

Advancing knowledge on the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities
Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Project description
December 2018

Motivation: Research on mass atrocities and their prevention has overwhelmingly focused on the actions of states as the most common perpetrators of atrocities and most visible actors in attempts to prevent or respond to them. Much less focused research has explored the roles of civilians—working through civil society organizations and/or less formal, local community mechanisms—in helping prevent mass atrocities and mitigate imminent threats. As a result, civilians are too often presumed to be passive victims or bystanders. Recent studies suggest that civilians in fact use a range of active strategies, yet many questions remain about these strategies, the conditions for their success, and external actors' roles in relation to them.

Overview: The Simon-Skjodt Center's research project aims to address gaps in knowledge about the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating atrocities through a combination of cross-national quantitative analysis; comparative case studies on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Sri Lanka; and interviews with policymakers and donors. The case studies, which will be conducted in partnership with local organizations or researchers, will seek to analyze variations in civilian-led actions within countries (across time and region) and between countries that have faced serious threats of mass atrocities. Zachariah Mampilly, Leonard and Sophie Davis Genocide Prevention Fellow for 2018-2019, will help oversee and lead the project, working with Center staff and other fellows/consultants.

Research questions:

- How prevalent are different types of civilian-led actions to help prevent and mitigate mass atrocities within and across different types of contexts and phases of a mass atrocity episode?
- What factors explain variation in the effectiveness of civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?
- How can international donors and humanitarian organizations most effectively support civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?

Key audiences: Public and private donors, policymakers on civil society and humanitarian issues, NGOs, scholars.

Expected outputs: The project should produce a series of papers reporting on the different elements of the research and a policy brief that summarizes key findings and recommendations.