Search for
Common Ground
Trust, Collaboration, Breakthroughs

Polarization, Social Cohesion, and Atrocities: Approaches for a Safer World

Katie Smith - July 2023

About

The study aimed to examine the lessons learned from implementation in high-risk atrocity contexts to improve early action to prevent atrocities. Amanda Feldman and Sara Hagos from Search's Global Affairs and Partnerships Team assisted the design, research, and authorship of this report.

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Executive Summary

The prevention of mass atrocities remains a critical global challenge for governments and citizens alike. Despite renewed commitments to prevention, atrocities are underway in thirteen countries in 2023 with millions of lives at risk.[1] Violent conflicts are at a 30-year high.[2] The UNHCR estimated more than 100 million people will be forcibly displaced before the end of the year.[3] Protecting civilians from atrocities requires ongoing attention, collaboration, and action from governments, civil society, and international organizations.

There are both long-term structural conditions that create situations of atrocity vulnerability, as well as triggering events that accelerate violence. Early action is crucial to the prevention agenda. There is an inertia to violent conflict. Atrocities rarely begin with the killing of a thousand or more people, the number of fatalities generally used to characterize *"atrocities."*[4] Yet, a history of violence against a particular group is one of the largest predictors of future violence. Acting early is crucial to prevent the accumulation of atrocity risk factors and the escalation of violence. It requires a dual commitment to reduce the enabling environment for violence and the creation of rapid de-escalation response capacities. Yet, atrocity *"prevention"* programming often starts after atrocities have already begun. True prevention requires early action and dedication to reducing the factors that lead to atrocities.

Search for Common Ground explored the question of how to improve early action to prevent atrocities through a review of its programs implemented in ten countries at high-risk of atrocity over the past decade: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Civilians in these contexts face similar long-term challenges that contribute to the risk for atrocities: (i) ongoing security situations characterized by widespread social divisions; (ii) history of lapsed promises and fractured relationships between government and citizens and/or between communities; (iii) exclusion of particular groups from political representation and/or access to resources; (iv) deficient communal capacities to identify, prevent, or respond to violent conflicts; and (v) complex, highly-sensitive, or shrinking space for civil society.

The findings of this review show that there are three things that donors, policymakers, and practitioners can do to improve early action to prevent atrocities:

1. Inclusive and diverse peace architectures improve ability, legitimacy, and action to prevent atrocities. Surge support in times of crisis is most effective when it can build on existing mechanisms and structures for nonviolent conflict management. This requires long-term commitment and investment to building a diverse and inclusive framework of individual capacity, structures, and frameworks that prevent and resolve conflicts. Enhancing individual and community-based abilities to anticipate and respond to conflict triggers and trends improves security.

2. Improving social cohesion during times of stability pays off in times of crisis. Atrocities are more likely to occur in situations of ongoing conflict and crisis moments can be an accelerant. The risk for atrocities increases when the context deteriorates and affects the relationships between divided groups. Peacebuilding interventions that build on existing influential individuals and structures within communities can prevent conflict escalation, reduce support to violence, and create space for longer-term interventions and assistance.

3. Bringing people together through collaboration reduces polarization. The risk for atrocity grows when divided groups stop interacting. Physical and social isolation between divided groups is a major risk factor for the occurrence of atrocities. Social and cultural solidarity events, social change media, and collaborative community action projects can restore humanity and dignity and reduce polarization in deeply divided societies.

Recommendations

1. Take urgent steps to improve social cohesion and reduce polarization to prevent atrocities. The goal of early action programming should be to build social cohesion and reduce polarization during pockets of stability.

- Prioritize improving social cohesion and reducing polarization as national security priorities in diplomacy, development, and defense.
- Invest in inclusive structures to identify, analyze, and respond to conflicts during moments of stability.
- Ensure the size and duration of early action programming is fit for purpose. Returns on investment in social cohesion take time to realize. Establishing peace committees, shifting narratives, and building trust require long-term investment and programming cycles beyond an 18-24 month cycle. Rapid response programs to respond to emerging opportunities or crises require a different disbursement method to quickly channel resources.
- Review how diplomacy, development, and defense agencies are contributing to improving social cohesion and reducing polarization throughout their portfolios in priority atrocity risk countries.
- Prioritize atrocities prevention in funding allocations. Increase investments in peacebuilding and programs that reduce vulnerabilities to atrocity.

2. Engage more, not less, in moments of crisis. Build on investments in strong peace architectures in times of crisis. Commitment to long-term peace goals, through diplomacy, physical presence, and donor investments, is crucial to de-escalating conflict and building healthy, safe, and just societies.

- Ensure that humanitarian and non-humanitarian support continues to support the people at risk of violence in crisis moments. Sanctions and other response mechanisms should not preclude the ability of local organizations to access resources and support in moments of crisis.

- Build an inclusive and diverse peace architecture over time to reduce risk factors for atrocities and provide quick-response mechanisms to de-escalate conflicts in crisis moments.

- Amplify and support the work of communities doing de-escalatory work, where safe and possible.

- Identify a focal point in embassies and missions whose job includes understanding where local capacities for atrocity prevention exist and establish secure ways to communicate in times of crisis.

3. Share lessons learned on atrocity prevention and apply to programming. Build the evidence base to develop effective strategies and programming to prevent atrocities. Wherever possible, share lessons learned and opportunities for joint-action.

