connection between safeguarding human rights and atrocity prevention, but they are distinct. So efforts to incorporate human rights into business practices are positive, but supporting human rights alone is not sufficient, and it is essential to

¹ United Nations & World Bank Group, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank Publications, 2018).

² Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2018: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: June 2018), page 3. Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>.

³ United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes* (United Nations, 2014), page 3.

counter atrocity-specific risk factors that are relevant to the business environment through efforts connected to those listed above.

It is important to recognize the private sector is not a homogenous group; rather it consists of multiple levels and different types of actors, including small- and large-scale local businesses, national businesses, international businesses (i.e., multinational corporations), business associations, business philanthropy, and illegal businesses. Within a national context, there is a hierarchy of business arrangements, ranked from smallest to largest: (1) individual corporations, (2) sector-specific conglomerates, (3) the larger business community, and (4) the business community with the addition of the informal private sector.

This diverse group of private sector actors has different capabilities and capacities to contribute to prevention and resilience. The larger the enterprise, the more resources it has to invest in prevention and the more influence it can have on policy and decision makers. However, any one entity can only do so much; therefore, one of the greatest areas of potential is with chambers of commerce and business associations. Associations have more leverage with governments and more capacity to reduce risks for atrocities and stabilize operating environments than individual business actors. However, local business owners have a greater stake in community stability and resilience and therefore arguably greater motivation to make peace a priority. Therefore, business actors at all levels have good reasons to be involved in prevention.

What are some positive examples of a business role in prevention?

In 1988-1991 in South Africa, the Consultative Business Movement facilitated the transition away from apartheid and contributed to stability by creating spaces for dialogue and fostering trust and consensus building among private sector actors, media, civil society, and political parties.

In the 1990s the Group of Seven in Northern Ireland, created by the Confederation of Business Industry and other business associations, used media and publicity campaigns to demonstrate the value of a “peace dividend”, arguing for the resolution of conflict to spur economic growth.

In 2007 the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) encouraged the end of electoral violence, and played a proactive prevention role in 2012 by working with telecommunication companies to promote peace messaging and counter hate speech leading up to and during the elections.

In general, there are a number of positive, proactive actions businesses and private sector entities can take, including:

- Assessing the current or potential impact of business operations on communities and eliminating any practices that increase risks for atrocities.
- Developing and implementing “inclusive business practices” in line with corporate social responsibility standards that include provisions for gender equality and environmental

protection, with a particular focus on building strong relationships with local communities, following fair employment practices, providing services equally, and using land and natural resources responsibly.

- Taking anti-corruption measures, ensuring transparency and accountability to employees and the community.
- Providing accountable private security and providing conflict resolution and transformation training along with business opportunities for former combatants when relevant.
- Taking an active role in mediation and peace processes, and engaging in strategic partnerships with governments and civil society.

Relatedly, there is an important role for government actors in connecting businesses to their roles in prevention. In addition to lawmaking, legislators can use their unique roles in education, advocacy, and oversight in the following ways:

- At the National Level: Set regulatory frameworks and urge businesses to have clear standards for human rights and atrocity prevention, hold businesses accountable to international law, and encourage their participation in voluntary initiatives and benchmarking processes (such as the UN Global Compact). By bringing business to the table, government actors can foster connections between the private sector, civil society, and the government (on prevention).
- At the regional and international level: governments can support a strong international framework by urging other governments to improve regulations to international code of conduct standards, like the United Nations Global Compact and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by building on the commitments to the sustainable development goals.
- At the national and international level: engage local business actors at risk of influence by perpetrators of atrocities, incorporate atrocity prevention into investment sustainability policies and standards, and uphold domestic and international institutions involved in atrocity prevention and peacebuilding (including development and foreign affairs agencies).
- Fundamentally, governments can support the prevention and peacebuilding communities by working with civil society to assess risks and identify key partners and opportunities within the private sector to engage in early prevention. (Business leaders have the power to influence further buy-in from other private entities in engaging in prevention.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, public and private actors can play an important role in atrocity prevention, but these efforts must always be informed and guided by local context and expertise.⁴ Furthermore, peace is not just a goal reserved for some countries or regions, but rather requires diligence and priority in all nations. In fact, Europe, North America, the Asia-Pacific, and South America, all became less peaceful over the last year.⁵ Finally, while there is an important role for private sector actors around the globe, governments do and always will bear ultimate responsibility for preventing atrocities and generating the conditions for peace. It therefore remains important for government actors to foster policy and diplomacy that encourages constructive business engagement in building resilience and pursuing peace.

⁴ International Alert: Local Business, Local Peace

⁵⁵ Global Peace Index 2018