11.3: Problems and Challenges

The world is more likely to respond to human protection crises today than it once was, but as Syria shows we are nowhere close to solving the problem of human insecurity. Even when the normative and political context allows for it, the effective protection of populations from atrocity crimes confronts significant practical challenges. It is important to be upfront about what these challenges are.

The first point is to recognise that there are significant limits to what outsiders can do to protect people in foreign countries. Many internal conflicts are not readily susceptible to outside mediation as they are so complex and fraught with danger that they can defy easy resolution. Concerted international action can sometimes protect populations or prevent mass atrocities, but the primary determinants of violence or peace typically rest within the country itself and the disposition of its leaders. From the United Nations’ perspective, this problem is compounded by the fact that it tends to be confronted only by the world’s most difficult cases. Situations usually reach the UN Security Council only when others have tried, and failed, to resolve them. As a rule of thumb, where conflicts have an easy remedy, solutions tend to be found at the local, national or regional level. The world body tends to assume the lead only on those crises for which others have found no solution. In such circumstances, a modest success rate might partly reflect the sheer difficulty of the cases presented to the United Nations system.

A second challenge is that human protection operates in a world of finite global capacity and competes with other cherished norms and values for attention and resources. This problem of limited resources is compounded by a climate of financial austerity arising out of the 2008 global financial crisis. Many major donors have cut their own national budgets and have imposed austerity measures on their own populations, putting pressure on their support for the protection of people in other countries. The harsh reality, therefore, is that in the near-term, the cause of human protection will not be able to call upon significant new resources.
A third challenge is to recognise that the pursuit of human protection is politically sensitive. Human protection is both enabled and constrained by politics and can generate acute controversies and disputes by, for instance, requiring that some states be identified as being at risk of a crisis and demanding actions that some governments might object to. Often, even long-term preventive measures entail a significant degree of intrusion into the domestic affairs of states, which is not likely to be always welcome. States jealously guard their sovereignty and are sensitive to perceived incursions on their rights or criticisms of their conduct or domestic conditions. As such, they rarely invite assistance or look kindly upon external efforts to prevent atrocities within their jurisdiction. It is important to remember that the United Nations’ activities are overseen by political (as opposed to judicial) organs comprised of sovereignty-wielding member states. One facet of the problem is that states sometimes judge that their own interests are best served by not preventing atrocity crimes. This can be seen over a wide range of cases, but perhaps none have been as striking as the Syrian example, where from 2011 the Security Council failed to act decisively as hundreds of thousands were killed and millions displaced. Historically, the United Nations has struggled to assert its primacy in such situations where the interests of powerful states, especially permanent members of the Security Council, are engaged with competing aims.

Another facet of the problem of ‘political will’ is that states are self-interested actors that prioritise the wellbeing of their own citizens. As such, they are generally reluctant to commit extensive resources to prevent atrocity crimes in other countries. The issue here is not whether governments support atrocity prevention as a goal, but the depth of their support relative to their other goals – including cherished domestic objectives such as healthcare and social welfare. Political and diplomatic capital is also a finite resource. Sometimes, states may judge that trade-offs have to be made to achieve the greatest good or least harm overall. For example, at the outset of the crisis in Darfur in 2003, several states decided not to press the government of Sudan too hard, fearing that this might jeopardise negotiations to end the government’s war with rebels in the south – who eventually seceded and founded their own state in 2011 with the creation of South Sudan.