- Atrocity prevention specialists should include a separate section in public country/region context reports and strategies that specifically addresses *"early action"* programming. Government bodies tasked with atrocity prevention duties should hold at least one meeting per year with civil society about how they have worked towards prevention in each of its regional contexts and what lessons have been learned.

- Share generalized or redacted findings on what has worked and what has not through donor/policymaker/practitioner communities of practice, such as the ConnexUs platform. Share general specifics of the conflict factors and what approaches have yielded results.

- Ensure that continual context updates and practitioner experience are informing programming decisions. Build in flexibility to programs and mandate moments of meaningful reflection, creating incentives and safety for implementers to share in a transparent manner lessons learned and best practices.

- Increase coordination and knowledge sharing between experts in conflict prevention and human rights and democracy, to enhance cross-fertilization and alignment of goals.

Introduction

Mass atrocities have been a recurrent problem throughout history, affecting millions of people worldwide. Conservative estimates approximate 100 million lives have been lost as a result of mass atrocities since 1900.[5] The victims of these mass atrocities include ethnic, religious, and political minorities, women and children, and other marginalized groups. The notable perpetrators of mass atrocities within various communities include state actors, armed groups, or other individuals who are seeking to gain or maintain power. Understanding the complex dynamics between victims and perpetrators and the context in which they exist is crucial for developing effective prevention and response strategies.

In recent years, governments around the world have taken steps to demonstrate their commitment to atrocity prevention. This includes endorsing international conventions and treaties aimed at preventing and punishing mass atrocities, establishing national mechanisms and institutions dedicated to atrocity prevention, adopting legislation to criminalize crimes against humanity, supporting international initiatives such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, engaging in early warning and prevention efforts, and allocating resources to support atrocity prevention programs and initiatives. These developments have shown progress in raising the national security priority of atrocity prevention. For instance, the United States passed the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act and released the first ever US Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities in 2022. This aligns diplomacy, development, and defense towards early action to prevent mass atrocities.

Despite this progress to prioritize atrocity prevention, atrocities have continued. In part, because the vision of atrocity prevention has not matched up with the prioritization and resourcing to achieve it. Too often, the focus on preventing atrocities comes too late. Atrocities have already begun. And the options presented to deal with them are slim. US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen stated that sanctions have not yielded the hoped-for outcomes on undesirable behavior in Iran.[6] In Myanmar, atrocities have persisted despite international condemnation of the actions of the military-controlled State Administrative Council.[7] Atrocities persist in countries, like Democratic Republic of the Congo, with decades-long United Nations peacekeeping missions.[8] As policymakers, donors, and practitioners look to improve atrocity prevention, it is ever more pressing to explore what constitutes an effective early action approach to prevention.

This paper examined various contexts with atrocity risks. In some cases, atrocities were or are underway. In other cases, targeted violence of civilians was happening and/or at risk of escalating into mass atrocity. Some atrocities are not always linked to wider social dynamics. This paper considered places where these linkages exist and analyzed the approaches used to address them. It asked the question: *what role do polarization and social cohesion play in atrocity prevention?*

The report asserts that interventions to improve social cohesion and reduce polarization are effective *"early action"* strategies to reduce atrocity risk. Societal divisions based on[7] identity that jeopardize peaceful coexistence and the belief that violence is justified against another group are contributing factors to atrocity risk. There are tools that are effective to address these risks. An early action approach to atrocity prevention should incorporate these tactics and approaches to reduce atrocity risk.

This paper is based on the review of Search for Common Ground (Search) programs implemented in ten countries that have all been in the top ten list of places most at-risk of atrocities in the past decade: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.[9] First, the report will share key factors that exacerbate the risk of atrocities. Then it will summarize key findings on how to improve early action from across the ten contexts reviewed. Finally, it will then suggest opportunities to leverage these findings to improve programming and policies to prevent atrocities.

TOP TEN LIST OF PLACES MOST AT-RISK OF ATROCITIES

- Afghanistan
- Central African Republic
- Democratic Republic Of Congo
- Guinea
- Mali
- Myanmar
- Nigeria
- South Sudan
- Syria
- Yemen

Social Cohesion, Polarization, and Atrocity Risk

The specific circumstances of each case of mass atrocity are unique. However, there are often underlying political, economic, social, and historical factors that explain how and why atrocity crimes occur. This section explores the way declining social cohesion and increasing polarization are linked with higher risk of atrocities and targeted violence.

Conflicts are more likely to become violent and deadly in places with weak and declining social cohesion.

Social cohesion provides a sense of whether people feel they have mechanisms and choices available to them beyond violence. UNDP defines social cohesion as *"the state of a society's convergence, or the 'common bonds' that unify different people and groups that share space or territory."*[10] It can be considered as the "*glue*" that holds diverse groups and ideas together peacefully. When social cohesion weakens, the social, normative, and economic bonds that hold communities together are strained, leading to increased social fragmentation and alienation. Physical safety, institutional legitimacy, and personal agency provide insight into the strength or weakness of social cohesion. As social cohesion weakens, individuals and groups may resort to aggression to address grievances or assert power. Trust in public institutions can deteriorate, especially in their ability to address societal challenges. When institutions lack legitimacy, people may turn to alternative means to seek justice or protection, further contributing to violence and instability. When individuals' senses of personal agency are compromised, leaving them feeling disempowered and marginalized, it can lead to frustration, resentment, and a higher likelihood of engaging in violent behavior as individuals may see violence as the only means to effect change.

