**Rethinking the Structural Prevention of Mass Atrocities: Understanding the Relationship between Risk and Resilience**

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Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest amongst scholars and policy decision-makers in the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities. In 2004, the Office of the Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG) was established within the UN Secretariat.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2005, international consensus was reached on the recognition of the primary responsibility of states to protect their populations from such violence.[[2]](#footnote-2) Declaring mass atrocities to be an issue of national security, President Obama established an Atrocities Prevention Board in 2012.[[3]](#footnote-3) The increased capacity of the UN Department of Political Affairs as well as greater support for UN-led political missions in a number of vulnerable countries and regions is another indication of the strengthening and diversification of international efforts to prevent mass atrocities.

Despite this growing commitment, researchers and policy decision-makers have largely overlooked problems inherent in the commonly accepted notion of prevention. Crystalized by the Carnegie Commission in its 1997 report, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, prevention has typically been understood in two parts, one addressing impending cases of violence (direct prevention) and the other focusing on the long term causes of violence (structural prevention). The concept of structural prevention, in particular, is problematic. Using prevention in public health as a model, the report defines it as the identification and addressing of ‘root causes’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This conceptualisation contains at least two limitations: first, there is an implicit assumption that root causes lead inevitably to violence, and second, there has been a tendency for international actors to decide, in general and global terms, what counts as root causes and how to ameliorate them, downplaying the role of local contexts and overlooking the preventive work of local and national actors.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, this notion of structural prevention does not cast a lens over domestic sources of resilience. Certainly, the identification of root causes is crucial for understanding risk, but prevention in practice (particularly by local and national actors) often entails a range of complex and contextually specific processes that do not have as their goal (or their outcome) the amelioration of root causes, but rather the ongoing management of diversity. Even in public health, this approach to prevention is a contentious one, with some peer-reviewed studies claiming that it has the tendency to lead to over-diagnosis and unnecessary medical interventions.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps it is no surprise that the idea of resilience – where ‘people are given time to let their normal coping and support mechanisms to come into play’[[7]](#footnote-7) – is emerging as a valued dimension in some areas of medical therapy.[[8]](#footnote-8) Likewise, in the prevention of mass atrocities, approaches which are premised on an understanding of how resilience is fostered in the face of risk, have the potential to yield fresh insights into the myriad ways that local and national actors develop their own ‘coping and support mechanisms’, as well as build social, political and economic stability.

In this paper, I argue that what is needed is a broadening of the concept of structural prevention so that it incorporates not only an account of root causes, but also an understanding of the dynamic interaction between the risk that root causes pose – and locally-based mitigation factors that foster resilience to risk. This two-step approach allows for long term preventive strategies – particularly those involving external actors – to facilitate local and national processes that already work. Effective long-term prevention is based on identifying and ameliorating negative characteristics in countries at risk, but also on contributing to the complex management of diversity. While this makes intuitive sense – and may in fact reflect the reality of how much preventive work is done – such an approach has not hitherto been reflected in conceptual understandings of prevention adopted by the United Nations, as well as academic researchers.

This article is organised in three parts. In the first section I will present an overview of the concept of structural prevention, particularly the way it has evolved since the end of the Cold War. The second section highlights two major limitations in the way that structural prevention has been conceptualised by researchers and by the UN – the assumption that the existence of root causes makes violence inevitable, and a tendency towards external diagnosis and prognosis. In the third section I propose a framework which broadens the concept of structural prevention in relation to mass atrocities to incorporate an understanding of the relationship between risk and resilience.

**The Concept of Structural Prevention**

The concept of long-term prevention took shape following the end of the Cold War. The OSCE was the first organisation to broaden the focus of prevention beyond preventive diplomacy and early warning, to incorporate strategies that addressed the root causes of potential conflict. The UN also embraced this approach – in *An Agenda for Peace*, Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared the importance of addressing the underlying causes of conflict in addition to preventive diplomacy,[[9]](#footnote-9) thus challenging policy makers to broaden the lens of prevention within the UN system. In 1997, the Carnegie Commission consolidated these two approaches in its report, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, where it established a two-pronged definition of prevention. Direct prevention was defined as addressing escalating tensions when conflict and violence appeared imminent, and structural prevention was framed as ‘strategies to address the root causes of deadly conflict’.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this conceptualisation of prevention, the authors of the report likened conflict prevention to ‘primary prevention in public health’[[11]](#footnote-11) – addressing symptoms of ill health before they manifest into disease.

