

11th Meeting of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points Outcome Document

The Global Network of Focal Points for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) held its 11th meeting from 15-16 May 2025 in Brussels, Belgium. The meeting, hosted by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect with the support of the European Union (EU) at the European External Action Service (EEAS), was a timely and urgent gathering of senior government officials and human rights defenders (HRDs) from countries around the world, together with representatives of United Nations (UN) mechanisms and former and current UN Special Advisers on R2P.

The meeting provided a unique platform for R2P Focal Points to reflect on the multilateral atrocity prevention architecture. The two-day gathering was curated as a collaborative learning and strategizing session where member states, civil society and UN representatives frankly exchanged on what multilateral responses have worked, how we measure impact and understand what contributed to the success of these actions and what existing measures and innovative tools we can utilize when the political barriers to response appear insurmountable.

A sense of community was developed in the room as participants drew on their diverse, collective experiences to conceptualize how states and the multilateral system can do better in preventing and responding to atrocity risks in the current global context. The participants addressed the challenges that arise from the fact that while the normative basis of R2P is widely acknowledged, the gap between commitments and effective implementation remains significant. With a focus on concretely and pragmatically discussing what remains possible in the current geopolitical context, participants highlighted that despite many failures and the growing complexity of atrocity risks, the multilateral system has still delivered responses with significant importance to affected populations.

Through the open exchange with affected communities and HRDs over the two days, states came away with a renewed and profound appreciation of what is at stake for

populations. The dynamic conversations in the plenary and breakout group sessions critically emphasized that the effective multilateral responses we have witnessed in recent years would not be possible without governments working alongside affected communities and civil society. Victim, survivor and family associations, HRDs and other civil society have thought innovatively on international mechanisms that address the acute needs of their communities during and in the aftermath of atrocities and have successfully advocated for states to deliver on creating survivor-led processes to achieve protection and justice and accountability.

OPENING PANEL: MARKING 20 YEARS OF THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

The meeting opened with remarks by H.E. Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU R2P Focal Point and Deputy Managing Director for Values and Multilateral Relations in the EEAS, Mô Bleeker, UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, and Savita Pawnday, Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

This opening set the stage for two days of critical discussion, offering reflections on the evolution of R2P over the past two decades. Panelists acknowledged that R2P has helped shift the global discourse on mass atrocity crimes from reaction to prevention. Although its implementation has faced political resistance, structural limitations and operational gaps, the adoption of R2P was the result of hard-won diplomatic achievements and its implementation is more essential today than ever. Panelists noted that R2P's integration into multilateral diplomacy had matured, particularly in response to crises in Ukraine, Sudan and Syria. The speakers all reflected on the current state of multilateralism and called for renewed courage to act preventively in an era when human rights and the rule of law are being undermined. They argued that while R2P's foundational principles

remain sound, a new generation of tools, partnerships and localized approaches is urgently needed.

Participants discussed how R2P Focal Points themselves have been and continue to be an essential component to the atrocity prevention architecture.¹ They were reminded that successful responses to atrocity situations over the past 20 years have not been the result of a single fortuitous moment, but rather of multiple iterative decisions made by R2P Focal Points and their governments to confront atrocity risks.

Longstanding R2P Focal Points provided an historical overview of the Global Network, reminding participants that the initial impetus of the Network aimed to ensure that R2P became a cross-government concern, not just the purview of diplomats in international forums, and that atrocity prevention discussions were moved out of New York and into national capitals. R2P Focal Points were always envisioned as high-level actors, capable of convening key ministries, advising leadership and coordinating action across sectors.²

THE MULTILATERAL ATROCITY PREVENTION ARCHITECTURE AND TOOLS TO RESPOND TO CRISIS SITUATIONS

This session explored the operational landscape of multilateral atrocity prevention by focusing on three policy spaces where R2P Focal Points have influence: the UN in New York – including via the UN Security Council (UNSC) and General Assembly – in Geneva via the Human Rights Council (HRC) and in capital. The session aimed to examine the scope of multilateral tools available and understand what the system has been able to achieve in order to find solutions to the continued prevalence of atrocity crimes. During the session participants focused not just on best practices and continued gaps, but also on pragmatically discussing concrete and creative steps taken to mobilize the desired response.

