

Tools to Combat Identity Based Violence

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Mass atrocities have been – and are – committed all over the world. To this day, identity-based violence continues to serve as an effective tool for political regimes, who marginalize and brutalize victim groups, to stoke fear and secure power. Genocide does not happen overnight. Instead, it is a dynamic process, composed of various elements and imposed conditions that develop over time, in which one can identify several risk factors. These include, among others, economic marginalisation and the state-orchestrated separation of people according to identity. Prior to genocide, one can always identify a process of dehumanisation in which a particular group is portrayed as the “other” or the “enemy.” Understanding mass atrocities as dynamic processes that unfold during a longer period provides many opportunities for relevant actors to intervene to interrupt the process.

Philosopher Edmund Burke famously said, “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to say nothing”. To prevent history from repeating itself, societies can no longer be silent and act as passive bystanders; every individual bears a responsibility to recognise the warning signs and act before it is too late. Atrocity prevention should, therefore, be a holistic endeavour of different stakeholders (governmental institutions, civil society, academia, international organizations, individuals), that collectively aim to prevent the occurrence of mass killings and other large scale human rights abuses committed against civilians. For this to be achieved, these actors must employ a broad range of tools and strategies for prevention that include education, capacity building, specific policy development, and cooperation.

In the field of atrocity prevention, we have observed that one of the most successful models for prevention requires the development of institutions, not only individuals, that have the necessary knowledge and capacity to regularly review and address the constantly evolving risk factors in a given society. These institutions are commonly referred to as National Mechanisms for Atrocity Crimes Prevention and are officially established bodies that include representatives from different areas of government relevant to the prevention of atrocity crimes. They support the development of a unified national prevention policy and have as their primary responsibilities, carrying out national risk assessments and developing policies to address the identified areas of risk.¹

AIPR also supports the coordination of States at the regional level through the establishment of inter-governmental networks dedicated to genocide and other atrocity crimes prevention. Networks allow States to establish region-wide priorities, develop plans for addressing them, and share best practices through the offering of bi-lateral technical assistance. This approach has been one of the most effective for prevention, as witnessed in Latin America through the work of the Latin American Network for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention - recognized as an “effective partnership for prevention” by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Such a regional approach reflects the reality of how we observe risk factors today, which are not confined to a given country, but are transnational in nature.

¹ Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation – Booklet on National Mechanisms for Atrocity Crimes Prevention, 2018. <http://www.auschwitzinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2018-National-Mechanisms-Booklet-web-1.pdf>.