This two-part definition subsequently underpinned the approach adopted by the UN. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in his calls for the UN system to adopt a culture of prevention, released three reports on conflict prevention, all embracing the notions of direct and structural prevention, and all reinforcing the idea that structural prevention entailed identifying and addressing root causes.[[12]](#footnote-12) This was further consolidated by the Security Council, whose resolution on conflict prevention equated the creation of the ‘conditions for durable peace and sustainable development’ with the addressing of root causes.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ban Ki-moon’s 2008 report on conflict prevention added support to this notion, and declared the neglect to do so would warrant negative outcomes: ‘If we do not deal with the root causes of conflict – and offer sustainable solutions – we will be left with humanitarian emergencies and peacekeeping operations without end’.[[14]](#footnote-14) What unfolded in these reports was an intimate connection between root causes and violent outcomes, and an obligation for international actors to ‘deal’ with them.

Premising structural prevention on the addressing of root causes is also apparent in specific relation to mass atrocities. The Carnegie Commission’s two-tiered definition was adopted by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in its development of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). In its 2001 report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, the Commission emphasised this approach: ‘Encouraging more serious and sustained efforts to address the root cause of the problems that put populations at risk, as well as more effective use of direct prevention measures, is a key objective of the Commission’s efforts’.[[15]](#footnote-15) When member states endorsed the principle of R2P at the 2005 World Summit, they acknowledged the role that both direct and structural prevention played in ensuring the protection of populations from the crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In emphasising the role of individual states in carrying out their responsibility, the document stressed, ‘this responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Subsequent to the World Summit, structural prevention of the four included has continued to be articulated along similar lines. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s 2009 report, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, for example, emphasised the need to address the ‘underlying fissures in the social and political fabric particularly in states and regions where ethnic tensions run high and deep inequalities among groups persist’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Although its primary responsibility is early warning, the Office of the Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG) also used the same definition of structural prevention in relation to its long term strategies. According to the Special Adviser, ‘To prevent genocide and genocidal conflicts, it is critically important to understand their root causes’, which ‘revolve around inequalities between identity groups’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Once these root causes in any given place are identified, the Special Adviser advocates their eradication: ‘In terms of prevention, the critical step is to identify the factors (discriminatory practices) in a given situation that lead to/account for acute disparities in the administration of a diverse population, and to seek ways to diminish and eventually eradicate these possible causes of genocidal violence’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This notion of long-term prevention has also resonated widely in the academic literature. Prior to the coining of the terms ‘direct’ and ‘structural’ prevention, Stedman articulated the difference between these approaches as ‘preventive diplomacy’ and ‘conflict prevention’, with the latter addressing ‘the supposed roots of such conflicts: poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, resource competition, and lack of legitimate political institutions’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Following the Carnegie Commission’s 1997 report, a number of publications used this distinction to formulate long term and proximate approaches to potential conflict and atrocities based on an understanding of root causes and escalating factors, and corresponding options for ameliorating them. In broad terms, key publications exploring prevention followed similar lines of investigation: an exploration of the concept of prevention; a discussion of the causes of conflict and/or mass atrocities; a presentation of key preventive strategies to address these causes; and finally an exploration of the key preventive actors with the capacity to adopt such strategies.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In the conceptual explorations of structural prevention found in these and other sources, one common feature is that structural prevention is premised on removing root causes. Jentleson, for example, adopts the Carnegie Commission’s definition of prevention, acknowledging that addressing the root causes of conflict lies at the heart of structural prevention.[[22]](#footnote-22) Carment and Schnabel point out that having knowledge of the root causes of conflict is crucial in order for practitioners to devise strategies based on sound analysis.[[23]](#footnote-23) A similar long term approach to prevention is also emphasised by Cockell: ‘if the nature of the problem is viewed as the perpetuation of structural conditions of human insecurity, more proactive measures may be planned to begin to address the various sources of that structural violence’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Wallensteen also adopts this notion of structural prevention, stressing that this long term approach to prevention involves adopting measures such as ‘the promotion of democracy, ethnic integration, international regional cooperation, arms control, and disarmament’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Promoting such measures, as the Carnegie Report points out, is akin to ameliorating root causes.[[26]](#footnote-26) In their exploration of preventive actors within the UN, Sriram and Wermester premise the efficacy of such actors in terms of their capacity to address root causes.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In relation specifically to the crime of genocide, Hamburg uses the public health analogy to illustrate the root cause approach. Prevention, he argues,

involves identifying an ailing nation’s specific problem(s) and employing evidence-based responses toward resolving them. Some measures, such as early, skilful, and respectful preventive diplomacy, can quickly show beneficial results, just as expert care of a sprained ankle results in rapid healing and prevents an injury from getting equitable, socioeconomic infrastructure, take longer to apply and even longer to show results, but the effects are likely to be lasting and pervasive, just as promoting a healthy lifestyle and environment can achieve much better health for a society that is accustomed to health-damaging habits such as cigarette smoking.[[28]](#footnote-28)

What this quote illustrates is that structural prevention not only entails identifying and addressing the root causes of genocide, but that the responsibility for identifying such problems as well as prescribing action to remedy them lies with actors external to the places of concern. Much like the relationship between a doctor and a patient, conceptual approaches to structural prevention demonstrate distinctions between prevention actors and prevention recipients.

