

Workshop Summary: The Role of Human Rights Defenders and Affected Communities in Mobilizing Multilateral Action to Respond to Atrocity Crimes

On 14 May 2025 the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect hosted a closed-door workshop entitled “Voices from the Frontline: The Role of Human Rights Defenders and Affected Communities in Mobilizing Multilateral Action to Respond to Atrocity Crimes” at the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Brussels, Belgium. The meeting brought together more than 15 civil society representatives, grassroots human rights defenders and members of affected communities from around the world. Participants represented a wide range of country contexts, including Syria, Sudan, Venezuela, Myanmar (Burma), North Korea, Tigray (Ethiopia), Iraq and others.

The workshop served as a convening space to reflect on civil society advocacy, share experiences engaging with the UN system, exchange strategies for navigating the challenges of sustaining influence in a shrinking civic space and explore strategies to bridge the gap between local realities and multilateral decision-making. Participants reflected on their experiences engaging with international mechanisms, shared successful advocacy strategies, identified common obstacles and collectively formulated recommendations for how states can better incorporate civil society, particularly communities directly affected by atrocities, into multilateral decision-making.

KEY THEMES AND DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

Navigating Political Realities of Atrocity Situations

The meeting structure enabled participants to share stories from their own personal experiences, highlighting the abuses they sought to confront and how their advocacy evolved and turned toward finding multilateral solutions. The open exchange enabled participants to both unpack what is unique about their individual context and discuss the common ground they shared with victims and survivors from other countries.

By offering case-specific insights, participants collectively illustrated how human rights crises and atrocity situations often compel people to become the voice for the voiceless. Most participants had not started their careers as human rights defenders or multilateral advocates, but the abuses they witnessed and endured alongside their families and communities pushed them to become activists, think creatively about solutions and seek out options at the national, regional and multilateral levels. In this regard, several participants noted the powerful role that mothers of victims and survivors have played in advocacy and in spearheading much of the work done in various country contexts to identify and seek accountability for the missing and disappeared.

Advocates shared the challenges they faced nationally, particularly in contexts where the governments themselves are perpetrators of atrocities. Participants from Ethiopia (Tigray), Sudan and Myanmar highlighted the international community’s role in legitimizing bad actors through their inclusion in transition processes and designation for global peace awards. This enabled their governments to “take away rights in broad daylight.” Participants from several countries highlighted their governments’ manipulation of events and weaponization of truth, as well as the role of leaders in amplifying divisive misinformation and disinformation targeting specific communities.

Individuals from Syria, Myanmar and Venezuela, among others, acknowledged the multifaceted nature of the

crises in their countries, noting both their experiences with government repression and collapsing civil space, as well as the impact of sectoral sanctions on resources available to communities. In multidimensional situations like these – where populations simultaneously face human rights abuses, forced displacement, humanitarian crises and widespread impunity – they are met with a multilateral system that continues to operate in silos. This fragmented approach places the burden on the affected communities to advocate across different parts of the international system to secure a response that should instead be coordinated.

Human rights defenders also discussed the international expectation that civil society present a unified perspective on what needs to be done in times of crisis, as well as the consequences of such demands. Representatives from Myanmar, Iraq and North Korea specifically highlighted challenges stemming from diaspora fragmentation, the politicization of labeling a country as an atrocity situation and the implications of designations related to specific crimes. They also noted the reluctance of states and some UN officials to explicitly name perpetrators – or even affected communities – such as the resistance by some to using the word “Rohingya” in diplomatic fora. Some warned about communities being instrumentalized or their stories co-opted for geopolitical agendas, as seen in the case of Yazidi and Rohingya communities. Several participants also noted that these gaps are sometimes exacerbated by the feeling among communities that states are applying a hierarchy of victimhood rather than a principled approach to atrocities. Participants from Sudan also noted how the failure of the international community to respond effectively to multiple crises in their country – including genocides twenty years apart – has led to fatigue among the population regarding the value of advocacy in multilateral spaces.