The first panel – on atrocity prevention through NY-based bodies – featured presentations from Alice Jacobs, United Kingdom R2P Focal Point and Deputy Director of the Conflict and Atrocity Prevention Department in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Uriel Pérez, Mexico R2P Focal Point and Legal Adviser at the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the UN in New York, and Niemat Ahmadi, Founder and President of the Darfur Women Action Group.³

While acknowledging the geopolitical realities that have significantly hampered meaningful UNSC action, participants exchanged views on the range of practical measures Council members still have available for protecting populations from atrocities. Since the UNSC remains the most visible platform for atrocity prevention, it is uniquely able to spotlight a situation, galvanize international attention and pressure leaders to act. Procedural innovations – including Arria-formula meetings, informal “any other business” briefings and joint, cross-regional statements – elevate visibility when consensus is unreachable and have sustained attention on crises that might otherwise fall off the agenda. When consensus on a particular course of action is absent, the Council has still been effective in adopting resolutions or convening meetings that sound the alarm on the imminent risk of atrocities – as seen in Resolution 2736 on Sudan, which drew attention to acute risks, including rising sexual violence in a conflict.⁴ Through humanitarian support, the mandating of UN peacekeeping missions and other UNSC-authorized tools, the Council has also been able to deter grave abuses by perpetrators. At the same time, initiatives aimed at changing Council behavior on atrocity situations, such as the French-Mexican veto initiative, have sought to alter the cost calculations of decision-makers. Panelists also discussed how seemingly simple innovations in the General Assembly – such as the Sixth Committee’s adoption of a resolution to convene the “United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Humanity,” while still respecting the committee’s consensus rules – can help overcome inertia on issues central to the prevention and punishment of the commission of atrocity crimes in multilateral spaces.⁵

Participants looked to the case of Sudan to highlight where the multilateral system has been successful in authorizing action, as well as where gaps continue to fail populations on the ground. In the Sudan case, HRDs emphasized that while the international community initially took multilateral action – such as through establishing peacekeeping operations and investigative mechanisms through the UNSC and HRC – these efforts often lacked sustained political follow-up, resulting in missed opportunities to meaningfully address atrocity crimes. The international response focused narrowly on conflict prevention rather than atrocity prevention, consistently overlooking root causes and structural risk factors. This approach failed to recognize the specific and disproportionate vulnerabilities faced by women, ethnic minorities and other targeted communities. By prioritizing short-term political stability, the international community empowered the very actors

responsible for past and ongoing atrocities, expecting them to lead peace processes and ignoring the cycle of impunity that enabled them in the first place. Human rights advocates stressed the urgent need for a protection of civilians approach – not only to save lives and enable humanitarian access, but also to create the conditions necessary for a sustainable political process. Moreover, accountability for perpetrators must be central to any response, including ensuring those responsible for atrocity crimes are not part of peace deals or political settlements.

The second panel – on atrocity prevention in Geneva – featured H.E. Shara Duncan Villalobos, Costa Rica R2P Focal Point and Chief of International Law and Human Rights in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship of Costa Rica, Nicolas Agostini, Representative to the UN and Senior Advocate at DefendDefenders,⁶ and Feliciano Reyna, President of Acción Solidaria Venezuela.

The HRC and Geneva-based mechanisms were widely recognized as valuable tools for early warning and prevention, due to their nimbleness and responsiveness to emerging risks. Fact-finding missions (FFM), commissions of inquiry (CoI) and Special Procedures contribute to the creation of authoritative records of atrocities and can serve as precursors to accountability. Several panelists acknowledged that the HRC has successfully mainstreamed investigative elements within mandates – including evidence collection and preservation and the establishment of facts and circumstances – as well as newer advancements such as utilizing victim-centered approaches, gender analysis and expertise and transitional justice practices.