Since the end of the Cold War there has clearly been a growing interest in the prevention of intrastate conflict and mass atrocities. In that time the concept of prevention evolved and took shape by distinguishing two main approaches – direct prevention and structural prevention. The concept of structural prevention is premised on the identification and amelioration of the root causes of potential deadly violence. Understanding these underlying causes is clearly a crucial dimension in efforts to prevent violent conflict and mass atrocities of which such root causes are antecedents. Moreover, the growing capacity of regional and international actors in implementing preventive strategies has indeed resulted in successful cases of conflict/violence aversion.[[29]](#footnote-29) Despite this, the concept of structural prevention is limited in its neglect to consider and incorporate domestic sources of resilience that hold valuable insights into the process of the management of diversity and the mitigation of risk.

**The Limitations of Structural Prevention**

By framing structural prevention as the identification and addressing of root causes, researchers and policy makers are faced with two major limitations. First, this notion of prevention assumes that the existence of root causes will necessarily result in a violent outcome if not dealt with, suggesting a linear connection between cause and outcome. Second, the public health model approach to long term prevention has encouraged a tendency towards external diagnosis and prognosis, prioritising the role of international actors in determining what the root causes of potential conflict are, as well as determining the correct strategies to deal with them. These limitations exclude a consideration of the local and national capacities for building resilience to the risk that such root causes pose, and as a consequence overlook the role that domestic actors play in the prevention of mass atrocities. These limitations will be explored in greater detail below.

*Assuming linear inevitability*

Premising prevention on the identification and removal of root causes assumes a linear relationship between cause and outcome – that such violence will inevitably occur if the root causes are not dealt with. It suggests that the existence of conditions that amount to root causes necessitates their removal, and that doing so will result in the prevention of mass atrocities. For example, in his 2008 report on prevention in Africa, Ban Ki-moon emphasised, ‘if we do not deal with the root causes – and offer sustainable solutions – we will be left with humanitarian emergencies and peacekeeping operations without end’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Often the linear relationship between cause and violent outcome is suggested through the positioning of root causes as the first of a number of stages, or phases, eventually culminating in violence. The stages of conflict typically progress from ‘pre-violence’, or ‘potential violence’ – representing the existence of root causes – then usually passes through periods of ‘gestation’ and ‘escalation’.[[31]](#footnote-31) While there are caveats,[[32]](#footnote-32) the assumption of a linear relationship between cause and outcome nonetheless remains. Framing structural prevention within a ‘conflict continuum’[[33]](#footnote-33) or a ‘temporal continuum’[[34]](#footnote-34) invites a certain policy logic – that not only is it better to tackle these problems earlier rather than later, but that not tackling such problems at an early stage will inevitably result in the need to deal with more complex challenges later on. Dress and Rosemblum-Kumar advocate the need to ‘develop interventions aimed at poverty alleviation, social empowerment, and reducing horizontal inequality’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Draman regards such early stage prevention by international actors (particularly the UN) as ‘morally imperative’, and crucial to ensuring the genie does not escape the bottle.[[36]](#footnote-36) Once such root causes are known to exist, there is a need to act, lest these causes are allowed to progress from the stage of pre-violence to one of gestation.

However, just as some contend that preventive approaches in public health have the tendency to lead to over-diagnosis, there is a similar risk that approaches to conflict and mass atrocities prevention may conclude wrongly that violent outcomes are inevitable without action. Indeed this assumption holds little currency in the research by scholars of genocide and mass atrocities – here there is general consensus on the argument that long-term structural preconditions to such violence (otherwise referred to as root causes) have at best a tenuous causal link with mass violence. While they create the conditions that are conducive to atrocities, these preconditions are not sufficient in and of themselves to directly cause such episodes of violence.[[37]](#footnote-37) In fact, the perpetration of mass atrocities is rare – the exception rather than the norm, as Bartoli, Ogata and Stanton state: ‘Most states do not commit genocide most of the time. State interest normally does not coincide with genocidal intent, and the predisposition of governments is generally non-genocidal’.[[38]](#footnote-38) According to Genocide Watch’s survey of countries that experienced significant risk of genocidal violence between 1945 and 2008,[[39]](#footnote-39) for every country that reached stage seven (genocidal, as well as non-genocidal massacres), there were two that did not.[[40]](#footnote-40) Chirot and McCauley point out that genocide, a crime that occurs predominantly during violent conflict, is ‘far less common than warfare itself’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Therefore, it is clear that risk often exists without inevitably resulting in the perpetration of mass atrocities. Clearly there is a gap between the assumptions embedded in the concept of structural prevention, and the findings of the research conducted on the causes of mass atrocities.