Conflicts in places with weak social cohesion are usually more frequent, more violent, and more destructive.[11] When the *"glue"* that allows people to coexist peacefully deteriorates, it is often accompanied by an uptick in violent conflicts. In some places this looks like people seeking comfort in their *"in-group"* and placing blame for violence, economic downturn, or other conflict issues on an *"out-group."* This in turn can increase polarization and, at times, extremism and targeted violence against the group perceived as the enemy. The relationship does not only proceed in one direction. Chronic violence weakens social bonds and can affect the normative acceptance of violence. For instance, in South Sudan, the acceptance of violence towards another tribe increased or decreased alongside surges or reprieves in violent attacks.[12] This suggests that when violence surges in a context of weak social cohesion, normative acceptance and approval may entice more people to support it.

Periods of mass violence are often preceded or accompanied by ongoing violent conflict and impunity. High levels of physical violence and a normative acceptance of that violence increase atrocity risks. Previous or ongoing discrimination, persecution, deep identity conflicts, and/or violence against the group is a common risk factor for mass atrocity.[13] Atrocities rarely begin with the killing of a thousand or more people, the number of fatalities generally used to characterize *"atrocities."*[14]

Sudden shifts in existing conflict dynamics that deteriorate the context and the dynamic between conflicting groups can trigger atrocities. Atrocities are often accompanied by moments of crisis.[15] Transitions, political upheaval, and crisis moments often preempt the onset of mass violence and increase the vulnerability of at-risk groups. Crisis moments that deteriorate the context and power balance between groups cause a shift in the overall conflict dynamics and are correlated with significantly greater civilian atrocities perpetrated by state or non-state actors.[16]

Increasing polarization indicates growing atrocity risks.

Polarization is a strong predictor of intergroup hostility. Polarization goes beyond dislike. It is the perception that other people are less human or abide by a different social contract than they do and it has accompanied some of the worst atrocities in history.[17] It can be explicit and direct or it can be embedded in norms, structures, and policies. Widespread patterns of behavior that systematically discriminate against a particular group are highly associated with the risk of mass atrocities. Dehumanizing language and ideology are a particularly alerting sign of potential group-targeted harm.[18]

Discrimination and exclusion compound atrocity risks. Discrimination and exclusion whereby certain groups are excluded from governance mechanisms or denied access to basic services, resources, and opportunities, create an environment of inequality and injustice. When groups are marginalized, their grievances and concerns are often ignored. In these instances, violence becomes a viable means of achieving their goals. Discriminatory attitudes and policies can fuel intergroup tensions and lead to hatred and violence towards certain groups, further increasing the risk of atrocities. Exclusion can also lead to physical separation that renders these populations vulnerable to harm and breaks down the *"glue"* that binds society together.

Support for violence increases with perceived or actual grievance and decreases with political efficacy.[19] It can create conditions within a society that enable wider identity-based conflicts.[20] When individuals or communities lack access to basic rights and freedoms, it contributes to social exclusion and polarization.

In Yemen, the Muhamasheen people have experienced systematic discrimination due to their position outside traditional social structures and their perceived African ethnic origins.[21] A United Nations survey revealed drastic disparities in access to services such as water and sanitation, electricity, and quality of housing.[22] This discrimination has contributed

to underrepresentation in local authority structures and exclusion from state-provided services, moreover, they live outside the security parameters of society, increasing their vulnerability to the ongoing civil conflict. As conflict escalated and Yemenis were displaced because of the ongoing conflict, Muhamasheen were generally left to their own devices, moving into open fields and moving from place to place. This often was into unsafe and more volatile locations, closer to the fighting or in proximity to military zones.[23] Many Muhamasheen people have been excluded from public sector jobs, except for work in public sanitation and waste management. This has fed into existing discrimination and contributed to a stigma that Muhamasheen are contaminated or dirty. In the wake of COVID-19, Muhamasheen were targeted and attacked because of this perception of Muhamasheen as contaminated and the belief that they were the bringers of the virus.

The likelihood of mass atrocity unfolding increases significantly when at-risk communities are physically or socially separated along dividing lines. Atrocity risks rise when groups stop interacting on a regular basis in shared social spaces and form parallel economic, political, and cultural structures with relatively little interaction between them.[24] When individuals or communities are physically cut off from the rest of society, they may lack access to basic needs such as food, water, and medical care. Social isolation can also lead to the dehumanization of certain groups, making it easier to justify acts of violence against them.

Additionally, isolation can limit the ability of external actors to monitor and intervene in situations where atrocities may be occurring, allowing perpetrators to act with impunity.

