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Preventing the Kinds of Conflicts that are Hardest to Resolve and Most Costly in Lives

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Abstract

Progress in conflict prevention depends upon a better understanding of the underlying circumstances that give rise to violent conflict and mass atrocities, as well as the warning signs that a crisis is imminent. In recent decades there has been a substantial amount of empirical research on the causes of violence and the driving forces of conflict. The policy implications of this must be exploited to a greater degree so that the conditions that enable widespread violence can be addressed, before it occurs. The prevention of violent conflict and mass atrocities involves a range of social, economic and institutional factors, and it highlights broad challenges – many of which are international – relating to deprivation, inequality, political access and environmental management. It also involves overcoming a number of acute political obstacles that are currently embedded within the values and institutions of global governance. From this perspective, the paper presents a range of proposals related to structural conflict prevention and crisis response, as well as the prevention of mass atrocities

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1. Introduction

Most countries have experienced some form of civil conflict since 1960.¹ Mass atrocities – such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing – are all too often a feature of these conflicts. Because of its devastating human and material costs and the broader impact upon the international system, preventing such organized killing should be a central policy aim of the international community. Yet decades after the 1992 *An Agenda for Peace* – the new vision of conflict management in the post-Cold War era – civil wars and mass atrocities are a common feature of the contemporary world. The conflict and mass atrocities in Syria alone have reportedly claimed over 200,000 lives since the organized violence began in 2011.² In recent years, there have also been horrific situations of mass killings in Iraq, Libya, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and elsewhere.

Recent mass violence can be seen in the context of five important trends. First, there has been wide discussion about an apparent decline in armed conflict and violence over the long term, although the reasons for this decline are contested, as presented in section two.³ Whilst this paper casts some doubt upon this from the point of view of mass violence, lessons can certainly be learned in relation to international conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities. Second, since the Second World War, civil wars and intrastate armed conflict broadly defined have occurred about five times as often and killed about five times as many people as interstate wars.⁴ Given that mass atrocities often occur in situations of armed conflict, the prevention of atrocities and armed conflict more broadly is primarily a societal challenge. Third, a significant proportion of recent mass atrocities – approximately two thirds according to Bellamy's calculation – occur during war.⁵ Because of this, there is a role for prevention efforts even after armed conflicts begin, since wars without mass atrocities are preferable to wars with them. Conversely, if mass atrocities occur, the space and practical opportunities for conflict prevention are reduced. Fourth, conflict prevention is now closely connected to avoiding conflict re-occurrence, given that a very high proportion of civil conflicts – approximately 90%, according to one calculation – in the 2000s reoccurred in societies which had experienced widespread violence in the recent past.⁶ Finally, serious armed conflict is increasingly concentrated in certain regions of the world, particularly some parts of Africa, south and central Asia, and the Middle East.

All of these trends suggest that preventing civil wars and mass atrocities should be a priority within the international security field. Preventing wars between states remains a critically important challenge, but because their occurrence is infrequent, there is less that we can systematically know about their causes, and, hence, means of prevention.

¹ Christopher Blattman and Edward Miguel, "Civil War," *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2010. 48 (1): 3, 5. Following widely used definitions, an armed conflict (whether state-based and non-state) is defined as a violent political contestation in which there are at least 25 conflict-related deaths in a single year; a war is a major armed conflict in which there are 1000 directly related fatalities in a year.

² "Syria Death Toll Now Exceeds 210,000: Rights Group," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2015.

³ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: The Decline of Violence and its Psychological Roots* (London: Penguin, 2011); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

⁴ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 75.

⁵ Alex Bellamy, *Mass Atrocities and Armed Conflict: Links, Distinctions, and Implications for the Responsibility to Prevent*, Policy Analysis Brief (Muscatine, IA: The Stanley Foundation, 2011).

⁶ Barbara F. Walter, "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2014): 1–2.

How to organize, and who has responsibility for, implementing policies to prevent war and mass atrocities is contentious. One important framework for mass atrocity prevention is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. In response to the failures of the international community to prevent and react in a timely fashion to the slaughters in Rwanda and the Balkans, R2P emerged in 2001⁷ and state leaders subsequently accepted a modified version of the principle in 2005.⁸ A moral and political principle rather than new international law, R2P holds that states have the responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and to prevent such crimes, including their incitement. R2P stipulates that the international community should encourage and help states to exercise this responsibility and support the UN in establishing an early warning capability. The agreement indicates that the international community also has the responsibility to help to protect populations from these atrocities where national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations.⁹ As many experts – including the authors of the foundational report on R2P – argue, prevention is “the single most important dimension of the responsibility to protect.”¹⁰

An overarching message of this paper is that conflict prevention at the structural level, a fundamentally critical challenge, is being neglected by the international community. In the following section (two), we discuss the empirical literature on the causes of violent conflict in order to identify evidence relevant to conflict prevention strategies. In section three we review the main operational responses and reforms, and briefly assess initiatives on the ground. In section four we discuss the obstacles to implementing conflict prevention policies based upon recent experience. In the fifth and final section we propose a number of feasible policy reforms aimed at improving the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts.

2. Preventing Mass Atrocities

2.1 Main challenges

Strengthening the conflict prevention capacity of international actors depends upon a better understanding of the underlying circumstances which give rise to violent conflict and mass atrocities, as well as the warning signs that a crisis is imminent. In recent decades there has been a substantial amount of empirical research on the causes and driving forces of mass violence. The policy implications of this research – particularly in terms of structural conflict prevention – must be exploited to a greater degree so that the conditions that enable widespread violence can be mapped and addressed, before it occurs. The prevention of violent conflict and mass atrocities involves a range of social, economic and institutional factors, and it highlights broad challenges – many of which are international and regional in scope – relating to deprivation, inequality, political access and environmental management. With regard to the role of global governance, it is essential that conflict prevention is seen from this perspective, and not only as a form of crisis response.

However, the academic analysis of the causes of violent conflict and mass atrocities reflects significant disagreement and this raises concerns about the scientific basis of conflict prevention policies, especially in terms of long-term strategies which target the structural sources of violence.

⁷ Gareth Evans et al., *The Responsibility to Protect: The Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ontario: IDRC Books, 2001).

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, 2005 World Summit Outcome (New York: United Nations, 2005), 30.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations, 2009).

¹⁰ Evans et al., *The Responsibility to Protect*, XI.

Whilst there is a high level of agreement about the factors which appear to make violent conflict more likely (see below), there is less consensus about the causal relationships and the mechanisms which explain why violent conflict occurs. There are also conflicting research findings about the relevance of underlying political, social, demographic and environmental factors – amongst others – for explaining the onset of violent conflict. This presents a challenge for drawing and applying general lessons that might be relevant for conflict prevention.¹¹

One of the most prominent debates in recent years in which there are competing findings concerns patterns of armed conflict in historical perspective, and in particular if deadly violence is declining. It is widely believed that civil wars have generally been declining in number and magnitude in recent decades. The Human Security Report project, amongst others, found that civil wars, genocides and international crises have all declined significantly.¹² The Uppsala University Conflict Data Program (UCDP) similarly found a “long-term decline,”¹³ as did the Political Instability Task Force.¹⁴ The deadly conflicts which have emerged since the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have moderated optimism about the decline of intrastate war, but the quantitative studies of armed conflict still generally point to a longer-term decline in warfare in historical perspective.