Participants cited the FFMs on Venezuela and Sudan as examples of how swift international action can exert real pressure and affect behavior on the ground. In the case of Venezuela, HRDs noted how the establishment of the FFM had a notable impact on affected communities and perpetrators of atrocity crimes. While direct causation is difficult to prove, the work of the FFM and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) appears to have contributed to a significant reduction in extrajudicial executions – by over 50 percent between January 2020 and December 2021 – following the FFM’s first report. The FFM’s scrutiny of the Special Action Forces led to their reduced role in operations and eventual replacement by a new unit that continues similar practices, highlighting both the limits and the deterrent potential of such investigations. Moreover, public reporting by the FFM and OHCHR on torture and ill-treatment has been linked by civil society to a temporary decline in such abuses. The FFM also helped

maintain international pressure on the Venezuelan government, influencing its temporary willingness to engage with the broader UN human rights system. Though often driven by the government’s desire to avoid scrutiny rather than a genuine commitment to reform, these changes illustrate the FFM’s critical role in fostering accountability, incentivizing the government to halt abuses and sustaining international engagement.

Participants warned, however, that, like the UNSC, the HRC is not apolitical and sometimes experiences biased states attempting to block or water down responses to certain crises. Additionally, effective implementation often depends on the willingness of the concerned state to cooperate and comply with the HRC. In some of these instances, weak statements and weak action are worse than no action at all. They also pointed to the failure of the HRC to renew some mechanisms under these circumstances, citing the end of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) – just as it had warned of the risk of further atrocities – as a notable example.

The final panel – focused on capital engagement in atrocity prevention – included H.E. Stella Ronner-Grubačić, Rochus Pronk, Head of the Human Rights Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director of Protection Approaches.

Panelists highlighted the crucial role of capital in effective diplomacy on atrocity situations by connecting warnings and messages from embassies with the priorities of capital and the actions that can be taken in multilateral spaces. Some participants highlighted that capital’s priorities – such as accountability, development or human rights promotion – can complement R2P even when not explicitly labeled as “atrocity prevention.” They provided examples illustrating how a foreign policy priority can evolve from a ministry’s agenda to the creation of a human rights fund or a post-atrocity transitional process at the international level.

Panelists also discussed the unique role of regional organizations like the EU in galvanizing international response – both among its members and in multilateral fora. While previous meetings of the Global Network and UN reports have recognized that regional organizations play an important role in prevention within their regions – due to their deeper understanding of the local context – the discussion here focused on their collective strength in multilateral spaces.⁷

Regional organizations can amplify the impact of diplomatic actions being taken from the capitals of their members and project their collective strength in messaging at the multilateral level. Participants discussed the role of these organizations in bringing their membership's diversity of views and positions together for a common agenda in places like the HRC and General Assembly committees.

Participants discussed challenges that arise from the fact that atrocities are no longer an aberration, but rather a deliberate and strategic "cornerstone of practice" in most conflicts and that in many cases these atrocities are being perpetrated by states themselves. Some criticized leadership at all levels – national, regional and multilateral – for lacking a clear vision or strategy to confront the rise of authoritarianism, the threats it poses to the post-1945 international order and the exponential increase in abuses perpetrated by these governments against populations. Participants also noted that while many governments seek to distance solutions to atrocities from politics – for example framing situations as exclusively "conflict" and relying on humanitarian principles to address immediate risks – situations like Gaza and Ukraine cannot be solved without confronting the political aims of the perpetrators.

Some R2P Focal Points also discussed the challenges they face as individuals, including varying visibility and impact of the role itself within their systems. While countries like Slovenia have mainstreamed R2P across foreign policy and in areas such as education and societal programming, others face structural isolation. Some R2P Focal Points lack a formal mandate, making inter-ministerial coordination difficult. Others reported internal skepticism, with some ministries still viewing R2P as a euphemism for foreign military intervention or perceiving it as a norm under increasing international strain – prompting them to adopt a less visible posture in support of the norm. One participant noted that this retreat is gravely impacting the seniority, expertise and capacity of those in capital to make the necessary political decisions to develop protection options.

