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## Atrocity Prevention at the State Level Security Sector Reform and Horizontal Equality

### Summary

- Security Sector Reform (SSR) encompasses activities aimed at improving a country's capacity to deliver justice and security in a transparent, accountable, and professional manner. Horizontal equality strategies include a broad range of policy measures to increase actual and perceived equity in the distribution of assets, income, and opportunity between groups.
- When properly implemented these structural measures may enhance state capacity to prevent large-scale violence committed by non-state perpetrators while reducing the risk that state actors become complicit in the atrocities themselves. If poorly implemented these reform efforts may reinforce existing patterns of political or economic competition and marginalization, increasing the risk of civil conflict and atrocities.
- The impact of domestic security sector reform and the promotion of horizontal equality will depend on the desire of both regime and population to incorporate these measures in a comprehensive reform strategy. SSR practices particularly relevant to mitigate the risk of mass violence include the assurance of civilian oversight and the promotion of individual professionalism amongst uniformed personnel. Relevant development policy measures need not only include redistribution mechanisms, but also consider employment and safety net programs for marginalized groups, reform to reduce corruption linked to identity, and efforts to build national identity and transcend societal divisions.
- Including an atrocity prevention lens in national SSR campaigns and development strategies implies awareness of the local sources of risk and resilience, as well as the potential utility and constraints of reform activities in areas considered at risk of atrocities. At the same time, effective risk assessments will identify the most salient inequalities and security challenges experienced by potential victim groups.

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### Introduction

The primacy of domestic efforts to prevent mass atrocities within state borders is a core tenet of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. At the 2005 U.N. World Summit, Heads of State and Government unanimously affirmed that atrocity prevention begins at home, as each individual state has a primary responsibility to protect its population from genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes. Under this first pillar of the R2P principle, states are expected to mitigate the risk of mass violence through structural reform efforts that encourage inclusive politics, tackle economic deprivation, or cultivate the rule of law. Recent U.N. General Assembly

dialogues on the Responsibility to Protect revealed that the focus on local and upstream prevention initiatives is appealing given the wariness of intrusive R2P measures, in particular external coercion. Structural upstream prevention is frequently cited as a cost-effective approach to mitigate the risk of R2P crimes, preferable to crisis management or reactive measures. If properly implemented, timely reform will enhance the state capacity to prevent atrocities committed by non-state perpetrators while reducing the risk that state actors become complicit in atrocities themselves. The political and operational utility of 'root cause' atrocity prevention, however, remains unclear, as the structural drivers of mass atrocities are poorly understood and the practice of R2P appears more amenable to operational prevention, i.e. efforts that address the immediate manifestation of atrocity situations.

This Brief examines the utility of two upstream prevention measures that fall under the primary responsibility of the state: security sector reform (SSR) and the promotion of horizontal equality. While recognizing the importance of external donor assistance, this assessment concentrates on best practices for domestic strategy and implementation.

## Atrocity Prevention through Security Sector Reform

Security Sector Reform (SSR) encompasses activities aimed at improving a country's capacity to deliver justice and security in a transparent, accountable, and professional manner. Originally aimed at discouraging excessive military spending and supporting development efforts, SSR is now commonly identified as a reactive peacebuilding tool following its application in stabilization operations in the 1990's. SSR is typically conducted with donor support in post-conflict settings and aims to transform relevant policies, structures, behaviors, and attitudes. Although frequently implemented in environments that recently experienced mass violence, security sector reform, like other structural reform efforts, is rarely considered as a tool for domestic atrocity prevention within its specialized community of practitioners.

An effective SSR process may directly mitigate the risk of R2P crimes by controlling the means to conduct an atrocity campaign and deterring instances of misconduct or abuse. SSR practices particularly relevant to mitigate the risk of mass violence include the assurance of civilian oversight, the promotion of individual professionalism among uniformed personnel, improving relations between security forces and communities, and efforts to address impunity, corruption, and the spread of small arms. Domestic reform efforts are more likely attuned to local cultural and political realities, and enhance long-term public trust in government institutions. Successful examples include the justice sector reform conducted by the Mongolian government in the 1990's, South Africa's Defense Review Process following the end of the Apartheid regime, and Indonesia's transition process to a civilian-controlled government. However, the lack of practical or theoretical expertise in reforming countries may produce an exclusive focus on the strengthening of a homogenous security force, leading to reduced accountability or transparency, internal destabilization, and security concerns in neighboring countries. Both in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the security sector remains poorly integrated and continues to endanger rather than protect the civilian population in certain areas despite numerous reform efforts.

Security sector reform is more likely to yield results and reduce the risk of atrocities when initiated by a legitimate government with comprehensive democratic reform plans or democratic institutions already in place. Capacity-building exercises in authoritarian, fragile, or elite-captured regimes frequently produce counter-productive results, as security actors exploit the capacity increase to gain a tactical advantage over political adversaries or minority groups, apply repressive practices, and further undermine democratic freedoms and transparency. Long-term SSR efforts occasionally trigger a short-term backlash, as professionalized security forces appear weak or constrained in the

eyes of criminal actors, insurgents, and society as a whole, eroding confidence in the reform effort or even triggering a return to unrestrained practices. A comprehensive and multisectoral reform effort, however, can break the cycle of suppressing violence through indiscriminate force.