In explaining this apparent decline in deadly violence, much attention has been given to increased international activism in preventing and resolving armed conflict, with the resurgence of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and conflict prevention activities at the forefront.¹⁵ In broader historical perspective some scholars have suggested an evolutionary decline of human violence in line with changing norms and progress in political organization, most importantly the spread of consolidated states.¹⁶ The most ambitious recent study is Pinker’s 2011 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which argued that declining wars are a part of a far broader decline in all types of human violence over many thousands of years.¹⁷

The declining armed violence thesis has been challenged on many fronts, and serious doubts are emerging which point to far less positive signs about the nature and magnitude of armed conflict and violence in the future. These doubts arise from four concerns.

Firstly, the historical timeframe for making claims about significant trends in armed conflict in recent decades – typically, using data for the post-Second World period – is narrow and arguably not representative of broader experience. The data of the Correlates of War project, which covers all forms of war between 1816-2007, suggests that the apparent decline in deadly violence since the mid-1990s is not historically significant; it reflects a continuation of fluctuations in levels of armed

¹¹ Edward Newman, *Understanding Civil Wars. Continuity and Change in Intrastate Armed Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹² Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2013: The Decline in Global Violence: Evidence, Explanation, and Contestation* (Vancouver: Human Security Press, 2013); Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report 2011 Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, 2011); See also Joshua S. Goldstein, “Think Again: War. World peace could be closer than you think”, *Foreign Policy*, September/October, 2011.

¹³ Lotta Themnér and Peter Wallensteen, “Armed conflict, 1946–2010”, *Journal of Peace Research* 48 (2011): 525.

¹⁴ Jack A. Goldstone et al., “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability”, *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (2010).

¹⁵ Virginia Page Fortna, “Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War”, *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (2004); Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Goldstein, *Winning the War on War*; Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101-152; Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom, “Post-Conflict Risks”, *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (2008).

¹⁶ Azar Gat, “Is war declining – and why?,” *Journal of Peace Research* 50 (2013); John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

conflict and not a long-term decline in broader perspective.¹⁸ Moreover, from the perspective of scientific inquiry, claims about broad conflict patterns are questionable since historical data may be unreliable, and the measurement of deadly violence is itself methodologically controversial.

Secondly, most evidence suggests that onsets of intrastate armed conflict are not in significant decline in the post-Cold War era. Rather, intrastate conflicts are shorter in duration and less likely to recur, which contributes to the overall picture of a decline in absolute numbers of conflict, even though major armed violence occurs with some regularity. This is a welcome trend, but it means that the onset of deadly violence remains a pressing concern deserving the highest priority.

Thirdly, a significant upsurge in instability in recent years – including violent conflict – challenges assumptions about a decline in armed conflict. To take just one example, the UN estimated that 191,000 people had been killed in Syria between March 2011 and April 2014, and this number grows given the absence of effective peace making. As of June 2014 it was estimated that 9.3 million Syrians were in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, with 4.25 million IDPs and 2.8 million refugees in neighboring countries – the vast majority women and children.¹⁹ 21st Century armed conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq, DRC, Libya, Syria, Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, Nepal, amongst others, amply demonstrate the deadly impact of contemporary civil wars. Forced displacement – generally a good barometer of instability and violence – has been at alarming levels in recent years. 2014 saw the highest displacement on record according to UNHCR figures: “By end-2014, 59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This is 8.3 million persons more than the year before (51.2 million) and the highest annual increase in a single year.”²⁰ According to the 2015 Global Peace Index Report, the economic impact of violence on the global economy in 2014 is estimated at US\$14.3 trillion.²¹

Finally, the debate about the apparent downward trend of armed conflict – and in particular civil war – neglects broader patterns of societal violence which have a devastating impact upon human security and entrap countries into situations of underdevelopment. Much of the narrative about declining armed conflict is based upon a conventional definition of civil war involving 1000 combat deaths in a year, in a conflict between state and non-state actors. This does not provide an accurate account of inter-communal violence and low intensity conflict which falls short of the ‘war’ threshold. Such conflict represents a far broader experience of violence than that which is reflected in the principal conflict trends, and this can escalate into full scale armed conflict and atrocities. Moreover, the empirical evidence suggests that even if (major) civil wars have declined in historical perspective, these minor conflicts appear to have increased.²²

This discussion puts the narrative about a decline in war into perspective. Violent conflict remains a pervasive challenge both for those it directly affects as well as the international community, and the underlying driving forces for this conflict show no signs of diminishing.

¹⁸ Meredith Reid Sarkees, “Patterns of civil war in the twenty-first century: the decline of civil war?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars*, ed. Edward Newman and Karl DeRouen, Jr., (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Oral Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/26/CRP.2, June 16 (Geneva: United Nations, 2014).

²⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *World at War. UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014*, (Geneva, United Nations, 2015), 2.

²¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2015: Measuring Peace, Its Causes and Its Economic Value* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015).

²² James D. Fearon, *Governance and Civil War Onset*, World Development Report 2011 Background Paper (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011), 9.

2.2 Underlying Driving Forces of Violent Conflict

Existing knowledge on the underlying sources of violent conflict can inform conflict prevention and this section will identify and discuss the key themes in this empirical scholarship.

2.2.1 Weak state capacity and the absence of effective institutions

There is a strong correlation between weak state capacity and violent conflict, although the direction of causation is not always clear, and it is not necessarily the weakest states which experience the most serious conflict. Weak states tend to rely upon oppression and clientelism to maintain order, which creates instability. They are also less likely to sustain distributive practices, leading to volatility associated with relative deprivation grievances. When instability does occur, weak states are generally poor at managing and resolving conflict, including inter-communal strife. These states are also less willing or able to mitigate economic shocks – for example, sudden price inflation – which can fuel societal conflict. Compared to effective, consolidated states, weak states are less able to manage the uncertainties associated with political change, so that periods of liberalization can be especially prone to instability and violence. Weak states in the developing world are also more prone to destabilizing external intervention, including the cross-border spillover effects of regional conflict. Weak states are often considered to be constitutionally problematic or illegitimate, especially in the post-colonial world. Similarly, ongoing statebuilding processes can create conflict. Weak states are clearly a major site of armed conflict, but armed conflict is also the consequence of unresolved and problematic statebuilding processes.²³

2.2.2 Poverty and horizontal inequalities in heterogeneous or polarized societies

Poverty can generate grievances and instability, including communal violence over limited resources. It can also be an enabling environment for conflict: underdeveloped societies are more likely to suffer from corrupt and poor governance, and lack mechanisms to address instability. The direction of causation between poverty and conflict is debatable, however. Economic inequality within a society – especially across distinct identity groups or communities – is a more direct source of conflict, and perceptions of relative deprivation are a key driver of violence. These ‘horizontal inequalities’ are particularly inflammatory in divided societies during times of economic change and in situations of power-seeking political leadership.²⁴ Rapid but uneven economic development can also be destabilizing if growth is not distributed equitably. Moreover, it is not necessarily the most deprived groups which instigate conflict: the relatively more privileged may do so in situations of social and economic change, fearing a loss of their position. Although inequality across countries has receded somewhat in recent years, income inequality has increased within many countries.²⁵

2.2.3 Group domination of power and exclusion

Group domination of political power and resources – linked to horizontal economic and social inequalities – is also a significant driver of grievances that can be transformed into political violence,

²³ Newman, *Understanding Civil Wars*.