Key recommendations and lessons from this session included:

- At a time when international norms and laws are increasingly being violated, states and regional organizations must remain vocal and act decisively in support of human rights, the rule of law, accountability and other principles that underpin multilateralism. This includes upholding the use of the term "Responsibility to Protect" rather than

diluting it with less forceful language like "prevention." Emphasizing responsibility reinforces the principle that states have a duty to act – and can be held accountable when they fail to do so.

- Center atrocity prevention and the protection of civilians in decision making and avoid prioritizing political expediency over addressing the long-term needs of vulnerable populations.
- Decision making should be informed by victims and affected communities, not just the leaders of the impacted countries who are often themselves implicated in abuses.
- Galvanize and demonstrate cross-regional support through coalition building, joint statements and resolution sponsorship, as well as cross-regional calls for special sessions and other flexible meetings of multilateral bodies.
- Sustained political follow-up remains essential to any response to capitalize on key opportunities for long-term prevention and protection. Member states should also meaningfully follow-up on the evidence and recommendations presented by various UN-authorized mechanisms, including Special Procedures mandate holders and investigative mechanisms.
- Assess exit strategies and evidence preservation plans for investigative bodies from the outset. For example, the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) lacked an exit strategy from Iraq, which hindered the efficacy of its work and created uncertainty around evidence sharing with national institutions.⁸ Similarly, some HRC-mandated mechanisms – such as ICHREE – have abruptly ended without clear guidance on archiving evidence or outlining next steps.
- Pursue creative approaches to crisis response – recognizing that the inability to resolve an entire crisis immediately should not prevent the development of innovative strategies to stop sexual and gender-based violence, protect children, enable humanitarian access or hold perpetrators accountable. Innovation may also require pursuing what may initially seem politically "impossible," as demonstrated by The Gambia's case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice and the establishment of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP) in Syria.
- All UNSC members – both permanent and elected – should make full use of procedural tools, such as Arria-formula and "Any Other Business" meetings, to raise awareness when there is an imminent risk of atrocities and formal UNSC action is not feasible.

Similarly, HRC members should call for Special Sessions in response to imminent atrocity risks.

- Build stronger responses through promoting the use of Geneva-New York-capital linkages. UN Security Council response, for example, should always be seen as part of a whole package of actions and a broader political strategy, not as the sole action to confront a crisis.

MAXIMIZING THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF THE UN SECRETARIAT TO MOBILIZE EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

The UN Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect (the “Joint Office”), including its Special Advisers, holds a critical position in institutionalizing and advancing atrocity prevention and response within the broader UN system. Their mandates are essential to ensuring that the risks of atrocity crimes faced by populations are identified within the UN early and that appropriate action is mobilized in a timely manner. However, significant challenges have hindered the Office’s impact in mobilizing timely and effective action. As we mark the 20th anniversary of R2P, this panel brought together current and former UN Special Advisers on R2P – Mô Bleeker, George Okoth-Obbo, Karen Smith and Jennifer Welsh – to reflect on how the Joint Office can be more effective in mobilizing the wider UN system to better respond to situations at risk.

Panelists acknowledged significant normative achievements since 2005, including mainstreaming prevention into global discourse and embedding risk assessments in humanitarian and development work. As a political principle, R2P has succeeded in legitimizing the act of calling out atrocity situations rather than hiding behind sovereignty and non-interference. It has also contributed to the development of stronger institutional capacities. However, panelists emphasized that these achievements have not consistently translated into timely or effective responses. Syria, Gaza and Myanmar were cited as emblematic cases where political divisions prevented meaningful multilateral action, despite clear early warning indicators. Some speakers noted that such failures have eroded the public trust in multilateral institutions – and in R2P itself – as the states and leaders who once championed atrocity prevention can no longer hold the moral authority to call out the actions of others. Participants noted that while early warning systems have become more sophisticated and extensive legal frameworks exist under international law for addressing

atrocity crimes, there is no guarantee that either will trigger action.

