

11. August 2016

Germany should prioritize mass atrocity prevention

by Simon Adams

[Atrocity Prevention](#) [Vereinte Nationen](#)

More resources and diplomatic imagination are needed to achieve an equilibrium shift away from crisis response and towards conflict prevention. Germany should use its flexible and well-regarded diplomacy to strengthen the global commitment to the Responsibility to Protect and focus on the practical means to prevent mass atrocities.

No one expects Germany to single-handedly fix the world's problems, but just as The Economist described Chancellor Angela Merkel last year as “[the indispensable European](#)”, Germany has an essential role to play in the struggle to ensure that the twenty-first century does not mirror its predecessor in terms of internecine bloodshed. The United Nations (UN) is currently dealing with the largest displacement of human beings since the end of the Second World War and responding to four simultaneous “Level-3” emergencies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Sudan. In each of these humanitarian crises, mass atrocity crimes have also been committed.

According to the Global Peace Index, in financial terms alone conflict and terrorism [cost the world about \\$13.6 trillion annually](#). But as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has pointedly noted, [80% of current humanitarian resources are spent on man-made problems](#) and investment in prevention is minuscule by comparison.

Moreover, it is not just human beings that are under attack. The norms that bind and “safeguard humanity,” to use the Secretary-General’s words, are also under threat. The deliberate bombing of hospitals and the indiscriminate killing of civilians has almost become routine. Numerous governments and murderous non-state actors (like ISIS or Boko Haram) are defying international humanitarian and human rights law. So while funding emergency humanitarian relief is extremely important, such efforts cannot end the Syrian civil war nor resolve any other conflict.

The solution depends upon achieving an equilibrium shift away from crisis response and towards conflict prevention. This is especially true with regard to preventing mass atrocity crimes (genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing). Arguably, no single issue has done more to tarnish the reputation of the United Nations than the failure to prevent and halt atrocities. From Rwanda and Srebrenica during the 1990s to Syria today, the failure to meaningfully protect vulnerable civilians strikes at the very idea of our common humanity and undermines the principles upon which the United Nations was founded.

Conflict prevention efforts should include an atrocity prevention lens

While conflict prevention and mass atrocity prevention are distinct fields, they share considerable practical overlap, especially with regard to policies for mediating identity-based conflict and promoting human rights, good governance and the rule of law. In this sense they also overlap with other multilateral initiatives regarding [Preventing Violent Extremism \(PVE\)](#) and in support of [Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals](#).

What makes the mass atrocity prevention lens unique, however, is its ability to focus these seemingly disparate objectives and link them to the commitment made by all states at the

2005 UN World Summit to uphold their [Responsibility to Protect](#) (R2P) populations from mass atrocity crimes. By implementing functional policies that prevent mass atrocity crimes we can simultaneously strengthen the sustainable development agenda, human rights and the global struggle against violent extremism.

The reverse is also true: mass atrocity crimes are a humanitarian and developmental catastrophe as well as an inherent threat to international peace and security. The 2011 conflict and atrocities in Cote d'Ivoire saw [the country's GDP decline by 6%](#) in just one year. The United Nations has estimated that the civil war in Syria [has wiped out development gains](#) made in health and welfare over the previous 35 years. This is why preventing atrocities must be a global priority.

The problem is rarely an absence of forewarning – but political power struggles

Most conflicts where mass atrocities eventually occur are slow-burn situations that develop over years, rather than days or months. From Iraq to South Sudan or from Burma to Burundi the problem is rarely the absence of adequate forewarning. Rather, these conflicts are the result of deep structural problems, rooted in protracted disputes over the use and abuse of power.

Take, for example, Burundi. The tiny central African country has a bloody history, with an ethnic-based civil war consuming 350,000 lives between 1993 and 2005. The origins of the current conflict lies in the 2015 decision of President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term. This was seen by many as a violation of the 2005 Arusha peace accord. Since mass protests began in April last year, more than 265,000 Burundians have fled the country, claiming persecution by the police or the ruling party's youth militia, the Imbonerakure.

Assassinations and extrajudicial executions have become a regular occurrence in Bujumbura and more than 500 people have been killed.

It is for this reason that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, [has warned](#) that, "all the alarm signals, including the increasing ethnic dimension of the crisis, are flashing red" in Burundi. But the general level of violence has not risen to massacres or mass graves. This means that despite the African Union (AU) threatening last year to deploy 5000 peacekeepers to Burundi, the government will not be forced by anyone to do anything. Until recently, the UN Security Council was too divided to even agree to deploy a modest UN police contingent.

Catastrophic conflict can be prevented – and Germany has unique capacities to do so

Burundi may well survive until its next election in 2020 without experiencing open civil war or widespread atrocities. Or it might not. But catastrophic conflict can be prevented.

The international community worked successfully to help prevent recurring ethnic conflict and support structural reforms in Kenya after the bloody 2007 election. It also did so in Guinea in 2010, after an election paved the way for the country's first civilian government in five decades. The United Nations' much undervalued Peacebuilding Commission then helped mobilize funds for the retirement of more than 3000 members of Guinea's bloated and abusive security forces. From 1999 until 2012 the United Nations also helped an independent East Timor reconcile and rebuild after decades of deadly conflict and atrocities.

Stopping slow-burning conflicts like Burundi will require diplomatic imagination, significant resources, and the creative deployment of a range of multilateral tools. In this regard,

whether investing in mass atrocity prevention or politically strengthening international human rights norms, Germany has unique capacity to contribute.

Berlin should prioritize R2P and the practical means to prevent mass atrocities

Germany's ability to play an enhanced global role is predicated not only on its considerable economic strength and record as a major contributor to international development assistance, but also on its tragic past. Germany's history of dealing with repressive dictatorship (in both the Nazi and Stalinist variants) brings tremendous credibility to its international efforts in support of conflict stabilization, peacebuilding and mass atrocity prevention.

Already this decade Germany has played a crucial role in holding the European Union (EU) together, dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis in keeping with long-established humanitarian principles, and peacefully resisting the authoritarian over-reach of Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. And it has done so at a time when many other Western democracies are retreating into austerity, xenophobia and isolationism. This is augmented by Germany's more recent experience of using creative diplomacy as part of the P5+1 process that secured a nuclear deal with Iran. Therefore, I agree with the argument in [Jean-Marie Guéhenno's PeaceLab2016 article](#): while Europe will rightfully remain Germany's main foreign policy focus, it is capable of having far greater positive reach and diplomatic influence.

At its best, German diplomacy is perceived internationally as being flexible, non-binary and grounded in human rights. As Berlin contemplates its future in an increasingly multi-polar world, German foreign policy should therefore prioritize politically strengthening the global

commitment to the Responsibility to Protect, and focus on the practical means to prevent mass atrocities wherever and whenever they may be threatened.

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