

GENOCIDE AND MASS ATROCITIES

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Genocide and many other mass atrocities like ethnic cleansing, mass killings, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, have been occurring across the globe since the first civilizations were organized and created. The word “Genocide” however, did not exist until 1944, when a Polish lawyer named Raphael Lemkin created the term using the Greek prefix *genos* (meaning a race or tribe) and Latin suffix *cide* (meaning to kill) in response to the Nazi’s organized killing and murder of Jewish citizens.¹ This is when Genocide also becomes the word to describe past and future instances of targeted killings or actions focused on destroying a certain group of people. However, to fully understand the issue one must know the differences in mass atrocities compared to genocide. Mass atrocities are a broader category that encompasses major human rights violations like genocide or other large violations of international law, but are not limited to the destruction or harm to a particular group of people. When discussing incidents of genocide and mass atrocities we now must look to the future and increased preventative measures in this increasingly dangerous world.

In order to create and have a sustainable future there must be more done in the way of preventing mass atrocities and genocide on multiple different levels. As history has shown, with advancements in technology there comes advancement in weaponry and lethality, all becoming more deadly to humans and the environment that we continually rely upon. Although nuclear weapons have been and continue to be the greatest threat to a sustainable future and good global health, there are many other examples of horrifying weapon advancements that have been used in conflicts throughout history. The United Nations (UN) became involved in addressing genocide and mass atrocities in 1946 by recognizing genocide as a crime under international law. Then, in 1948, the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed by the UN General assembly

¹ United Nations, “Genocide,” United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Par. 1

adopting The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention).² The Genocide Convention expanded on Lemkin's definition and created a universal definition of genocide while also creating new international laws to punish those who commit genocide. In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, either in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

“(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”³

To further try to prevent genocide, the International Criminal Court (ICC) adopted the Rome Statute in 1998, which established the first permanent international court with jurisdiction over genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other mass atrocities.

TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACTS

Technology has unfortunately been used to enable and escalate genocide and other mass atrocities all around the globe for many years. Many technological advancements can serve as examples of these negative impacts on genocide and mass atrocities, some specifically in chemistry, biochemistry, and specific delivery systems, which have led to some of the deadliest gasses ever used, such as Agent Orange, Sarin, Phosgene, and mustard gas.⁴ Other examples include technologies like radio broadcasts, which were used during the Rwandan Genocide to spread hate speech and incite mass violence and now more advanced social media platforms are used for propaganda and coordinating attacks. Then of course there is nuclear technology, which can be used to power the earth, and also destroy it.

What we must focus on improving are the positive impacts of technology on stopping mass

² United Nations, “Genocide,” United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Par. 2

³ United Nations, “Genocide,” United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Article II

⁴ “Chemical Weapons – UNODA.” Par. 1.

atrocities and genocide, such as early warning systems that monitor social media, news sources, and ect. in order to detect early signs of tension and incitement of genocide. More examples of positive technological impacts include our abilities to gather digital evidence of atrocities and crisis mapping to help track incidents and other violent patterns to properly distribute resources for a response to the atrocities. Technology has a dual role in the context of genocide and mass atrocities. While it has been exploited for harmful purposes, it also offers innovative tools to prevent and respond to these crimes. The effectiveness of preventive measures however depends on the responsible use of these preventative methods through ethical considerations. There must also be a renewed commitment from international organizations, civil society and governments to use technology for the greater global health and prevent it's use in atrocities and genocide.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Genocide and mass atrocities have not only profound human and ethical implications but also significant environmental impacts. These impacts can extend beyond the immediate violence and destruction, affecting ecosystems, resources, and the long-term sustainability of regions. Some of the ways in which genocide and mass atrocities can negatively impact the environment are:

Displacement and Refugees: Genocide and mass atrocities often lead to large-scale displacement of populations. This means that overburdened host communities lose out on natural resources such as water, forests, and arable land, leading to environmental degradation.

Resource Exploitation: Conflicts associated with mass atrocities can lead to increased demand for other resources such as minerals, wood, and agricultural products, often leading to unsustainable exploitation and deforestation.

Pollution and Contamination: In conflict zones, infrastructure often gets damaged, disrupting waste management strategies and potentially causing the release of hazardous materials into the environment. This is important because contamination of water sources and soil can have long-lasting health and ecological consequences.

Ecosystem Degradation: Armed conflicts can also directly damage ecosystems through activities like bombing, shelling, and IUDs. Conflict can lead to ecosystem degradation due

to disrupted management systems, less conservation efforts, and the displacement of populations.

Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking: Conflict zones can sometimes become hubs for wildlife poaching and trafficking depending on the region and animals present. These armed groups do this by exploiting weak government structures to profit from illegal wildlife trafficking, which further endangers already vulnerable species.

Water Scarcity: Conflicts often disrupt water infrastructures, which leads to water scarcity. In regions already facing water stress. This means the issue can cause more tensions and fighting over resources, impacting agriculture and public health.

Loss of Biodiversity: Destruction of habitats and ecosystems due to conflict-related activities often results in the loss of biodiversity. This loss affects not only the environment but also communities in the region that rely on biodiversity to make a living.

Climate Change: Conflict-related activities, like burning and other industrial processes, can contribute to global greenhouse gas emissions and effect climate change. Additionally, climate change can worsen conflicts due to resource scarcity and population migration.

Long-Term Recovery: Recovery after conflict often requires a lot of resources, which can put further strain on the environment and countries in conflict that already struggle with resource scarcity. Rebuilding infrastructure and restoring ecosystems can help during recovery and can have ecological impacts.

