Introduction

In the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, Member States agreed on a collective responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes, the implementation strategy for which is outlined in the 2009 Secretary-General Report, commonly referred to as the “Three Pillars.” Since its adoption, more than 60 Member States have adopted mechanisms to strengthen their resilience to, and prevent, atrocity crimes, specifically through the appointment of national focal points. Regional and cross-regional approaches, such as participation in the Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GAAMAC), civil society initiatives, and the African Union regional framework to protect populations were lauded.

The report notes that Pillar One and the consideration of the Responsibility to Protect as a domestic issue need to be revitalized, moving the conversation away from the norm as an issue of foreign policy and international responses. The SG notes that Member States continue to lack political will, cooperation, and commitment to multilateralism that are needed to narrow the gap between words and action. The international community can do more, through identifying risks in the Universal Periodic Review process, reports to human rights treaty bodies, and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 16, to align words with action. Strengthening the rule of law and accountability mechanisms will also prevent reoccurrence of these crimes.

Taking stock of past practice: lessons learned for prevention

Past Secretary-General Reports on the RtoP have addressed the need for insight into best practices and lessons learned in the implementation of prevention measures. In this respect, the report addresses several levels on which these actions may be taken. Addressing the role of states, with whom the primary responsibility lies, the report gives concrete and specific examples of preventative measures that be implemented to strengthen democratic institutions and mechanisms. This includes legislation protecting minority populations, creating human rights bodies, and developing robust criminal justice systems, all of which serve as resilience building measures.

While these measures are not necessarily labeled as “upholding the RtoP,” or are explicit in their aims to prevent atrocities, the prevention activities outlined in the report serve and work in this respect.

- Diversity as a strength, rather than a source of weakness, managing root causes of inequality and marginalization
• Accountability and the rule of law, ensuring equal access to justice, legitimate security forces that respect the rights of populations while providing protection, and maintaining transparent governance institutions
• Secure livelihoods by implementing policies that reduce economic inequality, particularly increasing women’s economic empowerment
• Civil society engagement and enabling the sharing of different perspectives in order to reduce hate speech and incitement
• Guarantees of non-recurrence through the implementation of peace initiatives such as truth, justice, and reconciliation measures, human rights protections, as well as memorialization of past crimes and psycho-social support for survivors

In line with Pillar Two, and the acknowledgement that the international community must be ready to take steps for timely and effective action to prevent the occurrence of atrocity crimes, the role of collective action is also addressed. Noting that there has been significant increased engagement among states to support and invest in long-term and structural prevention activities, the Secretary-General encourages a closing of the gap between words and practice. The international community already has many tools that can be leveraged to take early action when the risk of atrocity crimes are present and can be used to change situations on the ground through intra-communal dialogues, mediation, and high-level political discussions. The Report provides states with several concrete examples of what these forms of direction action may take:

At the state level

• Addressing hate speech through monitoring and countering its usage in the news, social media, and radio,
• Protection of civilians mandates in UN Peacekeeping Missions; engaging in dialogues, physical protection, and creating protective environments,
• Supporting national authorities and security forces to strengthen their prevention capacities,
• Humanitarian action to address the secondary and indirect effects of atrocities

At the grassroots level

• Violence reduction programs and intra-community trust-building,
• Engaging religious leaders and actors, particularly through the UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes,
• Inclusion and empowerment of women and youth and promoting their meaningful inclusion in peace processes, transitional justice, and reconciliation measures,
• Decentralized approaches and engagement in peace and reconciliation processes, ensuring the inclusion of marginalized and hard-to-reach areas

However, the Secretary-General takes care to stress that effective prevention cannot take place without sustained engagement by the international community.

Lessons Learned

Based on the best practices outlined in the report the Secretary-General outlined key lessons for the prevention of mass atrocities. First and foremost, atrocity crimes are preventable, if actors at all levels are able to utilize diplomatic tools in a timely and decisive manner. The best outcomes result from the prioritization of atrocity prevention over other agendas by ensuring that key actors and institutions are able to play in active role in addressing the situation. Within the course of undertaking preventative measures, the unity, coordination, and coherence of stakeholders and mechanisms is essential for atrocity prevention.

At its core, atrocity prevention is determined by a wide variety of factors relating to national attributes including the commitment of a state’s political leaders to peace and their capacity to prevent; the strength, robustness, and buy-in of civil society; the culture of accountability, and the ability to restrain the activities of armed groups and other non-state actors. These factors, though they rest primarily with the state, can be strengthened with the support and assistance of neighboring states, other bodies, and members of the international community.

Conclusion

The Secretary-General’s Report concludes by noting the widening gap between the commitment states made at the 2005 World Summit when the unanimously adopted the Responsibility to Protect norm and the current experiences of vulnerable people and populations today, atrocity crimes need not be the cumulative result or ending in the various crises and conflicts occurring today. By upholding their responsibility to protect, and a commitment to prevention, states can strengthen their resilience to atrocities, but that the international community collectively can also support the implementation of initiatives reducing the risk of atrocities and work towards consistent early preventative action.