To suggest – as the concept of structural prevention does – that it is necessary to ameliorate such root causes once they have been identified, indeed runs counter to what is known about the long term causes of mass atrocities. If, as the scholarship on comparative genocide studies suggests, the existence of root causes does not indicate an inevitable violent outcome, what other outcomes are common? In countries that contain these root causes, the local dynamics and processes that steer them away from violent outcomes are clearly worthy of investigation, and are potentially a valuable insight into national sources of resilience that deter violent outcomes. Understanding the capacity of the sovereign to prevent genocide and mass atrocities, and tracing the actions of those that have done so, have not hitherto been a priority within the literature on structural prevention.

In fact, such positive dynamics are also largely overlooked in comparative genocide studies. Despite the consensus on the fact high risk prevalence is not sufficient for the perpetration of mass violence, very little research has been conducted into the reasons why many states that contain these root causes have *not* resulted in violent outcomes. Such scholarship itself has a tendency to focus on ‘what goes wrong’. Methodologically, the approach amongst most comparative genocide scholars is to select a number of cases of past genocides and to examine their contributing factors – those factors that are common across cases then form the theoretical bases found in comparative genocide studies.[[42]](#footnote-42) While such research has yielded valuable knowledge on the antecedents of past genocides, very little knowledge has been gained on what factors deter the outcome of violence where there is risk. Such knowledge is clearly valuable for the long-term prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities.

*Emphasis on International Actors*

The oversight of understanding regarding the positive processes that build resilience is also apparent in the way that research and preventive strategies have been shepherded principally by international actors, a tendency that – in public health parlance – is characterised by external diagnosis and prognosis. In fact, research and policy-making on conflict/atrocities prevention is almost entirely focussed on the role of international actors, consequently neglecting what states and communities already do themselves to manage diversity and mitigate risk. Principal proponents of prevention include the United Nations, regional organisations, international NGOs and wealthy nations acting as donors. It is rare in the literature on structural prevention to consider the role of local and national actors. This does not mean that international actors do not make valuable and often crucial contributions in terms of structural prevention. Rather, the role of such actors is discussed without considering what local and national actors might already be doing to mitigate the risk of mass violence. Consequently, the role international actors play in prevention is not discussed in terms of how they may facilitate processes that already work.

In the literature on structural prevention, key prevention actors are almost always external to the places deemed to be at risk. Indeed, some definitions of prevention explicitly exclude local and national actors in places of concern.[[43]](#footnote-43) Other sources, in discussing prevention actors, typically identify the United Nations, regional organisations, international NGOs and western liberal-democratic states as the key players. Local communities and national governments in places where preventive strategies are directed are – if at all – mentioned largely in passing.[[44]](#footnote-44) This is reflected in the key (mostly edited) publications on prevention that have appeared over the last decade – in chapters devoted to the role of preventive actors, international and regional organisations are featured prominently, as are (albeit to a lesser extent) national external actors and international NGOs.[[45]](#footnote-45) There are a few exceptions to this. For example, Dress and Rosenblum-Kumar stress there is a need to consider the way that a *broad* spectrum of preventive actors – from local to international – can improve the capacity for such action. Chirot and McCauley go further by examining a range of state policies aimed at managing tension between identity groups in countries, such as India, Switzerland and Canada, where ethnic and religious diversity exist.[[46]](#footnote-46) Despite these exceptions, there is a tendency in the academic literature to regard the business of identifying and addressing root causes as the concern principally of external actors. Consequently, overlooking domestic examples of success in the effective management of risk and diversity accentuates the culture of external diagnosis and trouble-shooting, and gives preventive action a paternal character, particularly when it is rare for such research to consider what is already happening in such places to prevent conflict and mass atrocities.

Even when the parlance of prevention shifts to incorporate greater state responsibility, there remains much ambiguity about how this is actually carried out. State responsibility is repeatedly stressed in numerous UN reports on prevention. Kofi Annan’s first report on prevention stated, ‘the primary responsibility for conflict prevention rests with national governments, with civil society playing an important role’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Subsequent reports by both Annan and Ban Ki-moon echoed this.[[48]](#footnote-48) However, there is almost no guidance in the literature on prevention about how to observe successful cases of responsibility being carried out. Much is known about the absence of responsibility, but little about its presence. The three-pillar strategy of the principle, arising from the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, clearly identified state responsibility as having primary importance when it comes to prevention. This was an endorsement of a principle for the prevention of mass atrocities that does not assume third party diagnosis and prognosis as the starting point. Yet it is surprising that there is very little research that investigates what states do to effectively carry out this responsibility, and little attention paid to the limited research that already exists, despite Ban Ki-moon’s call for such an approach: ‘More research and analysis is needed on why one society plunges into mass violence while its neighbours remain relatively stable…’[[49]](#footnote-49)