Speakers agreed that the current configuration of the Joint Office is ill-equipped to meet today’s prevention demands, arguing that it needs to be better equipped to analyze information and inform the UN system about emerging risks, to catalyze action within the UN and to guide and empower action by states. In order to do so, UN leadership needs to convey that atrocity prevention is an institutional priority and that various agencies and field presences should be sharing information with the Joint Office so that it can thoroughly assess risks and options for response. Others noted that the UN system itself and the continued operation in silos has triggered gaps between expectation and reality, emphasizing the lessons from Rwanda that regardless of the type of UN footprint, just by being on the ground the presence of the UN implies protection to populations.

During the session, R2P Focal Points also discussed the UN80 initiative and potential implications for the future of the Joint Office and Special Adviser roles. Participants acknowledged that atrocity prevention requires specific tools, risk analysis and political will to identify and act on early warning signs. These capabilities must be preserved and strengthened – not diluted. The current proposal for UN80 risks sidelining the distinct advisory role of the Joint Office, which would significantly weaken the UN’s ability to anticipate and prevent mass atrocities, ensure early warnings are heeded and empower the Secretary-General to respond with credibility and moral clarity.

Key recommendations and lessons from this session included:

- Reform the Joint Office with a unified mandate, regional focal point and stronger field presence.
- Ensure the Office remains a central node in the UN’s prevention and protection architecture.
- Enhance coordination across UN agencies – including UN country teams, Resident Coordinator offices, peacekeeping missions and human rights tools – and mainstreaming atrocity prevention into UN country team operations, implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and peacebuilding programs.
- Link early warning to mandatory response protocols and senior-level accountability.

ASSESSING IMPACT, SUCCESS AND FOLLOW-UP TO MULTILATERAL RESPONSE – THE GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY ARCHITECTURE

The international community has developed an extensive accountability architecture, including through mandating human rights investigations, judicial accountability mechanisms and other innovative mechanisms, procedures and processes, such as the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM). These bodies have preserved a wealth of information and evidence, as well as provided strategies to prevent the recurrence of atrocity crimes. However, a critical gap persists in meaningful follow-up by member states once their investigating and reporting is completed. This includes a lack of sustained political engagement to ensure that bilateral, regional and multilateral responses to atrocity crises are informed by and aligned with these findings.

This session explored three key topics. First, what accountability truly means for affected communities, and how prevailing understandings among policymakers, diplomats and international actors often fail to reflect the full spectrum of justice sought by victims and survivors. Second, how to ensure that the extensive architecture of accountability mechanisms is not merely reactive or symbolic, but that the information and findings they produce lead to concrete and sustained follow-up and political action. Third, the role that these mechanisms play in preventing the recurrence of atrocity crimes, and how they can inform forward-looking strategies that prioritize early warning, structural prevention and the protection of communities at risk. Panelists included Beatriz Balbin, Chief of the Human Rights Inquiries Branch at OHCHR, Kathryne Bomberger, Director General of the International Commission on Missing Persons, Federica Tronchin, Head of the International Justice Programme and Senior Gender and Child Rights Adviser at Justice Rapid Response, and Kate Vigneswaran, Director of the Global Accountability Initiative at the International Commission of Jurists.

Panelists began by emphasizing the critical role of a wide range of actors – including civil society, UN member states and UN institutions – in shaping and strengthening the complex global accountability architecture. A recurring theme was the indispensable role of civil society organizations and HRDs in advancing key initiatives, from advocating for HRC-mandated

investigative mechanisms to pushing for the creation of the IIMM and IIIM. Consistent advocacy by affected communities and families, especially mothers, has driven innovation in justice and accountability, including efforts to uncover the fate of the missing, culminating in the creation of the IIMP for Syria.