Group-based inequality has been found to have a significant positive relationship with the likelihood of violent conflict.[25] Inequality can manifest through unequal access to economic resources, public services, political processes, and power that can create intense grievances. When unresolved, these grievances can be the fuel that accelerates violence. These risks are particularly detrimental to social cohesion when the disparities fall along social dividing lines, like ethnicity or religion.[26]

In Myanmar, fervent anti-Muslim public sentiment, institutional isolation, legally-enforced discrimination in an extreme form triggered, *"Muslim-free zones"* and encampments.[27] This institutional and social marginalization not only left this population vulnerable to attack from 10 state security forces, but also to the general acceptance of this violence by the wider population. More recently, military infrastructure in Myanmar separates townships under State Administrative Council control. The increasing segregation of groups based on ethnicity and geography can contribute to a strategy of *"divide and rule"* that uses social divisions to dilute opposition. In South Sudan, *"Protection of Civilian"* (PoC) camps physically separate communities from another they fear will harm them. These are often internally displaced people (IDPs) that are from a different community from the host population and fear being killed based on their identity. IDP living in PoCs and host communities face physical barriers - fences, checkpoints - to interact with one another. This intensifies fear and reduces opportunities for positive, everyday interactions.

Grievances are more likely to fuel violence in places with low trust and legitimacy.

Grievances are more likely to motivate violence in people who believe that the political system offers them little change to redress their concerns.[28] Perceived inequalities appear to be more important than actual inequalities in terms of understanding support for violence.[29] The perception that one's group is often treated unfairly by the government consistently increases support for political violence.[30]

There is a significant relationship between violence and trust in law enforcement and judicial institutions.[31] Negative encounters with state security forces contribute to support for non-state armed groups. For instance, in Mali, knowing victims of violence committed by agents of the Malian government increased the likelihood of youth's engagement in violent acts on behalf of their religious or ethnic group.[32] In places with low levels of public trust in political institutions, minor election irregularities can confirm perceptions that elections are rigged and justify resorting to violence.[33]

In six conflict-affected countries, the single biggest factor of success for COVID-19 public health responses was trust in institutions.[34] For instance, higher levels of confidence in national public health institutions is associated with lower national mortality rates from COVID-19, SARS, and Ebola.[35]

Threats to legitimacy can trigger crackdowns. Power holders tend to crack down on perceived threats to their legitimacy in an attempt to maintain their authority. One study revealed that while individuals who perceive themselves as deprived are more likely to support violence, members of groups that are relatively privileged are more likely to support violence.[36] This could be in part to their fear of losing power and/or political or economic position. In Myanmar, the military initiated violent crackdowns on protests and *"pro-democracy"* movements that began in response to their resumption of government control. In the response to COVID-19, many governments used the police and military to impose public health measures. In places, like Nigeria, where there was already poor trust between citizens and security forces, the extended 11 mandates and powers to impose COVID-19 lockdown measures led to increased tension and violence, such as the human rights abuses associated with the #ENDSARS protests.[37]

Low levels of trust in the government can also spark preemptive violence against institutional actors. During the Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, low levels of trust by rural communities in the eastern part of the country prompted a violent reaction to the public health campaign to control the disease. Public health workers became the target of years of grievance and fractured relationships between these communities and the government. Many in the communities felt that this was an attempt by the government to eradicate them and reacted defensively. This resulted in over 300 attacks on healthcare workers and centers in 2019.[38] This perception persisted in conflict-affected communities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as COVID-19 spread. In North Kivu, communities believed it was an *"extermination"* agenda, intensified by the government's inconsistent compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols.[39]

Impunity and violence are linked. There is a strong positive correlation between overall

impunity and unaccountable governance, economic exploitation, and human rights abuse.[40] Historical injustices matter. A research report on the history of atrocities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar captured the cumulative effect of impunity for smaller crimes. It stated that *"as long as the grievance existed and continued to persist, then violations that previously occurred on an individual basis could easily turn into ones directed at the group as a whole."*[41]

Lack of justice or accountability for harm directly contributes to lack of institutional trust. In South Sudan, despite broad recognition that mechanisms exist for redress of human rights abuses, the majority of residents in PoC sites in Bor, Juba, and Bentiu do not trust them.[42] The UN Commission on Human Rights detailed how impunity for serious crimes in South Sudan is a *"central driver of violence and misery"* for civilians.[43] In Nigeria, even when community members report suspicious activity or threats to the security forces, they often do not see an adequate response. One individual from Plateau state said, *"when there is information of an attack about to take place, and the matter is reported to the security agencies, there will be no response to prevent the attack. We have lost confidence on the security."*[44] This prompts retaliation for unaddressed crimes and preemptive violence to protect themselves and their communities. In Mali, rampant criminality and armed group activity and the lack of justice services to manage these crimes are cited by residents as the main factors in the conflicts affecting Mopti. Less than half of Mopti residents trust the government and the inaction on violence further undermines their belief that these institutions can provide protection or ensure justice.[45]

Violence becomes more attractive when individuals feel or are disempowered, marginalized, or lack agency.

People seek meaning and the ability to influence the dynamics around them. Agency is about the connection people have to their societies and whether they believe they have the power to change them. The World Bank noted that perceived or actual barriers to upward mobility contribute to social tensions and threaten the social contract.[46] In addition, acceptance for violence is more likely in contexts where people do not believe they can redress grievances nonviolently.[47] Those who are unable to do so through established, statutory avenues may look elsewhere to find power and purpose. A cross-country research study on support for political violence concluded, *"if people believe they can have their grievances addressed through regular political channels, their anger can be funneled into peaceful opposition, which helps undermine the ability of violent insurgency to take root."*[48]

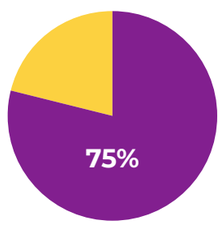
Violent groups rely on local communities for their survival. One pull factor for recruitment into violent extremist groups is the possibility for enhanced social influence. Former violent extremists in Yemen stated their desire for status in the community, respect of friends and family, and the promise of senior positions as reasons for joining violent extremist organizations. People naturally seek power and when they cannot find it in their communities, they may seek it elsewhere.

