



Center for Civilians in Harm's Way

PREPAREDNESS & HUMAN RIGHTS

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

Live out rights by outliving killers.

1. Perhaps more than any of the other endeavors noted in this series, the pursuit of human rights ennobles us. Our decades-long focus on “rights-holders” and “duty-bearers” has made it more difficult to commit abuses, or at least to do so with impunity. Support for this field must continue and grow.
2. But the gap between the ideal and the actual realization of rights has been noted countless times. Observers, like Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, remark that, “Reference to law is always strongest at precisely those moments when respect for the rules disappears.”¹ There are tens of thousands of agreements referencing human rights—but none with troops willing to deploy for that cause alone. There are more rights trainings than can be counted—but none focused on tactical skills for actualizing ones’ legal rights in a lawless land. This is where preparedness comes in.
3. The field of human rights lacks a fallback plan for those it seeks to benefit. Yet as with all endeavors in the realm of peace and conflict, human rights work has a *responsibility* to help its target group *prepare for the worst*. This is because its programs, its pronouncements, and its presence, all give locals a sense of hope that perversely might slow or supplant their own natural instinct to take steps for survival. This trust can then prove to be misplaced as violence overwhelms all best efforts and intentions—and they face their abusers alone.
4. Efforts to espouse and enforce legal frameworks are not the only path to realizing human rights. Support for physical, tactical abilities that help civilians avoid or mitigate abuse gives *real-world meaning and effect* to their rights in the face of violence. No matter how dear the path, it is the outcome that matters. As Phillip Lancaster, Gen. Dallaire’s confidant in Rwanda said, those

actually at risk live in “a separate world” where it is the “survival imperative” that keeps them alive.² It is only those who survived that terrible nether world who actualized their human rights.

5. Would human rights practitioners think it too sensitive to help civilians avoid abuse? This is a field that already treads the thin ice of neutrality (its role in political issues), sovereignty (its role in prosecution, even of state authorities), and transparency (its role in confidential monitoring and reporting). It is fair to ask: if rights workers talk privately with people *after* they are victimized in order to document and report violators, then why not talk privately with people *before* they are victimized so they might better prepare for and avoid those violators? Discreet discussion and mobilization is the very heart of preparedness.
6. Yet very few practitioners of human rights, or any of the endeavors cited here, would conclude that helping locals physically brace for violence falls under their purview. They might assume “experts” in “some other field” are handling it. *But there are no experts and no field focused on helping locals physically brace for violence per se.* There has been tinkering on the margins and applicable lessons learned in several scattered fields—but nothing systematic.
7. Rigidity of institutional mandates, academic and professional silos, as well as programmatic and funding pockets all inhibit integrated strategic thinking. In the field of human rights and each of the other enterprises noted in this series, we lack the clarity to see that an ability to survive alone in the face of violence can be of vital benefit both to those we serve—and to the enterprise itself.
8. Of our repeated, collective failures to prevent the worst kind of human rights abuses—mass atrocity and genocide—Samantha Power once asked: “How can something so clear in retrospect become so muddled at the time by rationalizations, institutional constraints, and a lack of imagination?”³
9. In the aftershock of atrocities, most human rights workers would say, “We didn’t do enough.” This is the grim clarity of retrospect. It prods us to imagine what we might do differently if we had a chance to do it over again. Perversely, we *do* have the chance to do it over again because the world will continue to provide us fresh atrocities. The simple question is whether we will use what hindsight has shown us to act with foresight?
10. Preparedness support can help give real-world meaning and effect to human rights that are being crushed.

Endnotes

¹ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2002; p. 244. **See also:** Nicholas Leader, “Proliferating Principles; Or How to Sup with the Devil without Getting Eaten”, *Disasters*, 22(4), 1998; p. 289. The author said “the periods of active development of humanitarian principles and law are often a reaction to their mass violation.” **See also:** Newsletter staff, *Protecting People in Times of War, Relief and Rehabilitation Network Newsletter*, Number 15, November, 1999. A passage states “international humanitarian law and international human rights law have become increasingly developed but their implementation, and their sanctions against those failing to comply, are feeble.”

² Philip Lancaster, “Human Rights and the Survival Imperative: Rwanda’s Troubled Legacy, ” in William Sweet’s *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 2003; p. 143.

³ Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Perennial, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2003; p. 516. **See also:** Fiona Terry, *The Deadly Secrets of North Korea*, Médecins sans Frontières website, August 7, 2001; p. 1. The author asks, “Why do we express revulsion when reading of Stalin’s gulag in the 1930s-60s; Mao’s secret famine in the 1960s; or the killing fields of Pol Pot in the 1970s, yet show indifference at the plight of North Korean’s today? We regret that our predecessors did not listen to the pleas of those who escaped the gulag, famine and killing fields; we chastise them for not believing that such horror could occur. But who is listening now?”