

When Peace Starts Local, Prevention Works: Reimagining the UN's Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding

September 2025 will mark 20 years since states gathered at the [2005 United Nations World Summit](#) and unanimously adopted the [Responsibility to Protect \(R2P\)](#), a global commitment to prevent and protect populations from atrocity crimes (genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing). The UN World Summit Outcome Document also provided for the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), with the aim of strengthening the UN's peacebuilding efforts and ability to prevent conflict.

The 20th anniversary of R2P and 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) coincide with a period of significant shifts within the multilateral system and the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War. This year is a critical opportunity for the international community to understand the linkages between conflict prevention, peace processes, atrocity prevention and R2P; to act on recommendations from current and past reviews; and recommit – with renewed urgency – to upholding the enduring individual and collective responsibility to consistently protect the world's most vulnerable populations.

Atrocity prevention and peacebuilding work hand in hand, as the distinction between these two fields holds little significance on the ground. While the R2P framework focuses on the prevention of atrocities, which can occur within and outside of conflict, and peacebuilding focuses on conflict resolution and long-term conflict prevention and recovery, both rely on similar tools and approaches. Peacebuilders typically engage across the entire peace spectrum – from early prevention efforts, even before conflict erupts, to addressing the aftermath of widespread violence by helping rebuild the social fabric of communities and preventing further escalation. These efforts create societies resilient to atrocity crimes.

Due to this interconnectedness and common goals, the UN's peacebuilding architecture plays a crucial role in preventing atrocity crimes and the recurrence of conflict. Atrocity crimes often contribute to cycles of recurring violence, which in turn hinder the capacity to achieve lasting peace and sustainable development.

INCORPORATING AN ATROCITY PREVENTION LENS TO BOLSTER PEACEBUILDING AND PREVENTION EFFORTS

What makes prevention through R2P unique is the application of the atrocity prevention lens. This involves an assessment to determine who is at risk, what factors and actors contribute to that risk and what needs to be done at the domestic, regional and international level to ensure their protection.

Atrocity crimes do not occur in a vacuum. They are often preceded by social, political, economic and/or environmental patterns that create an enabling environment for their commission, as well as particular events or situations of instability, such as elections, spillover of armed conflicts or humanitarian crises, that could trigger an escalation. Some of these factors may facilitate atrocities by providing the means, motives and opportunities for perpetrators.¹ The atrocity prevention lens assists actors in reframing their analysis and monitoring to recognize patterns and dynamics that may lead to atrocities, such as exclusion of minorities, discrimination of vulnerable groups and politicization of past atrocities, as well as to understand what policies, practices and actors may act as deterrents to escalation or lessen the likelihood or severity of crimes. The lens also helps identify specific vulnerabilities of certain populations – such as ethnic and religious minorities, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, children, people with

disabilities and others – as well as factors that may put them at heightened risk. It accounts for historical and cultural contexts to assess whether there is increased likelihood of renewed targeting of certain populations. This long-term pattern recognition enables actors to understand when vulnerabilities may worsen, what might trigger an escalation and how to protect civilians before it happens.

While armed conflict is undeniably a significant driver of atrocities, it is important to recognize that these crimes can also occur in the absence of conflict, such as under repressive regimes or in post-conflict periods. The factors that predict armed conflict may differ from those that predict atrocities, underscoring the need for monitoring through an atrocity prevention lens to detect early warning signs before violence becomes widespread.

Atrocity prevention is closely linked to broader violence and conflict prevention efforts, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches. Applying an atrocity prevention lens adds value to conflict resolution, peacebuilding and protection agendas by encouraging decision makers to develop intersectional strategies that counter threats and avoid exacerbating or reinforcing societal cleavages, structural exclusion or violence among groups. Prevention must begin well before risk factors emerge through proactive policies, practices and structures that strengthen societal resilience and inhibit the drivers of conflict or direct violence, including fostering a culture of tolerance, promoting social cohesion, upholding human rights and the rule of law and ensuring accountability. Integrating an atrocity prevention lens within the UN's peacebuilding architecture would strengthen the PBC's ability to recognize early warning signs, address root causes and enhance the system's capacity to act before crises escalate.

However, these efforts will only lead to lasting peace if they are rooted in the work and knowledge of local peacebuilders and human rights defenders.² They are often the first to witness warning signs and the primary preventers and responders. With deep contextual expertise, local peacebuilders understand the dynamics that make certain populations vulnerable and offer critical guidance on prevention and protection strategies. Their closeness to the realities on the ground makes them essential for preventing atrocities and building sustainable peace. For this reason, atrocity prevention efforts need to be shaped by, and built around, locally-led peacebuilding from the outset.

LOCALLY-LED PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION AS ATROCITY PREVENTION

Since local peacebuilders are at the forefront of preventive efforts and often the first responders, any initiative to enhance atrocity prevention must acknowledge and build on their expertise and contributions. Greater engagement between policymakers and local peacebuilders is needed to harness their critical insights and incorporate them early into the design of effective prevention strategies. Too often, peace processes focus on national or local political elites while overlooking local dynamics and at-risk communities, weakening long-term peace efforts.³ Without directly engaging local communities, such processes risk neglecting the deeper political, social and cultural drivers of conflict, leaving populations vulnerable to renewed violence. Grounding prevention strategies in the realities, needs and strengths of affected communities enhances their effectiveness.