Opportunities to Improve Early Action

Improving social cohesion and reducing polarization are effective early action approaches to prevent atrocities. Effective early action requires a dual commitment to reduce the enabling environment for violence and create rapid de-escalation response capacities. This report looks at locally-led peacebuilding in ten contexts at high risk of atrocity to determine what components make for effective early action.

Inclusive and diverse peace architectures improve ability, legitimacy, and action to prevent atrocities.

Atrocity prevention requires a peace architecture of individuals and structures that are both inclusive and capable of transforming cownflict nonviolently. This takes time and commitment. A review of over thirty years of Search's programming revealed the minimum length of time to create institutional change was seven years. At the same time, these commitments provide real value to their communities through outcomes like improved agency and reduced violence. In one study that analyzed the ROI of peacebuilding programs in Plateau and Benue states in Nigeria, 75% of programs reduced fatalities and contributed to violence mitigation in their target area.[49]

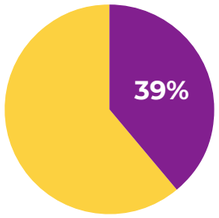


75% of programs reduced fatalities and contributed to violence mitigation in their target area.

Empowering individuals and communities with knowledge, skills, and resources can build stability. In various contexts, programs equipped individuals (Peace Ambassadors, Insider Mediators, *"truth-tellers,"* etc.) with skills to understand, identify, and respond to conflict trends and triggers in their communities. The findings revealed that programs that equip individuals with skills and opportunities to address conflict issues build agency and a sense that individuals can change the context around them. This manifests in different ways, like improved resiliency to recruitment into violent groups or individual actions to resolve conflicts nonviolently.

For instance, in one of the longest running conflicts in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, cyclical reprisals between non-state armed groups, security forces, and communities have led to human rights abuses, including rape, torture, murder, and recruitment into armed groups. Trauma inflicted on the population as a result of the conflict had been linked with greater risk of committing atrocities, the presence of harmful social norms (including hate speech and rumors that mobilized violence), and undermined reconciliation efforts.[50] 39% of the community

expressed a *"desire for revenge"* and even more expressed other forms of trauma including depression, anxiety, and nightmares/insomnia.[51]



39% of the community expressed a "desire for revenge" and even more expressed other forms of trauma.

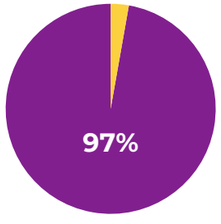
In this context, *"trauma healing companions,"* led monthly, small-group trauma healing sessions in tangent with community theater productions, to help their communities interact with conflict issues and manage the trauma of long-standing conflict. These interventions have discouraged the perpetuation of violence and changed individual perceptions about the acceptability of violence. One individual associated with an armed self-defense group stated, *"Before being selected as a community trauma healing companion, I was associated with the Twirwaneho self-defense force. After all the teaching I received, and with all the testimonies of the people I help to heal from their traumas, I have decided not to participate in the fighting anymore. I want to be a peace actor and help others become one."*

In South Sudan, community members from Magwi and Nimule equipped with capacities to monitor conflict trends for early warning provided early responses to conflicts in their communities. The trained conflict monitors and peace committee members reported that it *"drastically reduced"* the road attacks on the Juba-Nimule highway, reduced cases of domestic violence and rape, and reduced violence surrounding land issues as people return from IDP and refugee camps.[52]

Community mobilizer in Magwi, South Sudan, *"The conflict cases have reduced because the community members now know where to report the issues to, compared to some months back before this intervention. The identified cases are directly reported to the peace committee members or the conflict monitors and oftentimes they decide to come to the office and report. I now see the youth from the Acholi community going to buy some milk from the camp communities and this has indeed indicated an increase in the level of trust and the confidence among the two communities compared to two years back."*

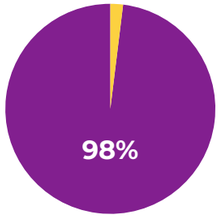
In Syria, trained local mediators identified rising conflict issues and created avenues for non-violent resolution of the issue. For instance, a dispute between two prominent residents of al Bab arose over the registration of an armed brigade in the city. The two individuals fought and led to an exchange of gunfire. The tension then reverberated through their groups, with accusations of attempted murder. Local armed groups in the city began to plan retaliation. The trained local mediators stepped in and called a meeting of the local armed groups, security officials, influencers, and concerned civilians. During the meeting the groups involved revoked their complaint and admitted their lack of ill-will, which quelled the open conflict in the city.[53]

Inclusive community structures for conflict resolution provide responses to conflict issues and reduce trust deficits with institutions. There are limits to what individuals can do to transform conflict in their communities on their own. Inclusive community structures that are part of a broader peace architecture approach to conflict creates a framework for multi stakeholder engagement, issue escalation as needed, and a platform to engage institutions in early warning and early response. In some cases, community structures were created in places with high levels of impunity and low levels of institutional trust. In others, trusted systems for conflict resolution existed but were limited in their ability to adequately address the issues they received. In the Central African Republic, 88% of young people trained as community mediators said they had contributed to the resolution of conflict between two or more parties.[54] In Mali, 97% of residents in Bandiagara, Bankass, and Koro, believe that Search-trained *"Peace Ambassadors"* are highly engaged in conflict management and that their work has improved the situation.[55]



In Mali, 97% of residents in Bandiagara, Bankass, and Koro, believe that Search-trained "Peace Ambassadors" are highly engaged in conflict management.