Addressing the environmental impact of genocide and mass atrocities requires a comprehensive approach that includes environmental considerations in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict recovery efforts. Integrating environmental sustainability into peacebuilding strategies can help mitigate some of the long-term consequences of these devastating events. It also highlights the interconnectedness of social, political, and environmental factors in global security and stability.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 16 & 17

Sustainable Development Goal 16 is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for

sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.⁵ Preventing genocide and mass atrocities is central to this goal, as achieving peace, justice, and strong institutions is essential to avoid the breakdown of societies and governments, which can lead to mass atrocities and violations of human rights. Sustainable Development Goal 17 calls for strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.⁶ It emphasizes the importance of partnerships to achieve the SDGs. Addressing genocide and mass atrocities requires collective international action and cooperation. Nations must collaborate to share intelligence, resources, and expertise to prevent and respond effectively to these crises. International cooperation is vital in holding perpetrators accountable through mechanisms like the ICC. Another vital element that plays into preventing genocide and mass atrocities is the Responsibility to protect (R2P), which is a global commitment that was endorsed by the UN in 2005 stating that the primary responsibility for protecting states populations from genocide, other mass atrocities and crimes against humanity lies on the sovereign state themselves. If a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens then the international community has primary responsibility to assist or even take collective global action to protect the affected groups.

PREVENTING GENOCIDE AND MASS ATROCITIES

Preventing genocide and mass atrocities requires a combination of diplomatic, legal, and humanitarian efforts. Early warning systems, conflict resolution, promoting human rights education, and strengthening international justice mechanisms are essential. Effective intelligence sharing, targeted sanctions, and diplomatic pressure can also deter potential perpetrators. The R2P has become a focus point for the global community in preventing genocide and mass atrocities as it is what promotes outside assistance from fellow nations to step in and put a stop to th atrocities in all forms. R2P is based on three pillars:

Pillar 1 - Responsibility to Prevent, which involves actions taken to address the root causes and promote prevention of conflicts that could turn into genocide or mass atrocities. This

⁵ "THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development." Goal 16.

⁶ "THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development." Goal 17.

pillar uses diplomatic efforts, conflict resolution techniques, addressing violations of human rights, and promoting both economic and social development.

Pillar 2 - Responsibility to React, which states if prevention fails and mass atrocities are coming or currently occurring, the international community should respond with multiple different reactive measures. These measures can include diplomatic pressure, sanctions, tariffs, and providing humanitarian assistance.

Pillar 3 - Responsibility to Rebuild focuses on after the mass atrocities or conflicts. Efforts from the global community should focus on helping the affected state rebuild and recover its infrastructure and economy. This involves supporting institutions, promoting reconciliation and cooperation, and ensuring that the issues that led to the atrocities are not allowed to happen again.⁷

R2P represents a significant shift in the understanding of sovereignty. It acknowledges that states have a responsibility not only to their citizens but also to the international community, to prevent mass atrocities. In practice, the practical application of R2P remains complex. There have been cases where international intervention was deemed necessary, such as in Libya in 2011 when the international community intervened to protect civilians during the conflict. However, debates about the legitimacy of such interventions and concerns about the potential misuse of R2P have arisen. While R2P represents a significant step forward in preventing genocide and mass atrocities, its implementation requires careful consideration, cooperation among states, and a commitment to upholding human rights and international law. It underscores the idea that the international community has a shared responsibility to prevent and respond to the gravest crimes against humanity. Other preventative measures include:

Conflict Resolution and Mediation: Diplomatic efforts being used to mediate and solve conflicts before they escalate into violence can be very effective. Large international organizations like the UN often help in facilitating negotiations and peace agreements between many different conflicting parties.

⁷ United Nations, "Responsibility to Protect," United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Key Documents.

Human Rights Education: Promoting human rights education at an early age can help create a culture and society built on tolerance, understanding, and respect of diversity for all. This can help the prevention of discriminatory attitudes that can be a cause of genocide or other mass atrocities.

Capacity Building: Strengthening the capacity of governments and institutions to manage tensions and quickly respond to crises is essential, especially in regions that are more prone to conflict. This includes education and training in conflict resolution, human rights laws, and governance.

International Justice Mechanisms: Holding perpetrators accountable through international justice mechanisms, like the ICC, can serve as a deterrent to future conflict. Perpetrators knowing that there are consequences for committing mass atrocities can deter them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the history of genocide and mass atrocities is a constant reminder of humanity's capacity for horrific cruelty. The United Nations, through legal frameworks like the Genocide Convention and the ICC, has taken important steps towards preventing and addressing these crimes. Preventing such atrocities demands active and positive diplomacy, early intervention, and creating a culture focused on protecting human rights and diversity. These efforts align with SDGs 16 and 17, reflecting the relationships between peace, justice, cooperation, and sustainable development. The international community must stand strong in its commitment to preventing and responding to genocide and mass atrocities. By implementing effective prevention and reaction strategies, upholding international law, and promoting accountability, the United Nations and international community can play a pivotal role in safeguarding human rights and preventing further instances of these grave crimes. Collaboration between states, society, and international organizations is key to achieve lasting peace and security around the world.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do historical cases of genocide and mass atrocities change current international relations and diplomacy, and what lessons can be drawn from failures of the past in prevention and intervention?
2. How can we balance state sovereignty with the responsibility to protect (R2P) in the context of preventing mass atrocities?
3. What are some of the early warning signs or factors that can lead to genocide and mass atrocities, and how can they be monitored and addressed effectively?
4. What methods can be used to ensure that displaced citizens in conflict zones have access to basic resources and protection?
5. In what ways do economic and resource factors contribute to possible mass atrocities, and how can economic policies and international trade be used to mitigate these risks?
6. What organizations and other funding sources can be established to support the restoration of ecosystems and infrastructure regions that have suffered from conflict?

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