Improved understanding of risk factors and early warning – through an atrocity prevention lens and informed by local peacebuilders – enables a broader range of effective preemptive options, preventing both immediate and long-term escalation. Once warning signs of potential atrocities emerge, it is essential not to impose external solutions but to support and strengthen existing locally-led mechanisms. Proximate prevention efforts, such as mediation or calls for de-escalation, are often most effective when they originate from within affected communities and by trusted human rights defenders, community leaders and religious figures.

In conflict settings, communities have developed nonviolent strategies such as peace zones, local mediation or direct dialogue. Local community and religious leaders, civil society activists and women's and youth groups often play a pivotal role in de-escalating tensions and fostering dialogue between opposing groups. International actors should prioritize listening to, supporting and working alongside these local efforts, rather than creating parallel systems or imposing top-down solutions.

Community and local organizations play a critical role in the aftermath of atrocities, often driving advocacy for justice, accountability, redress, peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. They are best placed to inform the strategies required to build sustainable and contextually appropriate solutions for long-term peace, including measures that can facilitate structural

prevention. Grassroots reconciliation initiatives have significant potential to mitigate risk factors for atrocities: intergroup tensions, deep societal divisions, systematic discrimination and societal trauma. Peace education and local mediation are also beneficial for atrocity prevention efforts, as these initiatives can build trust, foster social cohesion and tolerance and address intergroup tensions.

Effective atrocity prevention relies on collaboration between local actors, policymakers, national human rights institutions and parliamentarians to identify gaps and address risk factors. Local insights help shape responses to underlying societal and institutional drivers, while national institutions can guide governments in strengthening protections for minorities, expanding access to justice – including non-traditional forms – and advancing policies that promote equality and human rights. Such partnerships are key to building more inclusive and resilient societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the multilateral system observes the 20th anniversary of R2P and conducts the PBAR, these recommendations aim to address the gaps in peacebuilding practices and enhance the UN's ability to prevent conflicts and sustain peace.

Prioritize atrocity prevention and locally-led approaches in peacebuilding by supporting and strengthening community-driven responses to risk factors.

Efforts to strengthen international foresight and invest in prevention would benefit from applying an atrocity prevention lens that centers locally-led approaches. This lens not only helps identify potential risks but also builds institutional capacity and societal resilience to address them. As highlighted in Our Common Agenda, addressing the underlying drivers of conflict requires meaningful investment in early, preventive action. This requires recalibrating multilateral responses, shifting from reactive measures to proactive strategies that prioritize locally-driven solutions. The UN Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace reinforces this by emphasizing that guarantees of non-recurrence depend on integrated, long-term approaches and early action that addresses structural issues and fosters societal resilience to future threats.

Such preemptive measures should focus on sustaining and strengthening national and local institutions, with

the goal of preventing, identifying and addressing factors that contribute to atrocity risks. This includes developing policies, laws and initiatives that protect the rights of all populations, prevent marginalization and inhibit the development of the drivers of direct violence. These measures should also invest in justice, accountability and reconciliation efforts that are locally created and led, as an effective means of preventing recurrence. Ending impunity for mass atrocity crimes through criminal investigations, truth commissions and transitional justice mechanisms can help deter future crimes and is an important prerequisite for lasting peace and stability. For survivors and their communities, recognition and accountability offer powerful restorative value. To strengthen the UN peacebuilding architecture, addressing the growing disregard for the rule of law and persistent impunity must be a priority as both are key drivers of recurring and protracted conflict globally.

The UN's Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes should be mainstreamed into the strategies guiding engagement with countries on the PBC's agenda. Additionally, member states should consult the [Framework for Action for the Responsibility to Protect](#)⁴ to assess gaps and identify opportunities to address atrocity risks nationally. Expanding the focus beyond existing conflict prevention frameworks to include specific risks associated with atrocity crimes would strengthen the efforts of the PBC and PBSO in supporting national peacebuilding priorities and rebuilding national resilience, thereby reinforcing the first pillar of R2P.

Center local peacebuilding organizations in the design and implementation of atrocity prevention and peacebuilding efforts.

The New Agenda for Peace, UN's Sustaining Peace framework and 2015 PBAR recommendations underscore the importance of inclusive, locally-owned solutions and the meaningful participation of women, youth and civil society to ensure that peacebuilding strategies reflect the needs and concerns of all sectors of society.

Effective and inclusive peacebuilding efforts require local communities to lead in defining priorities and shaping the design and implementation of prevention programs. Their on-the ground knowledge enables them to detect early warning signs of atrocities long before national, regional or international actors and offer critical insights for timely, context-specific responses. Strong, equitable partnerships are essential to combine expertise and enhance early warning and response systems. Sustained

dialogue and information-sharing platforms can foster trust and enhance coordination among peacebuilders, policymakers and national mechanisms, ensuring a more unified and effective approach to atrocity prevention.