The Secretary-General pursued this same line of questioning in a more recent report, entitled, *The Responsibility to Protect: State Responsibility and Prevention*. In it, he provides a lens for understanding both the causes of mass atrocities and the effectiveness of risk mitigation. He outlines key risk factors associated with mass atrocities; then he provides illustrations of strategies that states adopt to strengthen resilience and mitigate risk.[[50]](#footnote-50) By doing so, the report offers an approach to mass atrocity prevention which assumes that primary agency lies with states themselves. Premising approaches to prevention on state-based sources of resilience that mitigate risk,

**Developing a Framework for Understanding the Prevention of Mass Atrocities**

It is in the spirit of the Secretary-General’s 2013 report that I argue the concept of prevention needs to be broadened to incorporate not only an understanding of root causes, but also an understanding of sources of resilience. The purpose of this is to provide an analytical model that provides a lens not only on root causes, but the dynamics and processes within states and communities that already have some measure of success at mitigating the risk inherent in such root causes. An approach to prevention that incorporates resilience starts with the idea that in states that display risk of mass atrocities, local and national actors have the capacity to develop strategies to manage this risk. Although there may be cases where external support is needed with structural prevention, such support is best utilized when facilitating processes that have been initiated by domestic actors. In this sense, understanding the extent that domestic sources of resilience are able to mitigate the risk of mass atrocities becomes a valuable dimension of structural prevention.[[51]](#footnote-51) In order to incorporate resilience into a framework for long-term prevention, I draw on disaster management, psychology and ecological systems thinking to develop three key questions:

1. What coping and support mechanisms exist to manage the risk of mass atrocities in societies?
2. How do political and social institutions absorb crises?
3. How do these institutions adapt and improve their management of diversity and mitigation of risk over time so that stability is enhanced?

With regards to the first question, the incorporation and understanding of internal coping and support mechanisms is a logical starting point in understanding what states at risk already do to mitigate the risk of mass atrocities. In contrast to the preventive paradigm in public health, it instead draws on strategies which have recently been incorporated into the practice of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in response to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression.[[52]](#footnote-52) The UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction uses a similar definition: ‘the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate and to recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner’.[[53]](#footnote-53) The second question borrows an approach to resilience currently used in ecological systems thinking. Here, resilience is defined by one source as ‘the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and disturbance and still maintain function’.[[54]](#footnote-54) Given that one of the key turning points in the causal path to mass atrocities is the experience of upheaval, the ways that vulnerable states have avoided the escalation of tension and violence following upheaval is worthy of investigation in order to understand the role of resilience in acutely challenging circumstances. As such, one important dimension of resilient societies is how effectively they (where such instances have occurred) have absorbed the ‘shock and disturbance’ of upheavals including economic crises, natural disasters, military coups and revolutions. The third question also draws on ecological systems thinking, which has also defined resilience as ‘the capacity of a social-ecological system to adapt to change through self-organisation and learning’.[[55]](#footnote-55) The long term resilience of states is not only premised on how well they are able to absorb the shocks of upheaval, but also the extent to which they are able to adapt and build stability in a regional and global environment subject to constant change. These questions are designed to underscore the various ways that sources of resilience in states mitigate the risk of mass atrocities; and the framework below represents a synthesis of the research conducted on the key structural risk factors (or root causes) on the one hand, and key mitigating factors on the other.

Table 1. Framework for Understanding the Prevention of Mass Atrocities

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| --- | --- |
| **RISK:****Preconditions of Mass Atrocities** | **RESILIENCE:****Factors that Mitigate Risk of Mass Atrocities** |
| **Social Divisions**1. Religious, ethnic division
2. Social, economic or political discrimination
3. History of genocide and/or mass atrocities
4. Human rights violations
 | **Social Cohesion**1. Religious, ethnic cohesion
2. Social, economic and political inclusion
 |
| **Weak or Abusive Regime**1. Limited rule of law
2. Limited democracy
 | **Good Governance**1. Strong rule of law
2. A transparent and functioning democratic system
3. Constraints on the power of the chief executive
 |
| **Economic Weakness**1. Low economic interdependence
2. Inequality of wealth and opportunities
 | **Economic Strength**1. Trade openness
2. Equality of economic opportunity
3. Sustained economic growth
 |

The preconditions represented in this table are a synthesis of research into the structural causes of genocide and mass atrocities. As Kuper stated, while genocide is a crime committed by political elites, there are a number of structural preconditions that are conducive to the circumstances that permit elites with extreme exclusionary ideologies to take action. Such preconditions (or root causes) do not automatically result in genocide, but they do heighten the risk of other forms of mass violence, referred to here as mass atrocity crimes. Kuper saw genocide as ‘an extreme manisfestation of a broader phenomenon – of violence, destructiveness, or aggression’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Scholarship in the field of comparative genocide studies[[57]](#footnote-57) as well as on the early warning and long term risk of genocide and genocide-like violence[[58]](#footnote-58) all identify a range of root causes (or preconditions) of social, political and economic dimensions, including social divisions (religious, ethnic or political) that involve various forms of discrimination and a history of past atrocities; issues of governance including widespread and systematic human rights abuses, weak rule of law, absence of or weak democracy; and finally, low integration into the world economy, and a profound inequality of economic opportunities.