²⁴ Arnim Langer and Frances Stewart, “Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Conflict: Conceptual and Empirical Linkages,” in *Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars*, ed. Edward Newman and Karl DeRouen, Jr., (London: Routledge, 2014); Gudrun Østby, “Polarization, Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Civil Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (2008); Amartya Sen, “Violence, Identity and Poverty,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (2008); Marie L. Besançon, “Relative Resources: Inequality in Ethnic Wars, Revolutions, and Genocides,” *Journal of Peace Research* 42 (2005); Lars-Erik Cederman, Nils B. Weidmann, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison,” *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011).

²⁵ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Inequality Matters: Report on the World Social Situation 2013* (New York: United Nations, 2014), 21.

persecution and upheaval. Clientelist or corrupt governance designed to serve narrow interests is a recurrent theme in political violence in diverse cases, including Syria, Libya and Iraq. As resistance to such corruption rises, violence all too often becomes inter-communal and vicious, as the Central African Republic has recently experienced. Such conflict is often framed as 'tribal' or 'ethnic', but care must be taken not to misinterpret the underlying dynamics of this violence; social and institutional factors are generally key factors, whilst the identity dimension is how it is expressed, often with the support of political extremists and conflict entrepreneurs.

2.2.4 Political transition and anocracy in divided societies

Consolidated democracies in functional states are generally the most peaceful and stable domestically. However, imperfect democratic practices in volatile or poor societies, and societies which are experiencing a transition towards democracy, are more likely than non-democratic societies to experience armed conflict.²⁶ In societies which reflect broader conflict factors – such as weak state capacity, group domination of power and horizontal inequalities – political liberalization can exacerbate underlying conflicts and act as a catalyst to violence, especially where attempts to reform are rapid and lack local support and institutional capacity. It can generate insecurities amongst minorities and cause groups which fear the loss of vested interests to undermine political reform, sometimes violently. In these conditions elections can encourage political elites to campaign on sectarian agendas, and sometimes to deliberately exacerbate conflict amongst communities in an attempt to bolster support as people gravitate towards identity politics. In Angola in the early 1990s, Rwanda and Burundi in the first half of the 1990s, Bosnia in the 1990s, Kenya in 2007-8, and Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, amongst others, democratization and instability were directly linked.

2.2.5 Natural resources

There has been a great deal of attention to the relationship between intrastate armed conflict and dependency upon the exportation of natural resources – especially in conjunction with weak state capacity and corruption – although the nature of the association is contested.²⁷ Unsecured natural resources such as coltan, diamonds, timber and oil can provide incentives for rebellion as armed groups seek enrichment. The illicit trade in such commodities, in turn, fuels ongoing armed conflict, often across borders. Government predation and enrichment based upon resource exploitation weakens the legitimacy of the state by degrading its capacity to fulfill public service obligations and alienating groups which are not receiving the fruits of the government's corruption. This can lead to violent opposition, especially at times of crisis such as economic shocks, the withdrawal of support by a foreign patron, or food price increases that the government is unable to cushion. However, the 'resource curse' is not inevitable; some developing countries rich in non-renewable resources have not experienced serious conflict – in fact they use such resources for peaceful development – and

²⁶ Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability"; Havard Hegre, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001); Christina Schatzman, "Political Challenge in Latin America: Rebellion and Collective Protest in an Era of Democratization," *Journal of Peace Research* 42 (2005); Demet Yalcin Mousseau, "Democratizing with Ethnic Divisions: A Source of Conflict?," *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (2001); Patrick M. Regan and Sam R. Bell, "Changing Lanes or Stuck in the Middle: Why Are Anocracies More Prone to Civil Wars?," *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (2010); Edward D. Mansfield, and Jack Snyder, "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War," *International Organization* 56 (2002).

²⁷ Michael L. Ross, "What Do We Know about Natural Resources and Civil War?," *Journal of Peace Research* 41 (2004); James D. Fearon, "Primary Commodity Exports and Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (2005).

the lessons of this need to be explored.²⁸ Moreover, some evidence suggests that the distribution of natural resource revenues reduces the risk of conflict.²⁹

2.2.6 Environmental change

Environmental degradation can exacerbate latent antagonisms or create new ones related to resource use and socio-economic stress, and thus play a background role in armed conflict.³⁰ Climate change can threaten livelihoods in societies which are reliant upon primary agricultural production, generating grievances which are directed against governments, fellow citizens or other communities.³¹ These grievances can exacerbate existing social divisions and act as the ‘tipping point’ which results in societal violence. The pressures on habitable land and livelihoods can also uproot communities, forcing them to migrate in search of economic security and putting them into conflict with settled communities (a phenomenon associated with the Darfur crisis in Sudan). Yet few scientific results have persuasively demonstrated that environmental degradation and climate change directly cause armed conflict, and even less so as a causal factor which is generally applicable.³² It is therefore difficult to evaluate the role of environmental factors in isolation from all the other factors which induce conflict. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that climate change contributes to instability and conflict in vulnerable societies.³³

2.2.7 Social instability and globalization

The relationship between social factors, globalization and the occurrence of armed conflict is complex and contested. The integration of societies into international economic networks as a part of contemporary development is thought to promote stability because – with the appropriate governance structures – it brings increases in economic growth and income, and facilitates public goods. In addition to lessening grievances that might result in instability, this also increases the opportunity costs of being involved in organized violence. Against this general trend, some research explores the role of social change and economic liberalization in generating inequality, unemployment and relative deprivation, and the potentially destabilizing impact of these – especially when that change is abrupt.³⁴ According to Niemann, ‘globalization shocks’ are

²⁸ David Sebudubudu, *Wealth Sharing for Conflict Prevention and Economic Growth: Botswana Case Study of Natural Resource Utilization for Peace and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011).

²⁹ Raju Jan Singh, Cristina Bodea and Masaaki Higashijima, *Oil and Civil Conflict: Can Public Spending Have a Mitigation Effect?* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2014).

³⁰ Idean Salehyan, “From Climate Change to Conflict? No Consensus Yet,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (2008); Adrian Martin, “Environmental Conflict Between Refugee and Host Communities,” *Journal of Peace Research* 42 (2005); Thomas Homer-Dixon, “Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases,” *International Security* 19 (1994); Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Val Percival and Thomas Homer-Dixon, “Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: The Case of South Africa,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (1998); Wenche Hauge and Tanja Ellingsen, “Beyond Environmental Scarcity: Causal Pathways to Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (1998); Nils Petter Gleditsch, “Armed Conflict and the Environment: A Critique of the Literature,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (1998).

³¹ Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: what people will be killed for in the 21st century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Conor Devitt and Richard S. J. Tol, “Civil war, climate change, and development: A scenario study for sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2012).

³² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Halvard Buhaug, “Climate not to blame for African civil wars,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107 (2010); Alex Evans, *Resource Scarcity, Climate Change and the Risk of Violent Conflict*, World Development Report 2011 Background Paper (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011).

³³ Jeffrey Mazo, *Climate Conflict. How global warming threatens security and what to do about it*, (London: Routledge for the IISS, 2010).

³⁴ Margit Bussman and Gerald Schneider, “When Globalization Discontent Turns Violent: Foreign Economic Liberalization and Internal War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007); Caroline A. Hartzell, Matthew Hoddie and Molly Bauer,

destabilizing because they reduce the state's capacity to cushion the negative impacts of globalization, and this is associated with an increased risk of organized violence.³⁵ African societies, in particular, are more likely to experience armed conflict following economic downturns in the value of their main export commodities.³⁶ This can be compounded by a youth bulge, especially of young males, and high levels of youth unemployment and urban in-migration, as manifested in Yemen.³⁷ Food prices, as a proxy for a broader range of social factors, can also play a role in instability and conflict, as the soaring international food prices between 2007 and 2011 have demonstrated.³⁸ This inflation can help to translate grievances into collective action or provide the tipping point for uprisings against a weak or corrupt state – but the precise mechanisms involved are far from clear.

A range of other factors indicate an increased likelihood of violent conflict. States characterized by gender inequality are more likely to experience intrastate conflict.³⁹ Newly independent states also tend to be vulnerable, especially in conjunction with other conflict-inducing factors. An active and well-resourced diaspora community is often significant in mobilizing upheaval through resource transfers. There are also a range of 'new' conflict dynamics which point to a changing nature of armed conflict. Social media has played a role in mobilizing protests and upheavals – sometimes violent ones – and this may be promoting a demonstration effect across borders. There is evidence of a new form of 'people power' facilitated by social media which can have positive outcomes as communities demand better governance, social equity and opportunities. However, the instability that can arise can escalate, with unpredictable consequences.

Scientific work aimed at understanding the circumstances that give rise to atrocities, which actors are associated with the perpetration of atrocities, and the impact of such crimes has also generated some general conclusions. Some research has suggested that the warning signs of some types of atrocities can be identified with some precision, allowing predictive and preventive possibilities.⁴⁰ An Uppsala University study of one-sided violence found that governments or state-supported agents are more likely to be associated with the most serious atrocities and they have the highest capacity for perpetrating them.⁴¹ Specifically, state actors have tended to be the perpetrators or instigators of genocide. The study also found that 'the vast bulk of all one-sided violence is carried

"Economic Liberalization via IMF Structural Adjustment: Sowing the Seeds of Civil War?," *International Organization* 64 (2010); Michael Mousseau, "Market Civilization and its Clash with Terror," *International Security* 27 (2002/03).

³⁵ Mark David Nieman, "Shocks and Turbulence: Globalization and the Occurrence of Civil War," *International Interactions* 37 (2011).

³⁶ Markus Brückner and Antonio Ciccone, "International Commodity Prices, Growth and the Outbreak of Civil War in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Economic Journal* 120 (2010).

³⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Yemen Human Development Report: the Human Development Index*, 2009.

³⁸ Henk-Jan Brinkman and Cullen S. Hendrix, *Food Insecurity and Conflict: Applying the WDR Framework*, World Development Report 2011 Background Paper (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2010); Ray Bush, "Food Riots: Poverty, Power and Protest," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10 (2010).

³⁹ Erik Melander, "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005); M. Caprioli, "Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005).

⁴⁰ Benjamin E. Goldsmith et al., "Forecasting the onset of genocide and politicide: Annual out-of-sample forecasts on a global dataset, 1988–2003," *Journal of Peace Research* 50 (2013); Barbara Harff, "How to Use Risk Assessment and Early Warning in the Prevention and De-Escalation of Genocide and Other Mass Atrocities," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1 (2009); Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003).

⁴¹ Ralph Sundberg, *Revisiting One-sided Violence - A Global and Regional Analysis*, UCDP Paper No. 3, (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2009), 17. See also Michael Colaresi and Sabine C. Carey, "To Kill or to Protect: Security Forces, Domestic Institutions, and Genocide," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52 (2008); Matthew Krain, "State-Sponsored Mass Murder: The Onset and Severity of Genocides and Politicides," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41 (1997).

out in countries that are also experiencing armed conflicts.⁴² Therefore, atrocities are generally associated with war aims: as a form of collective punishment, to facilitate territorial control or control of populations, to prevent resistance, and to facilitate population movement.⁴³ While there may be local dynamics at play – associated with renegade or sadistic combatants, a breakdown of discipline, and inter-communal animosities – atrocities are all too often tactics, directed by political or military leaders, which play a role in the broader objectives at stake in a conflict.⁴⁴

There is a significant epistemic challenge to understanding the nature of mass violence in the 21st Century. The conflict-inducing factors described above can rarely be understood in isolation from each other, and certainly not as single, linear causes of violence. The implications of this can be confusing for long-term conflict prevention because of the difficulty of prioritizing attention. In turn, important issues may be neglected in mainstream scientific inquiries. Empirical conflict research has tended to focus upon material economic and political factors and the institutional context which enables upheaval to occur, whilst the role of injustice is downplayed. However, experience from the Arab Spring uprisings suggests that the perception of social injustice played a significant role. When societal justice cannot be achieved by peaceful means, instability can occur.

It is essential to grasp the structural factors that drive instability and violent conflict, within which mass atrocities generally occur. This is not an exact science, but there is significant experience across diverse cases to indicate where and why violent conflict occurs. The implications of current projections in environmental degradation, food price fluctuations, demographic trends, economic trends – including growing inequality – and resource use for future patterns of instability and conflict are alarming. But they also raise implications which can be fruitfully translated into new conflict prevention initiatives, if the necessary political support and resources are invested.

3. Operational Experience of Conflict Prevention

The United Nations is the preeminent global governance actor engaged in conflict prevention. During the Cold War the organization was often stymied due to geopolitical rivalries – which often incapacitated with Security Council – and attempts to strengthen the preventive role of the UN were limited. The organization was essentially excluded from some of the most serious armed conflict within and between states, and attempts to develop a conflict prevention capacity within the UN Secretariat were controversial. For example, an attempt to develop an early warning capacity in the Office for Research and the Collection of Information (ORCI) proved to be politically controversial and short-lived. The Department of Political Affairs – despite the UN Charter providing the Secretary-General with authority for conflict prevention – also needed to proceed sensitively in identifying situations that were at risk of escalating into open conflict.

Nevertheless a number of important conflict practices were developed during the Cold War, often through the leadership of the UN Secretary-General and the Secretariat. The concept of preventive diplomacy proved to be a very important means of responding to international crises and preventing regional crises from escalating into global conflicts. The Department of Political Affairs –

⁴² Sundberg, *Revisiting One-sided Violence*, 22.