Civil Society Advocacy in Complex and Politicized Environments

A recurring theme was the necessity – rather than choice – of multilateral engagement for many civil society actors. In contexts where national institutions are captured, collapsed or complicit in atrocity crimes, participants emphasized that turning to the international system becomes the only viable channel to seek justice and protection. Moreover, several highlighted that genocide – and the broader spread of hate – is highly profitable, and that the strength of the multilateral system is essential to shifting the cost-benefit calculations of perpetrators and those who enable them.

Advocates from Syria noted that due to the complete lack of access to the Assad regime, civil society had to use international avenues not only for human rights claims, but for all types of engagement. Venezuelan participants similarly described how domestic repression and the erosion of judicial institutions have left the international system as the only remaining path for redress. In the case of Venezuela, the pressure from the international system via the Human Rights Council (HRC)-mandated Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) had a measurable impact on the government’s tactics for repression, including decreasing extrajudicial killings.

Participants shared that while their advocacy demonstrates the important role of multilateralism in confronting atrocity situations, this does not come without challenges. Some emphasized the difficulty in getting states to recognize atrocity risks or support new mechanisms unless it aligns with their strategic interests. Some states frequently consult the same civil society organizations (CSOs), often excluding dissenting voices or lesser-known groups when doing so aligns with their own narratives or interests. Participants also noted the difficulty in promoting intersectional approaches to atrocity prevention – ones that center gender, ethnicity and economic inequality. In this regard, several emphasized the value of partnerships with internationally oriented CSOs, such as the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, as well as issue-specific or protection-focused organizations. These organizations can leverage their advocacy to draw parallels across different country situations and help articulate the importance of intersectionality, the need for early action and the impact of impunity and other systemic challenges on affected populations.

While advocates noted the challenges in maintaining international attention and generating the will to respond, they also emphasized the importance of persistence. Small gains – such as the inclusion of gender experts in an HRC-authorized investigative mechanism – can lay the groundwork for more transformative outcomes like standardized methodology across all mechanisms. Syrian colleagues provided a powerful example demonstrating how the inclusion of one sentence on victim participation in a 2019 HRC resolution established a basis for the inclusion of three paragraphs on their participation in a subsequent resolution. This gradual expansion of “accepted” language at the HRC paved the way for convincing states to utilize similar language to mandate victim participation in the creation of the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP).

Navigating the Multilateral System: Access, Influence and Trust

While affirming the continuing relevance of the UN and other multilateral platforms, participants discussed strategies for creating a demand for action with different UN bodies and how to overcome practical and political barriers to engagement.

Strategic engagement – knowing how and when to influence a resolution, and whom to approach – was identified as essential, especially in increasingly crowded multilateral spaces like the HRC. Participants compared their experiences advocating for various documentation and accountability mechanisms, including the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), as well as the IIMP, and the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD), which were authorized through the UN General Assembly and Security Council, respectively. They also discussed the creation of investigative mechanisms that collect evidence and help establish the truth, such as the FFM on Venezuela and the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE), both established through the HRC.

Crucially, participants emphasized that advocacy for one mechanism often built on the successes of previous efforts. For example, the establishment of the IIIM helped equip advocates for the Rohingya with the language and tools needed to convince states of the value of mandating the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM).

Participants discussed how they identified which states to engage as champions for initiatives at the UN, noting that this often began with identifying which countries would be willing to fund the requested mechanism. As competition for the state attention increases, some emphasized the importance of looking beyond traditional allies to the “unusual suspects” – reaching across regions or demonstrating how engagement on a specific country situation aligns with a state’s thematic priorities.

In this context, advocates from Syria acknowledged the role of states like the Dominican Republic in sponsoring and helping put forward the draft resolution on the IIMP. Some also highlighted coordinated campaigns that resulted in referrals to the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice, noting the value of appealing to states with a principled commitment to international justice and accountability. In the case of Venezuela, participants emphasized the importance of

multi-track engagement – not only with states at the UN, but also through the European Union, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Organization of American States – as key to influencing change.