Improving media reporting and building a healthy information environment reduced violence in Mali. In Mali, journalistic coverage of the conflict often conflated violence between extremist groups and conflicts over natural resources between ethnic groups. Approximately three quarters of surveyed Mopti residents reported they did not have access to sensitive and verified information on the conflict and that radio music stations contributed to inter-communal violence.[56] One journalist described the status of reporting, *"When we gave information about an attack, instead of simply reporting the facts, we would try to find out what ethnic group the attackers belonged to."* Training on conflict-sensitive reporting alongside peace-focused programming transformed perceptions of the conflict and those involved. News and music radio hosts were trained in conflict-sensitive reporting. Stations played spots and messages that delved into peace topics relevant to the communities. Through these interventions, access to monthly conflict and risk analyses improved by 52%, and **98% of community members believe this contributed to the prevention of atrocities and reduction of violence in their communities.**[57] One resident of Bandiagara stated, *"We now have a different perception of the crisis. Previously we thought [all violence was a result of] conflict between Peulh and Dogons but thanks to the project we know that this is not true."*



98% of community members believe this contributed to the prevention of atrocities and reduction of violence in their communities.

In Guinea, inconsistencies between reports from various outlets also contributed to suspicion and misinformation. The creation of a media professional and civil society platform improved the accuracy of reporting and countered divisive rhetoric spread by political elites that incited

ethnocentrism. In the pre-election period, participants noted that the improvement in the information environment eased pre-election tensions and reduced suspicion and violence triggered by inaccurate reporting.[58]

Local ownership and implementation is crucial for anticipation and prevention. In the warning signs and proposed solutions were almost always identified locally or with significant local input. Three layers of community response networks in southern Borno and northern Adamawa states of Nigeria, both areas affected by the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgencies, identified and effectively addressed approximately 30 conflicts per month, ranging from potential armed group attacks to sexual and gender-based violence.[59] These networks worked from the community-level up and created platforms to bring community leaders together with security forces and government officials to jointly identify and respond to conflict issues.

In Myanmar, rumors and misinformation are considered significant factors to inter-communal violence in the country.[60] Rampant national rhetoric of prejudice and fear towards Muslims connected with global narratives of *"Muslim takeover."* Rumors that play off these narratives have provoked ethnic and religious violence.[61] Community Information Committees, formal and informal community leaders trained to identify rumors and misinformation, have *"prevent[ed] many rumors from triggering violence in their community as well as resolve[d] many conflicts before they cause[d] any incidence of violence."*[62] For instance, a rumor was spread that a Buddhist monk had been killed by a Muslim man in Amarapura, creating a very tense environment around the township. The Community Information Committee dispatched their focal points to the Monastery, ward administrator, and police and confirmed no incident had happened. They shared this message widely on social media and by word of mouth, easing tensions and averting the type of ethnic/religious violence that had happened in other parts of the country in response to these types of reports.[63]

Improving social cohesion during times of stability pays off in times of crisis.

Strong peace architectures provide response capabilities in insecure and volatile contexts. Locally-rooted individual and communal capacities for identifying and responding to conflicts can address triggers for violence, even amid ongoing violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, fierce intercommunal conflicts between Twa and Luba communities ravaged northern Tanganyika province. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of IDPs from the north of this region doubled and armed militias were prevalent and frequently clashed with the military.[64] In 2017 alone, the UNHCR raised the alarm of the amassing crisis and documented 12,000 cases of human rights violations.[65] Within this broader insecurity, rumors triggered major bouts of preemptive and retaliatory inter-communal violence. Political actors often manipulated ethnic cleavages between the Twa and Luba groups through rumors and incendiary rhetoric to attempt to wrest control of local political and security dynamics. Nine comités villageois de paix, or village peace committees, were able to reduce the triggers and escalation of violence at the communal level. For instance, one rumor that a Twa warlord was set to attack Luba villagers sparked panic. Luba youth prepared to take up arms to defend themselves in what they considered *"preemptive defense."* The peace committees were able to contact the warlord and have him make a public statement refuting the rumor and simultaneously engaged with Luba youth to discourage preemptive attack.