⁴³ Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting civilians in war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, ““Draining the sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare,” *International Organization* 58 (2004); Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are So Violent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Neil J. Mitchell, *Agents of Atrocity: Leaders, Followers, and the Violation of Human Rights in Civil War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?” *Politics & Society* 37 (2009).

⁴⁴ Benjamin Valentino, “Final Solutions: The Causes of Mass Killing and Genocide,” *Security Studies* 9 (2000).

despite the political sensitivities in which it worked – discreetly engaged in early warning activities. In addition, a range of broad activities undertaken by the UN and related agencies – in the humanitarian, political, social and economic spheres – played a role in promoting the foundations of peace and stability, albeit without being framed as ‘conflict prevention’. Generally, the emphasis was on crisis response and inter-state conflict.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international political context has transformed and the conflict prevention work – and apparatus – of the UN has blossomed. The UN is now highly active both in crisis response and structural conflict prevention, and the opportunities to play a role in preventing or reducing the escalation of violent conflict are greater than ever before. At the heart of the UN approach – comprising a wide range of activities across multiple agencies – is a shift from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention.⁴⁵ Structural conflict prevention is addressed through programmes and activities that facilitate and promote conflict-sensitive development, good governance, social equity, and environmental sustainability. In this respect, the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, UNESCO, and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development – amongst others – are directly or indirectly working to address the underlying sources of instability and conflict. In terms of crisis response, peace operations and preventive diplomacy form an important part of the UN’s work, under the direction of the Security Council.

A number of analysts credit the increased conflict prevention and peacekeeping activities of the UN – and its readiness to intervene into situations of intrastate armed conflict – with playing a major role in the declining incidence and magnitude of armed conflict.⁴⁶ Yet there are obvious limitations, deriving from the political rivalries that characterize so many of the UN’s organs, constraints and sensitivities associated with the norms of sovereignty, and resource constraints. In addition, despite the rhetoric of a culture of prevention, the instinct for decision making based upon short-term and narrow political interests often prevails. The impact of some parts of the UN in relation to some of the most pressing humanitarian crises – most obviously Syria – has been particularly disappointing.

Regional organizations are increasingly important and effective in the global governance of conflict prevention. These organizations are generally considered to be more attuned to the needs and political realities of regional actors, and they may be considered to be more legitimate locally since they are comprised of local stakeholders. They are also often able to respond to crises more promptly than the UN. The European Union has made a major investment into conflict prevention as one of the main policy platforms of its role as a global actor. Its work in promoting good governance and equitable development, and its humanitarian assistance, are key contributions to structural conflict prevention. The EU’s crisis response mechanism has been designed to deal with political and humanitarian crises overseas, and preventing the escalation of crises is a central intention of this. Specific EU milestones such as the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts (Gothenburg Programme) of 2001, the European Consensus on Development of 2005, and the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid of 2008 also form the background for European action in this area, as well as the Lisbon Treaty agenda in relation to external action. The key limitations of the EU role on conflict prevention – illustrated with reference to Ukraine, Libya and Syria – has been the political differences amongst EU member states, based upon conflicting interests, different political outlooks, and the difficulties of coordinating the positions of so many states.

⁴⁵ United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, *Prevention of armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/55/985-S/2001/574, 7 June (New York: United Nations, 2001); United Nations, *Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results. Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2011/552, 26 August (New York: United Nations, 2011).

⁴⁶ Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom, "Post-Conflict Risks"; Lisa Hultman, Jakob Kathman and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (2013); Lisa Hultman, Jakob Kathman and Megan Shannon, "Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 108 (2014).

ASEAN has also recently undertaken initiatives in the area of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy, although the EU has greater institutional capacity. The principal objective has been to reach consensus amongst ASEAN members on regional measures to address armed conflict, and to respond to specific crises at the regional level. The establishment of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation in Jakarta is a step forward in this regard. The coordination of activities with the UN is also significant, following the ASEAN-UN Comprehensive Partnership. However, conflict prevention in the ASEAN regional context, despite progress in historical perspective, remains characterized by regional political norms that stress political consensus, state sovereignty, and non-interference into the affairs of states. Arguably, this approach generates limitations. Simultaneously, the stress upon social and economic development – and the economic progress seen in the region in recent decades – has underpinned the peace and stability of the region.

Experience in other regional contexts has similarly reflected greater attention to conflict prevention. The African Union has facilitated significant political and institutional developments through initiatives such as the Continental Early Warning System, the African Standby Forces Framework, and the African Peace and Security Architecture. Within the AU organization, the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division provides institutional momentum, and the overall impact of the various initiatives is generally considered positive. However, there are notable violent conflict challenges in Africa and the structural prevention of violence – and sometimes the response – has severe limitations. Geopolitical rivalries, problems of governance, and resource constraints, are at the heart of this.

Non-governmental organizations have also become a part of the apparatus of global governance, including conflict prevention. Countless NGOs are involved in conflict prevention at the grassroots level, both independently and in cooperation with international organizations and donors. At the political level, international NGOs such as the International Crisis Group and the Budapest Centre for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities work to identify conflict risks and promote early response. The work of these NGOs has become critically important, but in an international system defined by state sovereignty – where global governance is still primarily defined in inter-governmental terms – the capacity of NGOs to generate structural change in how conflict is addressed remains limited.

Experience in conflict prevention initiatives suggests that very significant progress has occurred since the end of the Cold War, at the regional and global levels and across a range of actors – both governmental and non-governmental. However, the record also indicates that perennial obstacles continue to exist.

4. Obstacles to Operationalizing Prevention

This section identifies the operational, institutional, and attitudinal obstacles to formulating and building prevention mechanisms and achieving a ‘culture of prevention’ within global governance and regional settings. At the heart of conflict and mass atrocity prevention is a paradox. Preventing conflicts and mass atrocities is morally preferable and politically and financially cheaper than reacting to crises after they begin, yet leaders generally invest too little in early prevention. The challenges of political will, and the inherently short-term nature of political decision-making, generate major obstacles to conflict prevention.

4.1 The Challenge of Political Will

There are at least two types of prevention efforts, structural (or root cause) and proximate (or crisis response).⁴⁷ Structural prevention efforts address the underlying and longer-term factors that are associated with civil war and mass atrocities, such as acute poverty or acute horizontal inequality. Proximate prevention efforts aim to diffuse tensions that could imminently result in war or mass atrocities. Both of these approaches involve significant political challenges.

4.1.1 Structural prevention

Structural prevention involves addressing underlying risk factors – identified in section 2 – some of which may be open to influence by outside actors. Many international actors have in place existing policies that can ameliorate the structural risk factors of war and mass atrocities. Donor countries can use existing development programs to promote conflict prevention and democracy promotion. NGOs that they fund can also be encouraged to fund programs that promote conflict prevention and support of good governance in addition to more traditional notions of development.⁴⁸ At the same time, many powerful countries are inconsistent – or even hypocritical – in simultaneously supporting regimes and policies that they believe will promote their interests even if this increase the risk of major violence.