Some participants highlighted the value of harnessing connections between local partners and international CSOs with expertise in navigating the multilateral system. Participants from Venezuela, Syria, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Iraq shared that while they and their communities had a clear understanding of their advocacy goals, they often lacked the connections needed to advance those goals. The Global Centre, in particular, was credited with helping identify strategic entry points and facilitating connections with key decision-makers to influence change. Participants also noted that training and support in understanding UN processes, along with more inclusive approaches to partnership by international CSO and states, would further strengthen efforts. Such support would help bridge the gap between locally grounded knowledge and the creation of demand for action at the UN.

However, they described a landscape that is increasingly difficult to access and navigate. Several participants discussed the practical barriers to engagement in the multilateral space, including visa denials, travel costs, linguistic limitations and bureaucratic opacity. Several participants noted that digital advocacy during the pandemic provided unprecedented access to decision-makers across time zones and institutions, reducing geographic and financial constraints. Advocacy efforts require long-term investment and collective backing, especially given the tendency of states to disengage or dilute mechanisms over time amid budgetary constraints, waning interest in protracted crises or political pressure. Organizations like the Global Centre, DefendDefenders and Protection Approaches were noted as being key partners in maintaining international attention and long-term pressure on states in capital and at the UN in New York and Geneva, even when situations have left the headlines. The need for diversified funding, particularly for documentation and victim support, was also noted, highlighting that overdependence on Western donors may be limiting and politically risky.

Concerns about trust and tokenization were also raised. Civil society actors are frequently asked to share testimonials or data without being meaningfully involved in decision-making processes. Many governments, multilateral bodies and agencies and international CSOs have routinely been extractive, rather than collaborative, with affected communities. Trust in the international

system has also been compromised by gaps between words and action. Participants from Myanmar, Sudan and Iraq, for example, noted that genocide recognitions have not always been met with meaningful follow-up action. Moreover, sometimes the same communities identified as survivors of atrocities later become targets for forced repatriation. Participants highlighted the stark contrast in the speed of the international community's response to the crisis in Ukraine compared to other atrocity situations, such as in Ethiopia, as well as the double standards applied to Israel's actions in Gaza. These examples were cited as reasons for the growing erosion of trust in international institutions and skepticism about their ability to take a principled approach on atrocity situations, rather than acting based on geopolitical interests.

Coalitions, Resilience and Reframing Advocacy

The shrinking civic space, financial constraints facing CSOs and global disinformation have required adaptive and collaborative strategies. In this regard, participants emphasized the importance of building coalitions. For some, the creation of horizontal coalitions within regions, particularly among groups that may not traditionally collaborate, was essential for triggering a meaningful response. Others worked effectively across regional and political lines, including building alliances between Latin American and African groups or engaging with religious and diaspora communities. Participants from Myanmar noted how they have shifted their strategies from focusing predominantly on multilateral spaces to now ensuring better engagement within the Southeast Asia region on the situation of the Rohingya.

Another way in which civil society has increased their impact and level of success is through building, sharing and engaging with different thematic narratives on their individual contexts. For example, participants from Myanmar highlighted a choice to expand advocacy to include a feminist intersectional approach and engage with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. This approach effectively engaged policymakers not only on country-specific concerns but also on broader thematic priorities. It also enhanced community buy-in, as the inclusion of young women in advocacy efforts expanded the range of narratives and priorities shared with decision-makers. Networks such as this, comprised of survivors from contexts like North Korea, Sudan and Syria, have also facilitated local exchanges and trainings on specific issues, such as transitional justice or sexual and gender-based violence, and translated those

exchanges into actionable advocacy points. Participants from Iraq, for example, highlighted how training women survivors on transitional justice and advocacy contributed to the adoption of the Yazidi Survivors Law.

The media landscape was cited as a major constraint. Some participants emphasized the impact of state-led repression of media in authoritarian contexts, such as Venezuela, where social media often served as the only available platform. Others highlighted the difficulty of sustaining media attention as global focus shifted to emerging crises elsewhere.

Participants reflected on the growing pressure to act as “influencers” to maintain attention and secure funding – pressures that can sometimes undermine the depth and authenticity of their work. At the same time, some acknowledged the role of public figures and media campaigns in increasing visibility and humanizing otherwise abstract advocacy goals. This included celebrity engagement by figures like Angelina Jolie and Amal Clooney on specific country situations, as well as the attention generated by Nobel Peace Prize awards received by individuals from their communities, which helped sustain awareness of ongoing crises.