While the research into root causes is extensive, there is a paucity of research that focuses on what promotes peace and stability.[[59]](#footnote-59) There are, however, a few exceptions, and it is with these exceptions that this framework constructs the eight factors that mitigate the risk of mass atrocities. To start with, implementing policies that ensure social cohesion and promote the benefits of diversity can create a base from which a memory of stability rather than a memory of violence is formed. Indeed, religious or ethnic diversity in a society is not a problem in itself – problems arising from diversity stem from largely from government policies that discriminate along social lines.[[60]](#footnote-60) The Carnegie Report concluded that ‘freedom of religion’ and ‘freedom to preserve important cultural practices including the opportunity for education in a different language’[[61]](#footnote-61) was a pre-requisite for developing ‘a sense of national cohesion’ (1997: 100).[[62]](#footnote-62) Therefore, policies that ensure freedom of religious and cultural expression act as a protective factor against divisions that fuel tensions between identity groups, and consequently against mass atrocities. Such examples include policies that promote the recognition of all major languages. An example of this in the UK is the Welsh Language Act of 1993, which put the Welsh language on equal footing with English in Wales. Many multi-ethnic states officially recognise a variety of languages, for example, eleven in South Africa, and eighteen in India.[[63]](#footnote-63) Freedom of religious practice is another measure of social cohesion. Policies that protect the right of all religions freedom to worship publicly, and also environments that encourage interaction and exchange between religious traditions provide a good basis for religious cohesion. Education that promotes appreciation and curiosity of other culture, and avoids promoting prejudice and division, is highly instrumental in fostering harmony and cohesion across different social groups.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Social, economic and political inclusion also benefits from active participation from civil society groups. The extent of activity, and the amount of support that such groups receive from their government are indications of the level of inclusion at a grass roots level.[[65]](#footnote-65) Organisations as varied as unions, human rights groups, religious organisations and welfare groups all play a valuable role in campaigning against injustices and in favour of safety nets, and providing support to those who need it. In Zambia, for example, a coalition of civil society organisations formed the groundswell of a new political movement which challenged the authority of the longstanding authoritarian government, and became a leading player in the burgeoning era of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Good governance includes the existence of the rule of law, and a democratic system which avoids factionalism, and keeps checks on the power of the chief executive. It is premised on the rule of law, which protects individual rights, property rights, cultural expression and religious freedom.[[67]](#footnote-67) Bearing in mind that no state is entirely free of discrimination, an independent judiciary gives citizens the chance to seek justice non-violently, and to redress any potential wrongs. A strong rule of law enables the provision of fair laws that do not disadvantage some groups over others, and discourages the need to look outside due process for justice. Adherence to the rule of law provides accountability even in the face of discriminatory policies from governments, ensuring a safety net for minority groups. In addition, strong rule of law ensures that institutions of public service and protection are under the control of civilians, and are ‘competent, honest and accountable’.[[68]](#footnote-68) In fact, as Fine argues, there is very little that either local or international actors can do in relation to prevention, ‘in the absence of a political, economic and civil environment that honours at least some major rules of law and practices the rudiments of public discourse’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Rule of law is the foundation of stable and prosperous democratic states.

A transparent and functioning democratic system is arguably the strongest protective factor against mass atrocities, a claim that is shared by both ‘large N’ and case-study-based qualitative research. A rise in the level of democracy lowers the risk of war and ensuing atrocities.[[70]](#footnote-70) This, according to the PITF, is the single most instrumental factor contributing to political instability, no because the ‘myriad social, demographic, economic and environmental forces that are often cited as causes of political instability,[[71]](#footnote-71) are miraculously absent in such regimes, but because liberal democracies possess the resilience in order to cope with such pressures.[[72]](#footnote-72) In a separate study on regime type, level of democracy and conflict, Hegre et al argue that civil peace is greater, more just and more durable in democratic societies.[[73]](#footnote-73) When political competition is fair and open, when opposition parties are robust and active, then the resilience and stability of a state is much higher. Such competition is most resilient when it is absent of factionalism that may exacerbate any social difference that may be apparent. According to the Carnegie Commission, a democracy ‘assures all citizens the opportunity to better their circumstances while managing the inevitable clashes that arise’.[[74]](#footnote-74) In other words, a democratic state provides a space for ‘accommodating competing interests’, decreasing the likelihood that dissenting groups will be marginalised, or will seek to fulfil their goals by taking up arms. A liberal democratic system has a positive effect on economic growth,[[75]](#footnote-75) and economic growth in turn increases the political stability of a country.[[76]](#footnote-76) In other words, the ability to adapt and improve is much stronger in states with multi-party democratic systems.