Political leaders are faced with a staggering array of urgent issues which can make it difficult to prioritize conflict prevention both at home and internationally. As Gareth Evans writes, “[t]hose who have never been involved in decisionmaking at the highest levels can scarcely begin to imagine . . . how hard it is to get anyone to focus on anything but the most immediate and urgent, and how tempting it is to deny, diminish, or defer a problem in the hope that it will disappear entirely or be seen as someone else’s.”⁴⁹ Planning for the long term is not something that elites are necessarily rewarded for or trained to consider.

Even if political leaders want to invest more in structural prevention, the democratic process itself may generate obstacles. Politicians face an electoral cycle which favors short-term, narrow policy planning and where concrete results are visible.

4.1.2 Proximate prevention

Inadequate political will to prevent conflicts and mass atrocities could emanate from at least five sources. First, the relevant actors could have insufficient information. Second, political leaders might not fully grasp the gravity of situations despite having the relevant information. Third, political leaders could have adequate information and comprehend the gravity of situations yet make strategic calculations that prevention efforts are not worth the political costs for them personally. Fourth, leaders could calculate that they would not have a reasonable chance of improving the situation even if they took action. Fifth, international actors could be constrained by the institutions in which they operate so that even if they had the will, they did not have a way to implement their preferences. We argue that a combination of the latter four can contribute to understanding the variance in prevention efforts.

⁴⁷ Evans et al., *The Responsibility to Protect*, 22–27.

⁴⁸ Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998); World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011).

⁴⁹ Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 226.

First, as Gareth Evans puts it, lacking information about mass atrocities is “rarely the problem it is sometimes thought to be.”⁵⁰ Evans continues: “[t]here was always someone within the system in question who had a clear sense of the nature and scale of the catastrophe that was unfolding, and in most of the worst cases, there was at least some kind of memorandum conveying that information finding its way to the most senior decisionmaking level.”⁵¹ The authors of the seminal ICISS report concur. They write that “[m]ore often than not what is lacking is not the basic data, but its analysis and translation into policy prescription, and the will to do something about it.”⁵² Recent empirical work has improved the ability to predict the onset of mass atrocities. Goldstein et al. predict accurately over 90% of cases onsets of genocide or politicide, and nearly 80% of non-onsets, from the period of 1988 to 2003.⁵³ But we have no similar figures on which prevention efforts may be effective at preventing genocide and politicide.

Second, there is evidence that policy makers “are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil,” as Samantha Power argues.⁵⁴ In 1998, President Bill Clinton gave a speech in Kigali. He claimed that he did not “fully appreciate” the horrors that were occurring in Rwanda in 1994. He called the genocide “unimaginable.”⁵⁵ Just over two weeks after the start of the genocide the *New York Times* ran editorial the first sentence of which read as follows. “What looks very much like genocide has been taking place in Rwanda.”⁵⁶ There is also evidence that the US provided warnings before the genocide and had good information about what was occurring during it.⁵⁷

Third, Samantha Power concludes her landmark study on US responses to genocide that “[t]he system, as it stands now, is working.”⁵⁸ She writes that “[i]t is daunting to acknowledge, but this country’s [the United States] consistent policy of nonintervention in the face of genocide offers sad testimony not to a broken American political system but to one that is ruthlessly effective . . . No U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence.”⁵⁹ Not only is it states that fail to take preventive measures. International organizations, including the UN, have failed to take actions that may have prevented or mitigated genocide. For instance, Kofi Annan famously failed to authorize Romeo Dallaire to take action to seize weapons in Rwanda prior to the genocide.⁶⁰

Just as there is evidence that powerful leaders may decide it is not in their interest to take strong preventive measures, there is evidence that they sometimes take actions that can prevent conflict in order to protect their strategic interests. Stojek and Tir find that the greater the economic ties between P5 countries and countries in civil war, the higher the chance that the UN will deploy peacekeepers there.⁶¹ This does not mean that economic ties are either necessary or sufficient for

⁵⁰ Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵² Evans et al., *The Responsibility to Protect*, 21.

⁵³ Goldsmith et al., “Forecasting the onset of genocide and politicide”.

⁵⁴ Samantha Power, *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), XVII.

⁵⁵ “Text Of Clinton’s Rwanda Speech,” *CBS News*, March 25, 1998, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-clintons-rwanda-speech/>

⁵⁶ “Cold Choices in Rwanda,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/23/opinion/cold-choices-in-rwanda.html>.

⁵⁷ Colum Lynch, “Exclusive: Rwanda Revisited,” *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/05/rwanda-revisited-genocide-united-states-state-department/>.

⁵⁸ Power, *A Problem From Hell*, XXI, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 343–344.

⁶¹ Szymon M. Stojek and Jaroslav Tir, “The Supply Side of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Trade Ties and United Nations-Led Deployments to Civil War States,” *European Journal of International Relations* 21 (2015).

deployment of peacekeepers. But rather, economic ties to the P5 increase the chances of peacekeeper deployment, controlling for a number of factors including security and humanitarian ones. Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom have found that on average, the higher expenditures on UN peacekeeping mission, the lower the prospects of civil war reoccurrence.⁶² Melander, Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon present evidence that peacekeepers also lower the risk of mass targeting of civilians in war.⁶³ Prevention efforts may depend less on the needs of those at risk of civil war reoccurrence than on self-interest of powerful states.

Fourth, the appearance of a lack of political will can simply indicate that leaders are making plausible calculations that they would not have a realistic chance of improving the chances of prevention by taking some action. All actions have opportunity costs. Politicians may reason that resources could be better spent on other policies if a conflict prevention policy has or seems to have a low probability of success. This may be especially important for conflict and mass atrocity prevention policies that may harm innocent civilians, such as economic sanctions. For instance, a widely accepted precept of just war theory is a reasonable chance of success, which was also accepted by the commissioners of the ICISS report.⁶⁴ Of course, part of the problem – given the paucity of reliable data about the likelihood of success in conflict prevention initiatives – is that politicians can plausibly use this doubt as an excuse even if they do not actually believe a conflict prevention policy will be successful.

Fifth, international political leaders are constrained by the institutions in which they operate, and sometimes think they are, sometimes to the detriment of conflict and mass atrocity prevention. The UN secretary general might advocate for peacekeepers but countries may not (fully) fund the request or supply the requested troops. When Human Rights Watch representatives visited White House National Security Adviser Anthony Lake about the Rwanda genocide, he told them “[i]f you want to make this [Rwanda policy] move, you will have to change public opinion.”⁶⁵ This was due in part to what occurred the year before the Rwandan genocide: the US intervened in Somalia in order to assist in the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the ensuing disaster overshadowed American intervention for years.

4.1.3 Identifying impact and effectiveness of conflict prevention policies

Problems of generating political will are connected to credibly determining when conflict prevention efforts have indeed played a role in preventing conflict. We can know with certainty when conflict prevention efforts fail. However, demonstrating that conflict prevention efforts have succeeded in preventing conflict is difficult. It is also difficult to determine the impact of conflict prevention policies even if conflict or mass atrocities occur, as prevention efforts could have mitigated the severity of the resultant harms.

One problem with assigning causation is that publics will be skeptical of politicians who claim that their efforts prevented great harms to innocents. Making such claims may undermine their credibility. Opposition politicians may use such claims to attack them. Critics of politicians who make such claims may be correct that prevention efforts were unnecessary and that no war or mass atrocity would have occurred, with or without them. Thus political will and risk are closely

⁶² Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom, “Post-Conflict Risks.”

