

*Lessons Learned in Preventing and Responding to Atrocities:
Organizing, Expanding, and Encouraging the Use of Policy-relevant Knowledge*

Rapporteur's Report

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On November 1, 2019, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and U.S. government officials for feedback on the “Lessons Learned” project at its interim stage. The Center staff presented components of the project and offered questions for discussion. This rapporteur’s report summarizes the major themes and questions raised throughout the workshop.

Introduction

“Lessons Learned in Preventing and Responding to Atrocities: Organizing, Expanding, and Encouraging the Use of Policy-relevant Knowledge” aims to improve atrocity prevention strategies by strengthening their linkages to an expanding and increasingly accessible body of policy-relevant knowledge. It is motivated by the assumption that understanding the effectiveness of different policy options should influence how governments devise strategies to prevent and respond to atrocities. However, there are at least three key challenges to encouraging the use of knowledge in policy decision-making: (1) Extant knowledge is diffuse and rarely organized in ways that respond to policymakers’ key questions; (2) There are large gaps in the existing knowledge base; and (3) Policy processes frequently fail to make use of policy-relevant knowledge, even when it exists in accessible forms.

The Simon-Skjodt Center developed three distinct elements for the “Lessons Learned” project. The first element of the project is to collect, distill, and organize existing policy-relevant knowledge--defined broadly to include theoretical and empirical research as well as the insights of experienced practitioners. The second element is to help expand the knowledge base by conducting or commissioning retrospective studies of U.S. policy in relation to major atrocity crises. The third element is to analyze how lessons learned from past policy actions could be more regularly integrated into U.S. government atrocity prevention processes.

Workshop goals & proceedings

The goals for the workshop were threefold: (1) Present the project to scholars and practitioners in the atrocity prevention field; (2) Seek feedback on the project’s interim outputs; and (3) Solicit

guidance on next steps for the project. The workshop began with a description of the project and research questions. The Center staff then presented a number of key assumptions on which the project rests. One key assumption is that effective prevention depends on choosing an appropriate policy strategy and policy tools to support that strategy. Second, the design and implementation of the policy tools will influence their effectiveness. The Center staff then shared the interim outputs of the project, which include a tool-specific evidence brief, protocol for gathering practitioner knowledge, and a concept note for research on encouraging the use of policy-relevant knowledge in policy-making. The workshop concluded with an open conversation on how to maximize the impact of the project and ensure the utility of the project's outputs.

Gathering Research on Atrocity Prevention Strategies and Tools

Policy strategies for atrocity prevention

The Center staff began by presenting one of the project's primary goals: to encourage policymakers to move from a "toolbox" to "strategy" mindset in policy decision-making regarding atrocity crises. As opposed to solely providing evidence on the policy tools available, the project output would encourage policymakers to first consider the broader policy strategy toward an atrocity crisis. The Center staff outlined an initial sketch of four policy strategies for the prevention of mass atrocities: (1) Dissuade potential perpetrators; (2) Degrade potential perpetrators' capacity; (3) Protect vulnerable civilian populations; and (4) Replace top leaders. They then outlined the assumptions underpinning each strategy. The Center staff explained that while these are generally understood to be atrocity prevention strategies, there is little literature on how policymakers should select strategies, and even less on how policymakers should identify the most appropriate tools to support such strategies. The Center staff opened the conversation to gather preliminary feedback on the strategies discussed. Participants addressed how to link policy tools to policy strategies, how well the strategies capture the relevant policy options, and how this research project could help practitioners think about policy strategies as opposed to just policy tools.

Participants were supportive of the effort to encourage policymakers to think in terms of atrocity prevention strategies. However, practitioners laid out a number of specific challenges to this effort. The primary issue, as one practitioner pointed out, is that currently there is no lead on atrocity prevention in the U.S. government, making it difficult to develop overarching policy strategies in the context of mass atrocities. Another discussant raised the issue that there is also a tension between policymakers who argue for the need to act, and those with the capacity to act, who often do not want to take initiative in atrocity crises. Many attendees also agreed that policy strategies are only as helpful as policymakers' baseline understanding of a crisis. One scholar pointed out that policymakers often skip the step of "diagnosing" the situation, which hinders the

formation of comprehensive response strategies. Finally, practitioners pointed out that there were numerous other strategies that would be worth adding to the list presented by the Center staff, including strategies that focus on targeting those enabling atrocities, such as suppliers and financiers.

Policy tools for atrocity prevention

Policy tools for atrocity prevention are frequently presented in broad categories such as diplomatic, military, economic and legal tools. Policy tools--a term that is used synonymously with policy measures or instruments--can potentially support atrocity prevention strategies. Given the dearth of literature on the effects of policy strategies for atrocity prevention or response, the Center staff conducted research on the specific effects of policy tools such as targeted sanctions, mediation, and naming and shaming on atrocity crises. The research goal was to gather empirical and theoretical papers that address the contextual and design factors that affect the success of policy tools in preventing or responding to mass atrocities, or closely related outcomes. The research included findings on closely related outcomes, such as human rights abuses and intentional civilian targeting, due to the dearth of literature on the effects of policy tools on mass atrocities specifically. The research was organized in a database where the Center staff tracked the findings and theoretical conclusions of each paper.