Equally important is the existence of constraints on the power of the chief executive. This means that free and fair democratic elections must be supported by good governance and strong political institutions. Institutions which strengthen a liberal democracy go far beyond the carrying out of periodic free and fair elections.[[77]](#footnote-77) Although they vary within place and circumstance, these include a legislature and judiciary independent of each other, a free media, local governance which encourages equitable participation and representation, and active civil associations. Such institutions have been discussed throughout this framework, but are all, according to the findings of the PITF, underpinned by a liberal democratic system. The healthy functioning of such institutions helps to keep constraints on power in a country, and also provides the foundation for the development of a ‘democratic culture’, which involves greater public participation in public decision-making, though ‘debate, demonstrations, and protests as well as negotiation, compromise, and tolerance’.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Three factors related to economic strength also mitigate the risk of mass atrocities – trade openness, equality of economic opportunity and sustained economic growth. Evidence of trade openness as a protective factors stems from the work of Barbara Harff and the PITF – they noted that the more interdependent a country is with others, the less likely it is that leaders from that country will commit genocide or politicide.[[79]](#footnote-79) Given that unequal growth in prosperity raises the risk that its benefits are less likely to be undermined by resentment and unrest, likewise, equitable access to employment and the development of human skill and capacity promotes greater well-being, greater stability, and mitigates the risk of such resentment.[[80]](#footnote-80) Sustained economic growth also mitigates the risk of mass atrocities. The Human Security report concluded that conflict decrease as per capita income rises. Supporting this is the economic transformation that occurred in East Asia in the post-Vietnam War period from the late 1970s to the 1990s. In this time, average incomes increased by almost 100 per cent, while the number of conflict decreased by nearly half.[[81]](#footnote-81) Clearly there is a correlation between economic growth, primarily reflected in rising incomes, and the avoidance of civil war and atrocities, making it an important contributing factor to political stability and resilience.

The research used to develop these mitigating factors demonstrates that the key actors in the effective long term prevention of mass atrocities have been local and national actors. Instead of aiming to eradicate root causes, these actors use strategies that seek to manage the tensions inherent in such risk – a process which is dynamic and ongoing. Although the research cited here is not exhaustive, it provides a broad lens to the complex interplay between risk and resilience, and in doing so, premises long term prevention in an understanding of what states at risk are already doing to build resilience*.* Preventive strategies which overlook such dynamics run the risk of undermining local and national sources of resilience, potentially impeding a country’s ability to sustain long term prevention on its own terms. It also has the potential to increase a country’s dependence on external actors and externally-driven strategies for its internal stability. Overlooking sources of resilience also devalues past cases of success in risk mitigation – cases which could provide insights for future preventive efforts. With the various findings represented in the research above, we can begin to build a general picture of the various ways that diversity is managed, and the risk inherent in the presence of root causes is mitigated through strategies that foster social cohesion, good governance and relative economic strength. Of course, this framework is not without its limitations. Because it synthesises a very small pool of research, the list of factors is not exhaustive – inevitably there are gaps in our knowledge about the comprehensive ranges of factors which mitigate the risk of mass atrocities. As such, the framework is best utilised as a guide, rather than a restrictive lens. Nevertheless, the broadness of the categories allows for the examination of a diverse range of dynamics and processes that build stability and resilience over time.

**Conclusion**

This article challenges the commonly held notion of structural prevention, specifically in relation to mass atrocities. It argues that the way structural prevention is commonly conceptualised is rigid and limited – premising prevention solely on the identification and amelioration of root causes is problematic in two ways. It assumes that there is a linear inevitability between cause and violent outcome, and it prioritises the role of international actors in determining what the root causes are and how to deal with them. Research into the root causes of genocide and other mass atrocities does not support the idea of causal inevitability – root causes, or preconditions are necessary but not sufficient factors for such violent outcomes. Despite this, there is very little interest in why mass atrocities do not occur, especially in countries that are deemed at risk. This article argues that investigating why mass atrocities do not occur provides important insights into the prevention of mass atrocities that the concept does not currently incorporate. What is needed is a broader focus – one which adopts a lens seeking to understand not only what risk factors, or root causes are present, but also what the sources of resilience are, and how they mitigate risk. This is an approach which currently receives little attention, both by researchers of genocide and mass atrocities, and by key prevention actors. In response to this apparent oversight, an alternative framework is presented, which provides a lens to the complex relationship between risk and resilience in relation to mass atrocities.