Transitional Justice, Documentation and Survivor Protection

Reflecting on the complexity of transitional justice efforts, participants emphasized that justice is not just about trials – it is also about truth, visibility and the ability to grieve and memorialize. Documentation was cited as a long-term form of resistance and truth-telling. Groups shared how rigorous evidence collection enabled advocacy over time, even when the immediate impact was limited. However, many noted, that there is sometimes a lack of community understanding and ownership of transitional justice processes, particularly as they may also be confronted by more acute risks and needs. As one participant said, “Bread and justice are both necessary.”

The need to preserve documentation and historical records even after a mechanism has completed its mandate was a cross-cutting concern. The closure of UNITAD and ICHREE were cited as cautionary examples, with many expressing concerns about what happens to the archives and evidence. UNITAD lacked an exit strategy, so when the state abruptly requested the closure of the mechanism, several issues emerged. These included questions around the storage and chain of custody of archives, lack of transparency regarding the conclusion of ongoing justice processes and concerns

from those who had provided evidence or testimony about whether authorities could potentially identify and link them to the data.

Several participants highlighted the value of having multiple accountability and investigative mechanisms with distinct mandates focused on specific situations – for example, the IIM, IIMP and Commission of Inquiry for Syria, or the FFM, IIMM and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. However, they also cautioned that these mechanisms must implement thorough safeguarding protocols and establish clear procedures for coordination to prevent the retraumatization of victims and reduce security risks. Others emphasized the need for consistent follow-up with communities after interviews, as well as transparency about why information is being collected and how it may be used to benefit them.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To States and Multilateral Institutions:

- Prioritize centering victims, survivors and other affected communities in processes for prevention, response and post-atrocity justice and accountability.
- Simplify procedures for civil society participation, including expedited visa processes and direct funding for affected communities.
- Ensure investigative and accountability mechanisms have clear mandates, transparent processes, safeguarding protocols, defined exit strategies and long-term support for documentation.
- Institutionalize safe and ethical testimonial practices that guarantee survivor agency and protection.
- Recognize and confront the economic interests that fuel atrocity crimes, including arms sales, natural resource extraction and global supply chains.

To Civil Society Organizations:

- Expand coalitions to include non-traditional allies, including trade unions, faith-based groups and local media.
- Engage with regional groups, including the African Union and IACHR, as well as states outside your region that may have a principled interest in confronting atrocities wherever they occur.

- Develop common messaging around inclusive transitional justice strategies that balance criminal accountability with broader reparative measures.
- Engage in capacity-sharing between international and local organizations to unpack the UN advocacy toolbox and support long-term leadership from affected communities.
- Enhance strategic communication through storytelling and new technologies.
- Invest in digital resilience strategies to counter disinformation and sustain advocacy momentum. Develop internal security protocols for handling testimonials and protecting survivors from retaliation.
- Create advocacy strategies that are multitrack (national, regional and international) and multilayered (media, legal and diplomatic).
- Exchange experiences with victim and survivor groups from other regions facing similar challenges and advocating for comparable support from the international community.

Cross-Cutting Recommendations:

- Bridge the gap between local analysis and multilateral action by amplifying context-specific insights from frontline actors.
- Encourage sustained dialogue between governments and civil society beyond formal sessions.
- Strengthen and diversify coalitions, including unusual allies (e.g. smaller countries) and underrepresented voices (e.g. other minorities that experience similar abuses and violations worldwide).
- Prepare CSOs to navigate UN language and processes more effectively.
- Explore non-traditional funding sources to sustain civil society operations.
- Advocate for victim protection, especially against forced repatriation and misinformation-fueled stigma.
- Establish a knowledge repository to consolidate and share civil society experiences and lessons learned.
- Promote a holistic approach to atrocity prevention that integrates justice, memory and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This workshop reinforced the central role of civil society and affected communities in shaping credible and effective atrocity prevention strategies. While many

participants expressed frustration at ongoing impunity, shrinking spaces and lack of political will, they also shared practical lessons, strategic tools and powerful moments of solidarity.