⁶³ Erik Melander, “Selected To Go Where Murderers Lurk? The Preventive Effect of Peacekeeping on Mass Killings of Civilians,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 26 (2009); Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, “United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War,” 875–91.

⁶⁴ Evans et al., *The Responsibility to Protect*, 37; Helen Frowe, *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 56–59; Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

⁶⁵ As quoted in Power, *A Problem From Hell*, 377.

connected to the inability to claim conflict prevention efforts successfully prevented conflict and the suspect political benefits robust prevention efforts.

4.1.4 External interests in civil war

External actors, whether we see them as benign or complicit, are often in some way involved in conflict and can influence the onset and nature of civil war.⁶⁶ This can occur through aiding one or more belligerent parties, intervening militarily, sanctioning or through other means which seek to influence parties to the conflict. Before open conflict or atrocities occur, even upstanding UN member states have supported regimes and non-state actors that become hostile. When conflict breaks out, individual states covertly or openly support various factions, as exemplified by Syria. This is an 'obstacle' because it demonstrates that the mindset of powerful international actors leads them to pursue their own agendas, irrespective of their declaratory commitment to multilateral conflict prevention.

5. Meeting the Challenges: Strengthening Conflict Prevention with Global Governance

This section presents a range of proposals for institutional reform aimed at strengthening the prevention of mass atrocities and the broader prevention of violent conflict. It is not possible, in practice, to make a neat distinction between the underlying sources and the triggers of violent conflict, but it is nevertheless helpful from a policy perspective to formulate conflict prevention around longer-term structural dimensions and crisis response. These proposals are aimed mainly at global governance structures and actors, including non-governmental actors, regional organizations, and the principal power groupings such as the P5 and the BRICS.

5.1. Structural prevention

The attention of the UN community has shifted towards preventive diplomacy and crisis response, which is a critically important area of activity. However, structural prevention in response to the underlying driving forces of instability is equally important and requires far greater investment and strategic direction. This involves bringing together the social, demographic, development, governance and environmental sectors to aid long-term conflict prevention.

- **Proposal:** the creation of a UN Conflict Prevention sub-Committee of the Security Council (with a parallel expert committee) would enable greater political attention to conflict prevention from a holistic perspective, with representation from UNDP, UNEP, World Bank, IOM, and the Peacebuilding Commission.
- **Proposal:** the post-2015 development agenda provides an excellent opportunity to integrate structural conflict prevention into international development discussions in order to promote a broader understanding of conflict and structural violence. If the security and conflict aspects of the development debate are reinforced as a part of this broader agenda it will generate greater resources and greater political attention to the structural aspects of conflict prevention. The 'securitization' of development does bring hazards and they will need to be mitigated; but above all, the integration of development, peace and security is likely to reinforce conflict prevention.

⁶⁶ Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Transnational Dimensions of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (2007).

Although there is some scientific consensus on the factors which increase the likelihood of violent conflict, there is significant disagreement about the causal dynamics at work, and there is insufficient intellectual exchange between different epistemic communities on the drivers of violent conflict. The UN system would benefit from greater evidence-based, policy-relevant research on the driving forces of violent conflict and especially atrocities, beyond the in-house work currently undertaken.

- Proposal: the creation of a fund to support collaborative scientific work that provides an evidence base for conflict and mass atrocity prevention, and especially research that is multi-disciplinary in its methods.

Conflict prevention is served by investment in education, social services and public service delivery, but in many of the most conflict-prone countries the traditional security mindset prevails and military establishments are privileged in terms of funding and political prestige, often to the detriment of investment in human security.

- Proposal: in support of ongoing global reform plans under the post-2015 SDGs agenda, traditional and emerging donors should encourage security sector reform that demonstrates the greater benefits of public goods (education, social services and public service delivery) rather than narrow military conceptions of security.

Conflict prevention should not only be seen in relation to responding to individual societies considered vulnerable to political violence; it is important to see connections between societal violence and international/global forces which give rise to societal injustice which can lead to instability. The 'culture of prevention' should be extended to the underlying sources of widespread violence, and not confined to the manifestations of conflict.

- Proposal: to facilitate regional and global debates, involving governments and civil society, on broader issues of international justice, and to consider how international institutions (including the way that the market is organized) play a role in the underlying sources of instability and violence.

Consolidated democratic societies in functional states tend to be more peaceful than illiberal states. In line with this, the international norm of democratic legitimacy underscores human rights, development assistance and peacebuilding activities. However, liberalizing processes, including elections, in divided and conflict-prone societies can be highly destabilizing.

- Proposal: the international norm of democracy and democracy-promotion needs to be reconsidered in terms of its role in international aid, governance assistance and peacebuilding. In parallel to policy initiatives on 'conflict-sensitive development', a dialogue on 'conflict-sensitive democratization' is necessary to inform international activities in this area.

Policy debates about conflict prevention, especially in UN circles, focus upon the creation of multilateral mechanisms for crisis response and general commitments by states to invest in conflict prevention. However, much could also be done to modify the behavior of powerful states in the way they intervene and exercise their power internationally. Some of the worst armed violence in the 21st Century has occurred in situations where powerful states have intervened.

- Proposal: to support the calls by the government of France and the 22-member Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) group at the UN for the P5 to collectively renounce their veto powers in mass atrocity situations, and also to call for a set of guiding

principles for conflict prevention for a more consistent and transparent approach to intervention.

The processes of economic globalization, trade and investment have lifted millions of people out of poverty and promoted stability in many regions of the world. However, there is evidence that some aspects of the international market have a destabilizing impact within developing countries, especially when it reinforces inequality and uneven development.

- **Proposal:** to introduce and build consensus on a set of principles for conflict-sensitive investment and greater regulation in conflict-affected and fragile states and to strengthen the evidence for the long-term financial benefits of fair investment.

It is widely agreed that social and economic inequalities, especially in divided societies, give rise to conflict that can escalate to widespread violence. However, the international dimensions of this, including the impact of international aid in conflict-prone societies, are not adequately understood.

- **Proposal:** a working group within the World Bank and involving the input of relevant donor agencies and non-governmental organizations should generate a new framework on conflict sensitive development which explores the relationship between development, international aid, and conflict, and produces guidance aimed at mitigating the potentially destabilizing impact of aid and investment. Development aid must be specifically designed to reduce horizontal inequalities and a new policy framework is necessary to promote this principle.

Regional approaches to structural conflict prevention and crisis response are fundamentally important and have shown positive development in recent decades. However, this development is uneven, and the regions which require the strongest conflict prevention mechanisms – such as Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East – are generally those which have the weakest capacity.

- **Proposal:** a new fund, similar to the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, should be created to encourage and support regional grassroots conflict prevention initiatives undertaken by non-government organization in partnership with regional organizations.
- **Proposal:** an intergovernmental committee of the UN Security Council comprised of representatives of regional organizations should periodically convene in order to discuss and plan institutional capacity building for conflict prevention.

