

The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities

Summary of Key Findings from the Simon-Skjodt Center's Research Initiative | July 21, 2020

Civilian communities are often presumed to be passive victims or bystanders when threatened by mass atrocities. New research from the Simon-Skjodt Center finds that civilian communities respond to threats of atrocities in many ways, even in the face of significant constraints. Civil society actors are more diverse and their roles are more complicated than is often acknowledged. A greater understanding of and interaction with local civilian communities is required to prevent mass atrocities.

Motivation

Civilian communities are often presumed to be passive victims or bystanders when threatened by systematic violence. In fact, civilians use a range of active strategies to prevent mass atrocities and to protect themselves if violence breaks out. Those actions are especially important when states and international organizations fail to address risks of mass atrocities. Despite a growing body of evidence from individual cases, including Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, many questions remain about when and how civilians try to prevent atrocities, what conditions or strategies increase their chances of success, and how external actors can support civilian communities most effectively. The Simon-Skjodt Center undertook a multifaceted research project to address the knowledge gaps.

Research questions

- How frequently do civil society actors and civilian communities take different types of actions to help prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?
- What factors explain the variation in the effectiveness of civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?
- How can external actors—particularly foreign assistance donor organizations—effectively support civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?

Methodology and partners

The Simon-Skjoldt Center’s research initiative entailed multiple research activities that used different methods to help shed light on key questions. Each discrete line of research involved independent scholars working as fellows or consultants, with center staff members providing research and administrative support.

- Zachariah Mampilly, Leonard and Sophie Davis Genocide Prevention Fellow (2019–2020), oversaw a set of comparative qualitative case studies and wrote a paper synthesizing the case study results.
- Local research teams conducted case studies in three countries: Congo Research Group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Sudd Institute in South Sudan, and a policy research organization in Sri Lanka.¹
- Erica Chenoweth and Evan Perkoski analyzed cross-national quantitative data to explore the relationship between civil society and the severity and duration of mass killings.
- Riva Kantowitz led qualitative research with foreign assistance donor organizations to explore their perspectives on how to improve external support for civilian-led action to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities.
- The project included workshops with scholars, nongovernmental (NGO) representatives, and government officials held at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in June 2018 and June 2019.

Summary of key findings

- ***Civil society and civilian-led action take many forms and vary considerably by local context.*** The case studies of civilian-led action in the DRC, South Sudan, and Sri Lanka found actions as diverse as mediation between political leaders, direct appeals to armed groups, monitoring and public statements, and discreet efforts to protect vulnerable people from attack.
- ***In situations at high risk of mass atrocities, the most important “civil society” actors are frequently not formal NGOs.*** Religious figures, business leaders, and ad hoc groups of influential individuals (actors that are not always captured by definitions of civil society) routinely help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Our case studies suggest that the influence of those groups often surpasses that of NGOs with more explicit human rights or peacebuilding mandates and more support from external donors.
- ***Although civil society actors can contribute to the prevention of atrocities, their options tend to be heavily constrained and their influence is not always or exclusively positive.*** In many countries at high risk of mass atrocities, civil society actors face intense scrutiny, harassment, and even outright attacks from government authorities. Furthermore, our case studies suggest that sometimes civil society actors *promote* violence by perpetuating prejudices or by supporting militia—even if the same groups work to prevent atrocities at other times. In addition, our cross-national statistical analysis finds that, under certain conditions, stronger civil societies are associated with more severe mass killings. Stronger civil society could make it easier for perpetrators to identify opponents, to organize large-scale attacks, or both.

¹ The partner organization for this study is anonymous for security reasons.

- ***Civil society actors appear to be more effective in helping prevent mass atrocities when they have strong ties to or standing with ruling political authorities and have multiple interests in containing violence.*** The DRC and South Sudan cases found that common ethnic identity between civil society actors and political leaders increased the chance that political authorities heeded civil society appeals for peace. The DRC case study also found that civil society actors were more likely to attempt to prevent atrocities when it aligned with their economic or political interests.
- ***Effective external support for civilian-led atrocity prevention cannot be reduced to focusing on a single type of actor or program. Certain ways of supporting local civil society do seem to be associated with success.*** Success factors include developing trusting relationships with local civil society leaders, incorporating flexibility to adapt support to changing circumstances, and providing small grants and in-kind support.

Implications

- Researchers should ***continue to investigate the varied roles*** that different civil society actors and civilian communities play in situations at risk of or experiencing mass atrocities. Scholars should ***employ multiple methods at multiple levels of analysis*** that balance interests in finding general conclusions based on comparisons across many cases and in gleaning insights from deep inquiry into particular situations.
- Policy makers and advocates should factor into their atrocity prevention strategies the diverse and evolving roles that civil society actors play within and across contexts. In particular, ***they should not assume that civilians are passive, stand free from partisanship, or always reject violence.***
- Donor organizations that support civil society and atrocity prevention activities should ***work through a set of key questions***, such as how to promote accountability to local communities, how to leverage their comparative advantage relative to other donors, and how to balance investment in early prevention and crisis response.
- Researchers, policy makers, advocates, and donor organizations should all ***engage local civil society actors and civilian communities more seriously in their work.*** Local communities know their contexts best and bear the greatest consequences of atrocities. Working in closer partnership with local civil society actors, therefore, should lead to better research, policy, advocacy, and foreign assistance programs, and is the right thing to do.