Panelists noted significant advances in the professionalization of investigative mechanisms, including the emergence of centralized bodies that evolve with global demands, uphold data integrity and evidentiary standards and coordinate with international and domestic courts. One notable example is the recent creation of the OHCHR Inquiries Branch, which represents an important step forward in ensuring that investigative work can begin even in the absence of – or while awaiting – formal political mandates. This is particularly critical in situations where time-sensitive evidence risks being destroyed or lost, and where rapid deployment is essential to preserving the factual record and advancing accountability. State-led initiatives were also discussed – not only in terms of technical success, such as the 75 percent identification rate for missing persons in the former Yugoslavia, but also in cases where states have proactively requested investigations themselves, such as Bangladesh.

However, participants acknowledged persistent limitations, including the current liquidity crisis facing the UN and the political nature of establishing human rights investigations and accountability mechanisms. Decisions on when and how to act are often shaped by political selectivity and competing priorities. Some participants also raised concerns about ad hoc mandates, inaccessible archives, political interference and fatigue from repeated testimony requests. The session underscored the need for stronger coordination across the accountability ecosystem, particularly between regional and multilateral bodies like the HRC and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

While acknowledging significant progress made in advancing judicial accountability for atrocity crimes, participants also noted that accountability efforts are often structured without sufficient input from the communities they intend to serve. Outreach is often underfunded and victims are too rarely consulted on what justice means to them. The discussion also explored how the concept of “accountability” may hold different meanings for victims, survivors and broader affected communities, and that these categories themselves are not static or uniform. For some, accountability is about securing justice in court; for others, it is about learning the fate of the missing or being able to safely share their

stories. For many, truth and acknowledgment are more important than financial retribution. Naming communities, such as the Rohingya and Yazidi, or affirming their identities publicly is already a meaningful step. Others emphasized the importance of inclusive, survivor-centered mechanisms that allow access to justice, including through international institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The discussion also explored how documentation efforts can be more directly connected to justice outcomes. The CoI on Syria, which contributed to more than 50 domestic convictions in Europe, was cited as a strong model. Participants urged better data management across agencies, ethical handling of evidence and stronger coordination between New York, Geneva and The Hague. Some participants also underlined that states must still uphold their own legal obligations, such as the duty to find the missing, emphasizing that models built on cross-border cooperation and sustained political commitment should be expanded globally.

The session closed with a reminder: accountability is not only about prosecutions. Truth-telling, public recognition and guarantees of non-repetition are equally essential. International investigative mechanisms, such as FFMs and CoIs, play a critical role in establishing the facts of a situation. Whether justice is delivered or denied shapes not only the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, but also the willingness of survivors to engage in the future.

Key recommendations and lessons from this session included:

- Establish, support and strengthen permanent, multi-mandate investigative infrastructure like the OHCHR Inquiries Branch.
- Build secure, shared evidence databases and guidelines for chain-of-custody protocols.
- Establish formal and sustained pathways for victims and survivors to engage directly with decision-makers shaping accountability processes and ensure that they are empowered to define what justice means within their specific contexts.
- Invest in outreach, mental health support and long-term engagement with affected communities.
- Integrate findings from CoIs and FFMs into transitional justice processes from the outset.
- Ensure that information and analysis produced by human rights investigations are systematically integrated into broader political decision-making – not limited to accountability forums such as the HRC

or ICC. Findings should inform diplomatic engagement, prevention strategies and responses at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.

- Strengthen national institutions that are essential to accountability, such as those responsible for identifying missing persons, preserving evidence or upholding judicial independence.
- Collaborate closely with civil society to ensure accountability efforts prioritize marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, children and ethnic or religious minorities, whose experiences have often been overlooked.

CLOSING THE CYCLE: MULTILATERAL RESPONSE TO ATROCITY CRIMES IN SYRIA AND LONG-TERM PREVENTION EFFORTS

To holistically reflect on the discussions from the first three sessions, this session used Syria as a case study to examine how multilateral efforts to advance justice and accountability can inform responses to other atrocity situations – both current and future. The session also explored how such strategies must be anchored in, shaped by and responsive to the demands, expertise and priorities of Syrians themselves.

