

# The Effect of Development Assistance on Mass Atrocities and Closely-Related Outcomes

## Tools for Atrocity Prevention: Evidence Brief

*The 1979 Report of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, which led to the creation of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, stated, “Only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group.”*

*The “lessons learned” project of the Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is one way the institution seeks to carry out the charge to identify lessons from history that can potentially contribute to saving lives by preventing future genocides and related crimes against humanity.*

*To identify these insights, we reviewed academic articles and think tank reports, and interviewed experts. We then distilled this body of policy-relevant knowledge into an accessible, practical resource.*

*Read more about our approach at: [www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned](http://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned)*

## Definition

Development assistance is “government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries” (OECD). Development assistance is typically organized into sectors, including democracy, rights, and governance; economic growth; health; education; and humanitarian assistance (USAID). Our research review includes studies of the linkage between development assistance of any or all sectors with mass atrocities or closely related outcomes. As such, it is not a detailed review of alternative program-level interventions. Research reviews of programming options in conflict prevention and peacebuilding can be found from the [International Initiative for Impact Evaluation](#) and the [United Kingdom’s Department for International Development](#). Guidance on programming options to help prevent mass atrocities can be found from [USAID](#).

## Connection between development assistance and atrocity prevention strategies

If development assistance increases the expected benefits of alternative courses of action to committing mass atrocities, it would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities

## Overview

Our research review includes 41 reports that address the effects of development assistance on closely related outcomes, such as civilian killings, human rights violations, and conflict recurrence. We did not find any studies meeting our inclusion criteria that addressed the effects of development assistance on mass atrocities. Our research review found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether development assistance was effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes, and
- Limited evidence on which specific factors contribute to the effectiveness of development assistance in helping prevent mass atrocities.

## Success factors

*We list below only those factors on which we found relatively strong or moderate evidence that the factor is associated with development assistance being more effective at decreasing mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes. These include contextual factors, which describe the circumstances in which the tool is used but which are beyond the control of policymakers, and design factors, which describe the manner in which policymakers use the tool.*

## Contextual factors

CONTEXTUAL FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Local support for tool	Most of the local population and/or local civil society supports the use of the tool and perceives its use as legitimate.	Moderate	Conflict

## Design factors

DESIGN FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Unbiased implementer or intervention	The tool implementer or intervention is not biased toward either party. Bias refers to the posture of the intervener, not necessarily prejudices that the intervener might hold about parties.	Moderate	Conflict
Committed implementer	The tool implementer has a high level of commitment, resolve, or credibility, or has committed a great deal of resources toward use of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict
International support or coordination	There is a high degree of international support for the use of the tool, or the tool implementer coordinates with other international actors on the use of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict

## Case Illustrations

*Development assistance was used in both Colombia and Kenya to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.*

### Colombia (2000–16)

In 1964-65, leftist insurgent groups in Colombia, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), emerged and began using terrorist and extortion tactics aimed at overthrowing the Colombian government. In response, right-wing paramilitaries formed and consolidated under the United-Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) (Felter and Renwick 2017; CRS 2021). All sides in the conflict committed gross human rights violations, including kidnappings, assassinations, and massacres, and an estimated 260,000 people were killed, mostly civilians (CBC News 2018). From 2000 to 2016, the United States provided over \$10 billion to Plan Colombia—the country’s strategy for enhancing security and development—through annual appropriations legislation. Since 2002, Congress required certification that the government of Colombia and its military forces were complying with human rights standards in order to receive a mandated percentage of its aid package. Some observers claim that conditional US assistance led to a decrease in extrajudicial killings by the Colombian government (Haugard 2015), yet others cite an increase (Reyes 2010).

## Kenya (2008–13)

Violence following Kenya’s disputed December 2007 presidential election left more than 1,000 Kenyans dead and 500,000 displaced in the two months following the elections (CSIS 2009; Halakhe 2013, p. 5). Following a mediated power sharing agreement, the international community took action to provide funding for programs and projects designed to prevent and mitigate such violence in future elections. Ten countries and forty organizations directly contributed to the multinational effort, with the United States, through USAID, serving as the largest single donor, providing \$150 million over five years (Cho et al. 2015). This assistance included support for both local civil society and international organizations to implement projects aimed at hate speech monitoring, peace messaging, early warning systems, voter education, and securing and professionalizing elections and political parties (Cho et al. 2015). Kenya’s 2013 elections were also closely watched by outside observers as well as an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (Fagan 2013, p. 2). Despite electoral delays and a closely contested race, the elections went off without major violent incidents and saw a record 86 percent voter turnout (Kimenyi 2013; USAID 2014).

## Selected informational resources on US government use of development assistance

- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2022) on US foreign assistance programs and policy
- US government [website](#) that makes foreign assistance data available to the public

**The Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide**

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjoldt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.



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100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW Washington, DC 20024-2126 [ushmm.org](https://ushmm.org)