Rapid response programs are most effective when they build on relationships and structures with trust and legitimacy. In times of crisis, rapid response is crucial to prevent escalation. Surges in instability or political transition often rattle foreign assistance. This has the combined effect of both cutting off critical support to prevent the escalation of violence, as well as jeopardizing trust and legitimacy that are fundamental to atrocity prevention. Investment and support to build structures in more stable times creates a foundation for rapid response in times of crisis. For instance, in Plateau state, Nigeria, donors supported the development of multi-level conflict monitoring and community dialogue platforms for more than five years across a variety of projects. As levels of violence in Plateau surged in 2018 and 2019 and the risk of atrocity grew, the local areas with established peace dialogues saw reductions in violence.[66] As one key informant noted, *"when violence erupted in other LGAs, the LGAs where [there were program] participants and structures were less likely to catch on fire, and more likely to be able to bring together stakeholders for prevention and response."*

Access to verified information and management of mis/disinformation during a crisis limits escalation and improves personal security. Improving the existence and access to up-to-date conflict information helped human rights defenders improve their personal security in Afghanistan. Early warning groups collected and disseminated *"conflict snapshots"* to help individuals understand atrocity risks and conflict dimensions in Afghanistan. The early warning groups shared information on conflict trends, events, and triggers across six provinces. Civil society activists, human rights defenders, school teachers, journalists, non-dominant ethnic groups, and ex-government employees stated they used the reports to understand their personal level and kind of risk, recognize potentially dangerous situations, and take necessary safety and security measures to keep themselves safe.

Bringing people together through collaboration reduces polarization.

Restoring or establishing positive interactions between divided groups is crucial to violence and atrocity prevention. In the Central African Republic, when the rebel coalition of Seleka fighters consolidated power in 2013, it triggered a backlash. Local anti-Balaka militia groups emerged, drawn from local communities and attacking Seleka positions. Because most Seleka fighters were Muslim, and most anti-Balaka fighters were Christian or animinst, the violence quickly adopted religious undertones. In a matter of months, the situation was critical. The armed conflict led to killings and *"cleansings"* based on religion and identity. The violence quickly created ripple effects where Muslim and Christian communities

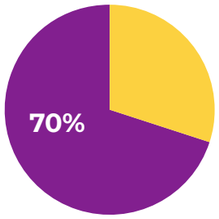
became more insular. Predominantly Muslim and Christian areas in Bangui, the capital, became *"no-go"* zones for outsiders for risk of attack. Muslims felt unsafe in predominantly Christian areas, and vice versa. Anytime there was violence, massive protests and demonstrations followed suit. Retaliatory cycles of violence were common. Interactions between individuals of different faiths were almost non-existent. Interaction only in times of violence increased the divide and *"other-ing."* Half of young people believed they had nothing in common with people from the other community.[67]

In response, one program launched a mix of livelihoods support and community solidarity activities to rediscover shared values and activities and create positive interactions between Christian and Muslim youth. Cultural and social events were a huge part of highlighting the common humanity. After one year, nearly all youth respondents were able to identify commonalities they shared and nearly 90% of participants found that they have more respect for other groups than they did before the project.[68] Restoring humanity and respect drained the inflammatory environment of conflict in Bangui. One resident in Bangui noted that despite several instances of violence after the end of the intervention, none of them have led to popular uprising nor to intercommunal clashes.

"Now Muslims can go to Miskine [one of the districts of Bangui feared by Muslims] without being threatened. At the beginning of the crisis, it was impossible for a Muslim and a Christian to play together or visit an area where the other lived. Today the fact they start playing sports together and interaction, marks a positive change favoring the return of social cohesion."

- District leader in PK5, *Central African Republic*

Social and cultural events play an important role in reducing violence. In Nigeria, preemptive and retaliatory attacks characterized violence between Fulani herdsmen, who were predominantly Muslim, and predominantly Christian farmers from a range of ethnicities. Given their ethnic, religious, economic and lifestyle differences, these two groups rarely come into contact with each other outside of confrontational scenarios or passing contact. This created a deadly social disconnect that dehumanized each community in the other's eyes. Over three years and across three states, cross-cultural festivals, dance theaters, and radio shows, brought farming and herding communities together to foster positive communication and cooperative linkages. In communities that participated in these cultural events, the number of fatalities had been reduced by 63% in the three year period and the number of events involving violence against civilians had been cut in half.[69] Nearly 70% of participants said the dance drama events and the cross-cultural events improved cultural understanding of the other group.[70]



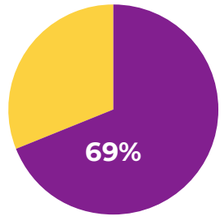
70% of participants said the dance drama events and the cross-cultural events improved cultural understanding of the other group.

"We are happy to live together now unlike what [happened] in the last few years. We now see each other as brothers and sisters despite our differences."

- Fulani herder, Nigeria

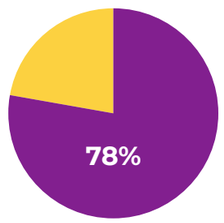
In Mali, identity-based conflict between Fulani and Dogon communities and their armed militias has caused tension and mistrust within their wider communities. In certain areas, like the prefecture of Bandiagara, the two groups ceased all forms of collaboration and exchange.[71] Participatory theater sessions brought together the communities and dramatically recreated the human side of the conflict. Participants in these areas saw the links between the participatory theater sessions and reduced atrocities, stating that it helped change community attitudes and perceptions which helped prevent violence and atrocities.[72]

Media for social change can shift norms and break down stigma. In South Sudan, local peacebuilding activities that focused on shared traditions and values, including media, music, and sports have improved feelings of national unity. This is significant because communities where people identify more strongly with their ethnic identity over their national identity are strongly correlated with higher acceptance of violence against another group in the country. In areas with listenership to peace radio programming, there was a 69% increase in individuals identifying most strongly with their national identity.[73] In