Within fragile states, civilian protection, professional conduct, and accountability should be prioritized over the build-up of capacity and technical proficiency. Whether domestic reform requires a reduction or increase in the size of the security apparatus, societal diversity should be reflected in its new composition. Effective reform efforts will acknowledge the role of non-traditional security or justice mechanisms, include a strengthening of civilian oversight or professional standards, and prioritize the protection of civilians over state security. The efficacy of vetting and human rights training continues to be the subject of debate. While a legal requirement, vetting alone is insufficient where there is a consistent pattern of abuse and inadequate information concerning the identity of perpetrators. Similarly, human rights training may fail in its objective to prevent atrocities in the absence of effective accountability mechanisms. While frequently excluded from domestic reform initiatives, local civil society plays an instrumental role in representing the security needs of vulnerable populations and facilitating the implementation of reform agendas in remote areas.

## Atrocity Prevention through Horizontal Equality

Horizontal equality strategies include a broad range of political, economic, and social policy measures to increase actual and perceived equity in the distribution of assets, income, and opportunity between groups. Reports on past atrocities, analytical resources, and policy documents frequently prioritize relative equality between identity-based groups as a structural objective to prevent mass atrocities. The 2001 Report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty and the 2009 Genocide Prevention Task Force report both highlighted the importance of deprivation and the inequitable distribution of power, resources, or opportunity as a root cause of deadly conflict. Struggle for relative group gain presents an important risk factor as the deprived party resorts to extreme measures to address the inequality, or the privileged group mobilizes its constituents to preserve an advantageous position.

Horizontal inequality is frequently cited as a source of the atrocities committed in Nepal, while the exclusive profits from narcotics trade received by the political elite in Guinea-Bissau arguably resulted in a series of destabilizing events. However, analytical claims about the causal relation between horizontal inequalities and the risk of atrocities remain largely speculative. While horizontal inequalities commonly appear, both in fragile and stable societies, mass atrocities remain a rare phenomenon. Rather than a driver of conflict or atrocities, horizontal inequalities serve as a risk factor that may increase the likeliness of mass violence, particularly when embedded in local narrative or manipulated by the political elite. Actual or perceived horizontal inequalities allow conflict entrepreneurs to mobilize ethnic, religious, political, or geographical community members around a subjective motive and justify extreme violence against an identity-based or political group.

Relevant policy measures need not only include redistribution mechanisms, but also consider employment and safety net programs for marginalized populations, as well as fiscal reform to enhance transparency and equity. In addition to these economic or social measures horizontal inequalities can be countered through anti-discriminatory initiatives, integrative policies aimed at strengthening the national identity, or efforts to dismantle rent systems and reduce corruption linked to identity.

While this is no easy task, even for a developed country, improvements in horizontal equality may lower the risk of mass violence by reducing the grievances caused by relative deprivation and creating a culture of inclusion. Inclusive and legitimate governance offers all groups a stake in the institutional

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

About 25 policymakers, scholars, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders participated in an input session organized by the U.S. Institute of Peace on April 2, 2013. The participants analyzed the utility of internal security sector reform and the domestic promotion of horizontal equality for the prevention of mass atrocities or R2P crimes. This Peace Brief describes the key findings and conclusions from the working meeting, and serves as input for the U.N. Secretary-General's report in advance of the U.N. General Assembly's interactive dialogue this summer on the protection responsibilities of the State in accordance with the Responsibility to Protect principle.



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arrangement, including potential perpetrators, and increases the opportunity cost of violent action. Successful examples include the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia, which effectively narrowed the income and inequality gap, and the inclusive politics of the Chilean government post-Pinochet. On the other hand, the lack of immediate tangible benefits may breed frustration; data on horizontal equalities may not be readily available; measures to close inequality gaps could undermine other priorities; or a homogenous political elite may wish to preserve its dominant position.

As a development objective, the promotion of horizontal equality is not a common component within domestic or international atrocity prevention strategies. The adoption of an 'atrocity prevention lens' in development policy is similarly not a frequent practice. A focus on horizontal inequalities should be incorporated in risk assessments by identifying the most salient inequalities experienced by potential victim groups. At the same time, development practitioners ought to be aware of the sources of risk and resilience in a given country, the utility of structural atrocity prevention measures, and the potential risks associated with their policy and practice.

## Conclusions

Theoretical findings and practical experience with structural prevention tools and the dynamics preceding atrocity situations suggest that security sector reform and horizontal equality measures ought to be considered in domestic strategies to prevent R2P crimes. Both structural reform efforts can directly mitigate risk factors and strengthen the resilience of states as a complement to other diplomatic, economic, or military measures. If properly implemented, SSR and horizontal equality measures could encourage potential perpetrators to realize their objectives through non-violent means and protect or empower vulnerable populations. The use of these 'technical' instruments, however, has important political ramifications. If poorly or hastily implemented, these reform efforts may create significant short-term risks, as the shifting power equilibrium creates new winners and losers. Domestic reform may empower future perpetrators, increase the stakes for warring domestic actors, or trigger inter-state anxieties.

The impact of domestic security sector reform and the promotion of horizontal equality will depend on the desire of both regime and population to incorporate these measures within a comprehensive multi-sectoral strategy. Both measures require a domestic assessment of the social, economic, and security challenges in the country prior to implementation involving independent external expertise and local stakeholders that supersede identity patterns. Domestic buy-in depends on the awareness of reform incentives, including the prospect of political and economic stability. Undertaking structural prevention efforts requires perseverance and expectation management, with little immediate benefits to show.

Including an atrocity prevention lens in national SSR campaigns and development strategies implies awareness of the local sources of risk and resilience, as well as the potential utility and constraints associated with activities in areas considered at risk of atrocities. At the same time, risk assessments need to identify the most salient inequalities and security challenges experienced by potential victim groups.