The research was then used to draft "evidence briefs" on each policy tool. The components of an evidence brief include a definition of the policy tool, the theory of change that connects the policy tool to the atrocity prevention strateg(ies) it supports, the macro-level effects of the policy tool, its unintended consequences, the contextual and design factors that impact the success of the policy tool, the authorities and standing capabilities for the U.S. government to implement the policy tool, and two illustrative case studies where the policy tool was implemented in the context of ongoing mass atrocities. Each brief has a "strength of evidence assessment," where the body of empirical literature on the tool is rated on a zero to six point scale measuring the quality, quantity, and consistency of the literature. The Center staff demonstrated that each evidence brief can guide policymakers in answering potential policy questions, depending on the research available on each policy tool.

A potential output of the project--a web resource to guide policymakers through the design and implementation of policy tools in atrocity crises--would present the the policy-relevant research while exposing knowledge gaps on each policy tool. The evidence would be presented in varying formats to allow policymakers to understand key conclusions, while also including detailed evidence when in-depth specifics and data are desired. The goal of exposing gaps in the literature is to provide scholars with new research questions to expand the knowledge base on the effects of policy tools in atrocity prevention and response. This web resource would be consistently updated and accessible to the public.

The Center staff closed by posing three primary challenges in developing this knowledge tool: 1) the gaps in the policy-relevant knowledge; 2) how to translate the knowledge for both policymakers and those who wish to read more detail; and 3) how to communicate the strength of evidence to provide guidance on how much confidence users should put in the findings.

Gaps in the policy-relevant knowledge on mass atrocities

Gaps in the literature on policy tools and mass atrocities fit into two buckets: (1) the general lack of knowledge on the specific effects of policy tools in relation to mass atrocities, and (2) inconsistent measures of the effects and “success” of policy tools. For instance, mediation may be deemed successful when it results in fewer civilian deaths, or when it results in a ceasefire agreement. These varying definitions of success make it difficult to group findings across studies, or to draw general conclusions about the effects of policy tools.

Participants generally agreed that including studies of closely related outcomes was beneficial to address the lack of literature on the effects of tools on mass atrocities specifically. One scholar suggested conducting searches on state repression, extrajudicial killings, torture, political imprisonment and disappearances to find studies on these topics that may have been missed in searches specifically focused on key words such as “mass atrocities.” Scholars additionally proposed that the final project output include a “gap map” to specifically highlight knowledge gaps scholars could fill, and encourage policy-relevant research in this field.

Scholars emphasized that the Center staff must address the difference in how dependent variables are defined and how “success” is measured in the aftermath of the use of a policy tool. Additionally, one scholar suggested removing the theoretical findings from the “evidence briefs” or at least treating them separately from empirical findings. It was also advised that the Center staff consider the difference in policy tools for atrocity *prevention* versus atrocity *mitigation* or *response*, as one scholar pointed out that while similar policy tools may be used for each goal, the variables are distinct and findings across studies measuring prevention or mitigation or response cannot be compared. One scholar added that there should be an emphasis on the timing of the intervention being studied as this would also affect the success of the policy tool in an atrocity crisis.

Finally, one practitioner noted that more research could be conducted to link policy tools to more policy strategies. Workshop attendees suggested that, in theory, each policy tool could support interim goals and strategies, as opposed to just the one or two strategies currently associated with each policy tool.

Translating academic knowledge for policymakers

Participants agreed that generally speaking, policymakers may only have time for shorter briefs, while others may desire more details on the complexities of designing and implementing policy tools. They thus supported the idea of a web-based resource, or other final output, that presents the research in different formats to reach different audiences. Attendees then suggested additional elements of the project that could add value for policymakers. One attendee emphasized that the Center staff could make an important contribution by simply defining key terms such as atrocity prevention versus atrocity response. Another suggested that the in-depth descriptions of theories of change would be very valuable to practitioners. They advised expanding the theories of change to further link the policy tools to policy strategies. Many other practitioners highlighted that case studies may be one of the most useful ways for policymakers to incorporate lessons learned in their policy decision-making. They emphasized that case studies are more tangible, highlight the effects of tools in specific contexts, and provide a better understanding of how tools may be used in conjunction.