Meaningful participation of civil society and affected populations must be grounded in the consistent inclusion of diverse identities, recognizing that communities are not monolithic and that protection needs vary significantly. Excluding voices of certain communities risks perpetuating marginalization and overlooking critical warning signs. Atrocity prevention and peacebuilding strategies must not only include, but also center these perspectives, as policies developed without their input may miss key risks, response opportunities and underlying grievances that drive conflict.

Greater emphasis must be placed on locally-led efforts, national ownership and strengthening local governance and capacities for conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. Sustainable peace can only be achieved when those most at risk are meaningfully included in shaping prevention and peacebuilding efforts.

Atrocity prevention requires a collective, multi-sector approach, with improved coordination among the human rights and peace entities of the UN system.

Prevention is a collective responsibility. Effective prevention can only be achieved if the UN system responds holistically, utilizing all available tools and mechanisms, while ensuring that relevant information and resources from across the system are shared and acted upon.

While the PBC already plays a crucial role in advising the UN Security Council and General Assembly on the country-specific situations on its agenda, this function should be enhanced to strengthen the UN's collective capacity to prevent the recurrence of conflict. This should include greater-cross departmental collaboration, integration and information-sharing by the PBC with other entities involved in peacebuilding, including the UN Development Programme, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UN peacekeeping operations. Improving coordination between the PBC and the Human Rights Council (HRC) is also essential. HRC-mandated investigative mechanisms, Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review and Treaty Bodies are uniquely suited to provide early warning for situations at risk of atrocity crimes and help concerned states and the wider international community identify

prevention and response strategies. The PBC can use the findings from HRC mechanisms to inform peacebuilding strategies, while the HRC can benefit from PBC's ground-level insights into institutional capacity and reconciliation efforts. Additionally, since the inception of the Special Adviser on R2P role, successive Special Advisers have been instrumental in identifying risk factors and clarifying best practices by states, regional organizations and the UN system in response to the threat of atrocities and engaging with civil society actors to both support and learn from their work. Improved collaboration and closer engagement, particularly during the early stages of a conflict, will ensure a more cohesive and integrated responses to crises.

Finally, the separation between different prevention efforts – like peacebuilding, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention – highlights the need to rethink some foundational assumptions within the field. The way in which violence is categorized by international actors and legal definitions does not always align with local community understandings and experiences. To bridge this gap, atrocity prevention – whether at the national, regional or local level – should be integrated into a larger strategy to prevent all forms of violence. This holistic approach helps ensure that prevention efforts are coordinated, mutually reinforcing and more impactful over the long-term.

Strengthen the role of the PBF in prevention and enhancing direct support to local actors.

To enhance its impact, the PBF should expand its focus beyond post-conflict recovery to include early-stage conflict prevention and long-term peacebuilding in partnership with local peacebuilders. This broader approach would better support efforts to prevent escalation and recurrence, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

A key part of this shift involves rethinking how funding is structured and delivered. Currently, much of the funding is channeled through intermediary organizations, which can lead to higher operational costs and decision-making removed from those closest to and impacted by the conflict. Direct, flexible funding to local peacebuilding organizations allows them to respond swiftly and adapt to changing circumstances, without bureaucratic delays.

In conflicted-affected areas, local actors have highlighted the challenges of “projectized” funding, which ties resources to short-term, narrowly defined programs. This model tends to prioritize quick results over long-

term change and leaves local organizations struggling without core funding to retain staff and cover operational costs. Local actors are often required to implement externally designed programs that may overlook or misinterpret local dynamics, potentially worsening tensions. To ensure the sustainability of prevention efforts, funding must be predictable, long-term and flexible, enabling local actors to lead based on their specific needs.⁵

To improve the effectiveness of large funding mechanisms like the PBF, donors should harmonize

institutional rules and procedures across donor institutions and countries, create funding channels for both immediate and long-term needs and allocate funds to reflect the diverse priorities of recipient communities. Ultimately, funding must be viewed not only as a vehicle for implementation, but as a strategic tool to strengthen local leadership, sustain institutional resilience and advance long-term prevention and peacebuilding efforts.⁶

¹ The UN Office on Genocide Prevention and R2P developed the [Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes](#), a comprehensive tool that outlines a range of risk factors for genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

² “Local” in this report refers to civilians or civil society actors/organizations engaged in prevention activities who are from and headquartered or based in the area, country or region affected by violence. This includes social organizations or informal actors, such as community or traditional leaders and religious groups, and can also include local government actors.

³ Peace Direct, *Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding: Key Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation* (2017), available at: [https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-](https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Atrocity-Prevention-Report_PD-2.pdf)

[content/uploads/2023/09/Atrocity-Prevention-Report_PD-2.pdf](https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Atrocity-Prevention-Report_PD-2.pdf)

⁴ A guide developed by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect for states on steps to take to protect populations from atrocity crimes, at home and abroad.

⁵ Bridget Moix and Landry Ninteretse, “A Birds-Eye View of Donor Funding for Atrocity Prevention,” in *Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding* (Peace Direct, 2017), 48.

⁶ Landry Ninteretse, “A Failure in Response: The Case of Burundi,” in *Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding* (Peace Direct, 2017), 51.