In areas with listenership to peace radio programming, there was a 69% increase in individuals identifying most strongly with their national identity.

one instance, the radio show Hiwar al Shabab, provided a platform for young people to discuss drivers of conflict and engage listeners to break down social, religious, and geographic stereotypes. After one year of programming, listeners were 78% more likely to say they trusted people from other tribes than non-listeners at the baseline.[74] IDPs from northern Yemen and host communities in the South created short videos that showcased stories of inter-group collaboration, shared values, and commonalities. These videos improved mutual understanding and 73% of respondents believed it improved inter-communal perceptions.[75]



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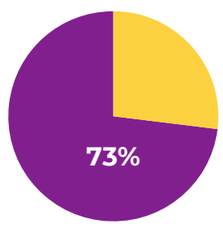

Videos improved mutual understanding and 73% of respondents believed it improved inter-communal perceptions.

In Al Dhale, students from religious and ethnic minority groups performed with students from majority communities in an arts competition. Afterwards, attendees stated that it had changed their perspective on minority groups, *"Prior to this event [I] did not believe that students from minority groups could have such creative talent."*[76]

Space for dialogue builds resilience and solidarity, especially in places with shrinking space for civil society. In Afghanistan, group therapy sessions and civil society coordination meetings have created space for civil society actors to access psychosocial support and solidarity. At the same time, it holds space for these individuals and their institutions to persist in a difficult operating environment.

Recommendations

The research shows that complementary and expansive programming leads to better and more sustainable results. Social cohesion and polarization are risk factors for atrocities. There are ways to address them and approaches that effectively reduce these risks.

Take urgent steps to improve social cohesion and reduce polarization to prevent atrocities.

The goal of early action programming should be to build social cohesion and reduce polarization during pockets of stability. This requires long-term commitment, integrated response, and dedicated funding across the diplomatic, development, and defense communities.

- Prioritize improving social cohesion and reducing polarization as national security priorities in diplomacy, development, and defense. This includes setting objectives in partnership and engagement strategies around improving social cohesion and building inclusive and diverse peace architectures in the country. It also means improving means of supporting and strengthening organizations, movements, and groups that are best placed to understand and respond to situations of acute violence.

- Invest in inclusive structures to identify, analyze, and respond to conflicts during moments of stability. Community and government structures for conflict prevention and management can be effective tools to reduce atrocity risk, though many require time to build trust, access, and credibility with the communities they serve. Once this foundation is established, they can be the first line of defense in times of crisis.

- Ensure the size and duration of early action programming is fit for purpose. Returns on investment in social cohesion take time to realize. Establishing peace committees, shifting narratives, and building trust require long-term investment and programming cycles beyond an 18-24 month cycle. Rapid response programs to respond to emerging opportunities or crises require a different disbursement method to quickly channel resources. Effective prevention requires both.

- Review how diplomacy, development, and defense agencies are contributing to improving social cohesion and reducing polarization throughout their portfolios in priority atrocity risk countries. This should include a common Impact Framework to measure and track the essential factors of risk and preventions (e.g. violence, legitimacy, agency, etc.) that all agencies contribute to.

- Prioritize atrocities prevention in funding allocations. Increase investments in addressing social cohesion and polarization. In the United States, this includes Reconciliation Programs and Democracy, Rights, and Governance at USAID as well as Atrocities Prevention and Human Rights and Democracy Funds at the Department of State.

Engage more, not less, in crisis moments.

Commitment to long-term peace goals, through diplomacy, physical presence, and donor investments, tends to waiver in moments of crisis. But this is precisely when more engagement is needed to prevent atrocities, not less. Effective atrocity prevention requires commitment in moments of stability and crisis to effectively prevent atrocities.

- Ensure that humanitarian and non-humanitarian support continues to support the people at risk of violence in crisis moments. Sanctions and other response mechanisms should not preclude the ability of local organizations to access resources and support in moments of crisis.

- Build an inclusive and diverse peace architecture over time to reduce risk factors for atrocities and provide quick-response mechanisms to de-escalate conflicts in crisis moments.

- Amplify and support the work of communities doing de-escalatory work, where safe and possible.

- Identify a focal point in embassies and missions whose job includes understanding where local capacities for atrocity prevention exist and establish secure ways to communicate in times of crisis.

Share lessons learned on atrocity prevention and apply to programming.

The sensitivity of atrocity prevention often presents challenges to knowledge sharing across countries, donors, practitioners, and policymakers. Build the evidence base to develop effective strategies and programming to prevent atrocities. Wherever possible, share lessons learned and opportunities for joint-action.

- Atrocity prevention specialists should include a separate section in public country/

region context reports and strategies that specifically addresses "early action" programming. Government bodies tasked with atrocity prevention duties should hold at least one meeting per year with civil society about how they have worked towards prevention in each region and what lessons have been learned.

- Share generalized or redacted findings on what has worked and what has not through donor/policymaker/practitioner communities of practice, such as the ConnexUs platform. Share general specifics of the conflict factors and what approaches have yielded results.

- Ensure that continual context updates and practitioner experience are informing programming decisions. Build in flexibility to programs and mandate moments of meaningful reflection, creating incentives and safety for implementers to share in a transparent manner lessons learned and best practices.

- Increase coordination and knowledge sharing between experts in conflict prevention and human rights and democracy, to enhance cross-fertilization and alignment of goals.

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