This session featured a diverse panel of Syrian civil society leaders, justice professionals and multilateral actors, including: Fadel Abdulghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Ahmad Helmi, Co-founder of the Ta'afi Initiative, Kholoud Helmi, Co-founder of Families for Freedom, Michelle Jarvis, Deputy Head of the IIM for Syria, and Habib Nassar, Senior Human Rights Officer at the IIMP in Syria.⁹

The Syria case illustrates both the costs of inaction and the power of resilience. With over a decade of conflict and rampant atrocities perpetrated during the conflict in Syria, states, civil society organizations and HRDs undertook extensive efforts to ensure a meaningful international response. Speakers reflected on the paralysis at the UNSC, where repeated vetoes by Russia and China undermined meaningful action – even as civilians in Syria endured torture, mass killings, sexual and gender-based violence and chemical weapons attacks. In the absence of formal action, civil society organizations stepped into the void, documenting crimes, organizing survivors and pressuring international institutions to act. Despite facing shrinking civic space and growing threats, these actors were often the first to

sound the alarm, gather data and propose policy alternatives.¹⁰ Their efforts led to the establishment of human rights investigations and accountability bodies, the imposition of targeted sanctions and the pursuit of universal jurisdiction cases, among other measures. HRDs present also credited the value of multilateralism, particularly the HRC and CoI on Syria, for maintaining sustained attention on Syria for 14 years and creating opportunities to influence accountability internationally when none existed at the national level.

Participants emphasized that Syrian survivors should not be treated solely as witnesses but recognized as active architects of justice. Stakeholders must enable survivor-led accountability processes that incorporates truth-telling, public acknowledgment and legal redress. The IIMP was celebrated as a landmark achievement – the first time a survivor-driven initiative led to the creation of a UN-backed institution specifically designed to address the needs of families searching for missing loved ones. Participants also acknowledged the critical role of Latin American countries in helping translate the initiatives of victim and survivor groups into the achievements at the UN.

As Syria enters a critical period of political transition following the fall of the Assad government, it is imperative for the international community to develop holistic strategies that mitigate future atrocity risks, end impunity and strengthen accountability efforts. The international community needs to act with urgency to preserve existing evidence during the current period of political transition and ensure that post-conflict fatigue, donor retreat or misplaced optimism about stability do not jeopardize long-term justice efforts. This includes ensuring investigative bodies are equipped with the forensics capacity to locate and exhume mass graves. Moreover, the international community needs to help build the capacity of Syrians to develop sustainable national or hybrid mechanisms for accountability and to design truth and justice mechanisms that address the full spectrum of abuses experienced by Syrians, including enforced disappearances, torture, forcible displacement, killings, chemical weapons attacks and more.

Key recommendations and lessons from this session included:

- Civil society is indispensable for early warning and must be seen as a co-leader, not just a watchdog.
- Multilateralism is a powerful tool for action when the state lacks or directly eliminates institutions that are accountable to the population. Multilateral action

should institutionalize pathways for survivor-led contributions to response.

- Accountability must be broader than criminal trials and include reparations, public apologies and psychosocial healing.
- Prevention is not only about stopping violence in the moment, but it also means sustained investment in human rights, community resilience, inclusive governance and civil society.
- Donor strategies must be long-term and flexible to match the evolving justice landscape, including coordinating funding and support for Syrian organizations committed to justice and reconciliation, while also being sustainable for the full length of justice and accountability processes.
- Embed long-term prevention into justice strategies and ensure that survivors lead the conversation – not only as a matter of principle but as a prerequisite for legitimacy and sustainability.
- Rather than waiting for institutional alignment, states and UN bodies should proactively create channels to incorporate survivor voices, support national-level processes and invest in public education campaigns that address intergenerational trauma.
- In contexts where multiple investigative and accountability bodies have been established – such as in the case of Syria – ensuring that each has a distinct, yet complementary mandate helps deliver a more comprehensive international response. This approach also helps avoid duplication of efforts, re-traumatization of victims and confusion regarding the storage and handling of evidence and information.
- Small and middle states have immense potential to exercise normative leadership and seize opportunities to make a meaningful impact through the creation of human rights mechanisms. In cases such as Syria, this leadership has not been confined to neighboring states but has also come from principled engagement by countries in other regions, including Latin America.