Broadening the conceptual lens of structural prevention overcomes these limitations in two key ways. It treats seemingly static structural features related to potential mass atrocities as context-specific, dynamic and indicative of not one narrow and inevitable outcome, but of a range of possibilities.[[82]](#footnote-82) A greater understanding of the complexities of risk and resilience within communities and states then allows for the development of a repository of knowledge that then accounts for – with the help of this framework – the myriad strategies and practices that local and national actors adopt to manage risk, by strengthening coping and support mechanisms, absorbing upheaval, and developing strategies to adapt to unfolding challenges. Extensive knowledge of this kind would certainly serve to increase the repertoire of options for prevention. In addition, premising prevention on an understanding of what processes already work enables international actors – where needed – to provide a facilitative, rather than prescriptive role. Managing risk and building resilience takes prevention beyond the conceptual limitations which regarded the best outcome as a non-event. Instead, building resilience has many tangible benefits that build social cohesion, enhance good governance and foster equitable economic benefits – outcomes which are beneficial in and of themselves.

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4. David Hamburg, and Cyrus R Vance (1997) *Preventing Deadly Conflict - Final Report*. (Washington DC: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997). For further discussion of the medical dimension of prevention, see Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2007), p. 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Ban Ki-moon, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1625 (2005), on Conflict Prevention, Particularly in Africa,* S/2008/18, 14 January 2008; Rasheed Draman, ‘Conflict Prevention in Africa: Establishing Conditions and Institutions conducive to durable Peace’ in David Carment and Albrecht Schabel(eds.), *Conflict Prevention: Path to Peace or Grand Illusion?* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003), p. 234; Peter Wallensteen, ‘Reassessing Recent Conflicts: Direct vs Structural Prevention’ in Fen Osler Hampson and David M Malone (eds.), *From Reaction to Conflict Prevention: Opportunities for the UN System* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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10. Hamburg and Vance, *Preventing Deadly Conflict,* p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kofi Annan, *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, A/55/985-S/2001/574, 7 June 2001; Kofi Annan, *Interim Report of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Armed Conflict*, A/58/365-S/2003/888, 12 September 2003; Annan, Kofi *Progress Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict*. Report of the Secretary-General, A/60/891, 18 July 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. S/RES/1366, 30 August 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ban Ki-moon, *Report of the Secretary-General,* p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘2005 World Summit Outcome’, para. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ban Ki-moon, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/63/677, 12 January 2009, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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27. Chandra Likha Sriram and Karin Wermester ‘Preventive Action at the United Nations: From Promise to Practice?’ in Fen Osler Hampson and David M Malone (eds.), *From Reaction to Conflict Prevention* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003), p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hamburg, *Preventing Genocide,* p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Two examples are the OSCE’s (formerly CSCE) mediation in Latvia in 1992, and the UN’s preventive deployment in Macedonia between 1995 and 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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31. Rasheed Draman, ‘Conflict Prevention in Africa: Establishing Conditions and Institutions conducive to durable Peace’, in: David Carment and Albrecht Schabel(eds.), *Conflict Prevention: Path to Peace or Grand Illusion?* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003), p. 234; Donald Rothchild, ‘Third-party incentives and the phases of conflict prevention’, in: Chandra Lekha Sriram and Karin Wermester (eds.), *From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Violent Conflict* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 44-56; Gregory H. Stanton, Gregory, *The 8 Stages of Genocide*, 1996, <http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/8StagesBriefingpaper.pdf>, accessed 23 November 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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36. Ibid. See also Jan Eliasson, ‘Establishing Trust in the Healer: Preventive Diplomacy and the Future of the United Nations’, in Kevin Cahill(ed.), *Stopping Wars Before they Start: Preventive Diplomacy* (New York: Basic Books, 1996) p. 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See, for example, Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); Barbara Harff, ‘No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing the Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955’ *The American Political Science Review* 97/1 (2003): 57-73; Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy.* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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39. Stage four or above, according to Stanton’s ‘Eight Stages of Genocide’. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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41. Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley *Why Not Kill Them All?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Such scholars include Fein (1979); Kiernan (2005); Melson (1992); and Semelin (2007). While negative cases (non-genocidal cases) are sometimes referred to, they are never included as one of the principal analytical subjects. For a discussion on the methodological limitations of such approaches, see Stephen McLoughlin and Deborah Mayersen (2013) ‘Reconsidering Root Causes: A New Framework for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities’ in Bert Ingelaere, Stephan Parmentier, Jacques Haers and Barbara Segaert (eds.), *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013); and Scott Strauss, (2012) Retreating from the Brink: Theorizing Mass Violence and the Dynamics of Restraint. *Perspectives on Politics* 10/2: 343-362 (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
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