How to present a strength of evidence assessment

Conversation regarding the “strength of evidence” assessment of the policy-relevant literature converged around two key questions: (1) Does it help policymakers determine the confidence they can place in the findings?, and (2) Does it inadvertently encourage inaction when bodies of literature are assessed as *weak* or *moderate*, not *strong*? In the evidence briefs the strength of evidence rating for each body of literature is presented up front, informing the reader of the quality, quantity, and consistency of the body of empirical literature before they read any of the individual findings. While there was consensus that some type of strength of evidence assessment was beneficial for the end user, attendees made a number of recommendations. One scholar suggested that instead of assessing the body of literature in the brief, each empirical finding should be assessed individually. A practitioner agreed, stating that the current strength of evidence assessment risks deterring policy action because it informs the reader up front that there is generally weak evidence on the tools. However, they hypothesized that if the strength of each finding was assessed, policy makers may consider the evidence and engage with the findings more actively. One practitioner suggested presenting the findings with the strongest evidence first, followed by the findings with weaker evidence, or contradictory evidence, in order to encourage the use of the policy tool for atrocity prevention or response.

Gathering Knowledge from Experienced Practitioners

The Center staff presented a proposal for how to elicit knowledge about the tools and strategies used in atrocity contexts from experienced practitioners. The assumption behind this element of the project is that practitioners’ first-hand experiences offer a wealth of untapped knowledge

about strategies and tools to implement in atrocity crises. In order to collect knowledge from experienced practitioners, the Center staff proposed conducting a “structured elicitation.” This would involve meeting with practitioners and asking them questions about the contextual and design factors that contribute to the success of policy tools in preventing or responding to mass atrocities.

Scholars experienced in structured elicitation emphasized that this method is best used when there are clear gaps in the knowledge around a subject, and that this would be an appropriate situation in which to use such a method. However, practitioners expressed concern that this process would take significant time, and policymakers may not necessarily be able to commit to lengthy meetings in order to complete the structured elicitations. They were also concerned that elements of the structured elicitation may not be useful ways of framing past experiences to current policy practitioners. As part of the elicitation process practitioners are asked to estimate the probabilities that certain outcomes take place after policy interventions. Many practitioners were concerned that policymakers may resist determining such estimates, or that the estimates may be so broad that the probabilities are meaningless. Instead, policymakers in attendance again emphasized the value of in-depth case-specific knowledge and illustrative narratives to shed light on how prevention strategies and policy tools were used in historical cases.

Regardless of how the Center decides to gather such practitioner knowledge there was consensus that practitioner insights are key to include. One practitioner suggested that the Center interview practitioners at multiple levels of government who are involved in policy-making, and another suggested that it would be beneficial to interview former government employees as they could be more candid about their experiences, and provide more insight into historical cases. Attendees then suggested a few individuals for the Center staff to recruit for interviews once they begin the process.

Encouraging the Use of “Lessons Learned” in Policy Decision-making

The final session of the workshop focused on how to encourage the use of policy-relevant knowledge in policy decision-making. There is evidence that organizations frequently fail to take advantage of knowledge that could potentially improve their decision-making. This is due to psychological, epistemological, bureaucratic, and political barriers to using lessons learned in decision-making.

The Center staff proposed a multi-step process to develop recommendations for how the U.S. government could more routinely and consistently make effective use of knowledge on mass atrocities and atrocity prevention strategies. First, the Center staff proposed interviewing current experts and former policymakers to see how a lessons learned tool may best be used in the policy decision-making process. Following this, the Center staff would review literature and documents

on decision-making in the U.S. government, and write case illustrations on best practices of using research on decision-making in the context of mass atrocities. Based on this work, the Center would develop provisional recommendations for encouraging the use of knowledge in U.S. government policy decision-making on mass atrocity prevention and response. Upon completion of these recommendations, the Center staff proposed testing and refining the recommendations in a table-top simulation. This would involve adapting an exercise that is sufficiently detailed and realistic to simulate key aspects of a policy process to determine how decision makers identify and weigh alternative options, and where the lessons learned research may play a helpful role in this process.

Attendees agreed that the Center staff should tap into the pre-existing literature in this area of study. While some practitioners were optimistic about incorporating the “Lessons Learned” project into policy decision-making, others were skeptical. Many practitioners highlighted that the issues in policy decision-making stem from deep-seated bureaucratic challenges that are difficult to overcome. While understanding these challenges, scholars emphasized that they want their research to be useful to policymakers, and the Center staff emphasized that their goal was to try to encourage just that.

Maximizing the Project’s Impact

To conclude the workshop the Center staff asked all participants for input on how to maximize the project’s impact. Scholars emphasized that using the project to highlight the gaps in policy-relevant research would encourage further research into the atrocity prevention field. They also noted that the research project itself will benefit the atrocity prevention field by providing a point of entry for systematic application of lessons learned. Practitioners agreed that there was the potential for the project to have a strong impact in the atrocity prevention space, but cautioned that the challenges to encouraging the use of policy-relevant knowledge in decision-making remain significant. The Center staff thanked participants for their engagement and recommendations throughout the day, and concluded by emphasizing that the final product of the project will aim to be useful to multiple audiences. They reiterated the goal for the “Lessons Learned” project--to guide policymakers in selecting atrocity prevention strategies, and designing and implementing policy tools to maximize their potential to prevent or respond to mass atrocities.