CONCLUSION

Across all sessions and discussions, a series of core themes and strategic imperatives emerged, underscoring that the prevention of mass atrocities is not a niche concern but a core responsibility of governance and that there is an urgent need to translate normative support for R2P into measurable, coordinated action.

Prevention Must Be Political, Not Only Technical

One of the clearest messages throughout the meeting was that early warning must lead to early action. While substantial investment has been made in risk analysis, that analysis too often remains in the realm of technical expertise without triggering political engagement. Strategies proposed included the development of national response frameworks, standard operating procedures for UN Resident Coordinators and direct links between analysis and decision-making at the UNSC and HRC.

Institutionalize, Don't Isolate R2P

Participants emphasized that R2P should be embedded in the broader architecture of governance, not treated as a siloed policy agenda. As multilateralism enters a period of uncertainty, participants agreed that strengthening the institutional architecture of R2P is essential for preserving its relevance and impact. This requires formalizing R2P Focal Point roles, integrating prevention into national development and human rights strategies and aligning R2P with broader UN initiatives, such as the SDGs. The meeting emphasized the need for R2P Focal Points to operate with institutional support, adequate resources and access to cross-ministerial coordination. Speakers stressed that atrocity prevention should be reflected in public education systems, civil servant

training, media literacy programs and civic engagement strategies.

Regional Leadership and Small-State Innovation

Several participants highlighted that some of the most innovative and courageous leadership in atrocity prevention has come from small and medium states. Countries such as The Gambia, South Africa, Colombia, Slovenia and Croatia have taken meaningful steps at the domestic level while also advancing global norms. Regional organizations were also recognized as critical norm shapers and first responders and several participants recommended leveraging regional human rights mechanisms as platforms for preventive diplomacy.

Civil Society as Equal Partners in Prevention

Throughout all sessions, the vital role of civil society was emphasized. Whether gathering early warning data, supporting survivors or advocating for institutional reform, civil society organizations are typically the first to act and the last to disengage. Yet their access to decision-making spaces remains inconsistent and their safety increasingly threatened. Participants called for civil society to be systematically included in multilateral forums and national prevention strategies. Survivor-led initiatives were particularly emphasized as both morally imperative and operationally effective.

¹ See the “Framework for Action on the Responsibility to Protect” for more on how R2P Focal Points and their system can implement R2P, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/a-framework-for-action-for-the-responsibility-to-protect-a-resource-for-states/>

² The R2P Focal Points Manual outlines how this can be done, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/manual-for-r2p-focal-points/>

³ For more on Niemat Ahmadi’s advocacy with the UNSC, see <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/expert-voices-on-atrocity-prevention-episode-37-niemat-ahmadi/>

⁴ UNSC Statement on Resolution 2736, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15728.doc.htm>

⁵ For more on the Sixth Committee decision, see <https://press.un.org/en/2024/gal3738.doc.htm>

⁶ For more on DefendDefenders’ approach to advocacy at the HRC, see <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/expert-voices-on-atrocity-prevention-episode-39-nicolas-agostini/>

⁷ See, for example, summaries from the 9th and 10th meetings of the Global Network, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/summary-of-the-9th-annual-meeting-of-the-global-network-of-r2p-focal-points/> and <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/summary-of-the-10th-annual-meeting-of-the-global-network-of-r2p-focal-points/>, as well as the 2011 report of the UN Secretary-General on R2P <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/the-role-of-regional-and-subregional-arrangements-in-implementing-the-responsibility-to-protect-2011/>

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the UNITAD exit, see <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/expert-voices-on-atrocity-prevention-episode-36-natia-navrouzov/>

⁹ For more on the work of victim, survivor and family associations in advocating for the IIMP see <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/evap-episode-19/>

¹⁰ See, for example, data collection by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://snhr.org>