

Risk, Responsibility and the Limits of Mass Atrocity Prevention

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Abstract

Myanmar has become a defining test case for contemporary mass atrocity prevention, highlighting the challenges of responding to escalating risk across compounding crises. This paper analyses the limits of mass atrocity prevention in Myanmar through the lens of UK policy and practice. As the only UK mission to have formally institutionalised the agenda, the Myanmar case offers an opportunity to interrogate whether institutionalisation enables more effective practice. Drawing on government and civil society interviews and a review of academic and grey literatures, it shows how, despite the introduction of dedicated roles, risk-identification systems, and revised sanctions frameworks, the UK's response to subsequent atrocities — including post-coup violations and aid restrictions — reveals persistent patterns of reactive and incoherent engagement. It argues that the limits of UK atrocity prevention in Myanmar cannot be explained solely by a lack of capacity or political will. Rather, preventative action is mediated by leadership priorities, risk tolerance, and the extent to which responsibility is internalised by individual decision-makers. While institutional reform may enable the identification and communication of risk, it does not guarantee coherent or proactive response. The Myanmar case therefore illuminates a broader tension at the heart of mass atrocity prevention between rhetorical commitments and operational discretion. The findings suggest that embedding the agenda is insufficient without corresponding shifts in how responsibility is interpreted and acted upon, with implications for states and non-state protection actors alike.