The idea of a ‘culture of prevention’ has been internalized within UN circles and at senior government levels, but the potential for implementing the principle amongst civil servants and civil society leaders in vulnerable societies has not been fully identified or exploited.

- **Proposal:** an international training program in conflict resolution and prevention for civil servants and community leaders organized by UNITAR and with support from regional organizations.
- **Proposal:** Integration of training programs of member governments. This would ensure buy-in from those governments and allow them some emphasis for their country and region.

Corruption in government, often with the involvement of organized crime, is a major source of state weakness and societal grievances, and as such it is an underlying source of instability and violent conflict. While there is wide normative condemnation of this – and anti-corruption measures are now integrated into the work of the World Bank and many national development assistance programs – a blind eye is all too often turned towards corruption when it is politically convenient to do so, especially between allies. In politically important bilateral relationships, therefore, corruption is often downplayed or ignored, and this can have a pernicious impact both within and across societies.

- Proposal: relevant international groupings, including the Security Council, the G7 and the OECD, should agree upon a framework for tackling corruption that is binding and which involves bottom-up accountability mechanisms.

Weak states are an enabling environment for instability and violence, and conflict prevention and peacebuilding focus upon the building or rebuilding of functional states, for good reason. However, the 'failed states' narrative neglects important aspects of the relationship between states and domestic conflict. Ongoing efforts to consolidate and build states – and not only 'failing' states – are also a driving force for instability and violence, and this needs to be recognized so that the appropriate forms of assistance can be offered to conflict-prone societies. In international peacebuilding greater awareness of the different forms and processes of states and local institutions is required so that assistance is sustainable, appropriate and effective.

- Proposal: a thematic debate in the UN Peacebuilding Commission should be organized to explore the nature of the state in different contexts, and to reappraise international activities aimed at statebuilding in light of experience since the end of the Cold War.

5.2 Mass Atrocities and The Responsibility to Protect

War crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide are more likely to occur in situations of ongoing conflict, and so the priority should remain the prevention of all violent conflict. However, the warning signs that atrocities may occur are increasingly recognized, even before the onset of open armed conflict. These situations require the greatest urgency at the earliest opportunity.

- Proposal: the momentum that currently exists regarding the prevention of atrocities – reflected in the Responsibility to Protect, General Assembly and Security Council debates on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and national efforts – must be taken forward in a more coordinated and institutionalized manner.

There is a need to reinvigorate and if necessary revisit the founding principles of R2P at its tenth anniversary in 2015. Whilst civilian protection has increasing political support, R2P has become controversial because of the selectivity of its application, its association with Western political agendas, because it is regarded as interventionist, and because there is inadequate accountability for coercive action taken in the name of R2P. Moreover, the R2P debate has become embroiled in broader debates about normative contestation in a transitional international order. Special UN General Assembly debates expose these controversies, but they do not have the effect of building support for R2P.

- Proposal: A new intergovernmental agreement is needed to accommodate some of the challenges and proposals – such as the Brazilian government's 'Responsibility While Protecting' concept – that have emerged since the 2005 agreement, in order to strengthen the R2P principle and its operationalization.

Debates related to R2P are preoccupied with the challenge of responding to the most acute humanitarian challenges. This remains a critically important aspect of R2P, in line with the 2005 commitment of UN member states to act when national authorities are "manifestly failing to protect their populations". However, the R2P principle is generally invoked far too late in international policy discussions, when atrocities are already occurring. This approach neglects the underlying factors that give rise to atrocities. Building the capacity of states to prevent the occurrence of atrocities requires far closer attention to the political, social and institutional factors that are known to generate political extremism and violence. Moreover, the UN Security Council should not be seen as the only organ with authority relevant to R2P, if the prevention of atrocities is to be taken seriously.

- Proposal: All the major agencies and programs of the UN should produce a plan of action to review the relevance of their work to the R2P principle, in order to produce a joined-up UN-wide perspective of the challenges of addressing atrocities, with a greater emphasis upon prevention.
- Proposal: the tenth anniversary of R2P in 2015 should include a high level meeting on the structural factors that are associated with the perpetration of atrocities, and this should become a greater part of the role of the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on R2P.

R2P debates and policy processes are not adequately gendered. Women and girls experience acute insecurity differently to men, and women and girls are particularly vulnerable to certain types of atrocities.

- Proposal: there is an urgent need to integrate policy on R2P into the promotion of activities around Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security.

The 2005 UN Summit Outcome – in which R2P is established – is a commitment amongst states. However, many atrocities are perpetrated by non-state actors that are often beyond the reach of international norms that are designed to proscribe certain types of behavior. Moreover, in situations of armed conflict, national authorities may be unable to hold such groups to account.

- Proposal: In order to address this R2P 'blind spot', greater attention should be given to the promotion of humanitarian norms amongst non-state combatants.

The second and third pillars of R2P are generally underspecified. Although the ICISS report and 2005 World Summit Outcome Document specify a collective responsibility by invoking the "international community" there is little consensus on which institutions have responsibilities to do what to prevent, react, (and potentially rebuild) after mass atrocities.

- Proposal: there should be a concerted effort to set concrete, achievable goals for various actors under pillars two and three. States could build consensus through an independent report, or the UN Secretary General could focus one of his annual R2P reports on it.

Accountability mechanisms and incentives are badly formulated to prevent and stop mass atrocities. Those with the power and authority act to prevent and stop mass atrocities often do not face the incentives to do so.

- Proposal: to create a permanent, high-level post within UN member states whose primary responsibility is coordinating national and international policy around the prevention of mass atrocities. This person would advocate within government to adhere to their international responsibilities under R2P and keep the head of government apprised of the at risk and crisis situations.

5.3 Crisis response

The history of the UN's attempts to create and institutionalize an early warning mechanism has been controversial and ultimately frustrating. Sensitivities related to intelligence gathering and concerns over interference into domestic affairs have resulted in a low-key, discreet approach to early warning that is politically acceptable but piecemeal. The UN should have a far more developed capacity in this area, involving a more substantial and systematic approach to early warning in order to inform decisions in the relevant UN organs.

- Proposal: a crisis response mechanism, as a sub-committee of the Security Council with a standing secretariat, should be established with the responsibility to monitor warning signs of violent conflict and atrocities and bring these to the UN agenda.

There is a need for better conflict prevention policy coherence within multilateral and national policymaking, and a need to complement conflict-prevention-as-crisis-response with early planning.

- Proposal: creation of an international body which represents humanitarian response agencies from the UN and regional organizations not only to coordinate response to crises but to strengthen forward planning.

There is anecdotal evidence, with growing scientific support, that soaring international food prices can play a role in creating instability that can escalate into violence, especially in volatile countries and where national authorities are either unable or unwilling to mitigate the effects of price fluctuations.

- Proposal: in order to cushion the poorest communities and those vulnerable to instability from the sharpest fluctuations of food prices, coordination is required between private commodity dealers, national authorities, and international organizations such as the FAO and WFP. This mechanism would aim to anticipate international food price increases, build partnerships between public and private stakeholders aimed at stabilizing food prices, and facilitate intervention – including subsidies – by national authorities to cushion the impact in order to promote societal resilience to adverse and sudden changes in the food market.

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