



# THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

## How to use this sheet:

This sheet describes the challenges facing the world community to protect civilians in armed conflict. It sets out 'the Responsibility to Protect' – a new doctrine adopted by the UN General Assembly and Security Council, and endorsed by the World Council of Churches, to address injustices like genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity, and explains why the Responsibility to Protect is essential for global peace and security.

## Use this sheet to:

- **Reflect on how to stop conflicts**
- **Raise awareness of the Responsibility to Protect in your church/community**
- **Find out more and take action:**  
[www.ncca.org.au/cwslr2p](http://www.ncca.org.au/cwslr2p)

## The need for a new way of thinking

Violent atrocities such as the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia in 1995, or the bloodshed in Sierra Leone in 1997 have punctuated human history. When the dust settles and the full scale of the human suffering is apparent, we are left asking how it was allowed to happen? why were their cries for help ignored? and how can we prevent it from happening again?

The truth is these horrible atrocities are neither unavoidable nor unpreventable. In the most violent armed conflicts and genocides of the last 40 years, the international community has simply lacked the political will to act. While developed nations have feared expensive peacekeeping operations and long-term involvement in rebuilding and development, developing nations have fiercely guarded their sovereignty and stuck to the age-old doctrine of not interfering in the internal affairs of another state.

International debates over how to respond to atrocities such as Rwanda, or now Darfur in Sudan, have thus tended to focus on what right the international community has to militarily 'intervene' in these countries. Debates thus, revolved around the 'right to intervene' and the interests of powerful nation-states



*It is in those who are most vulnerable that Christ becomes visible for us (Mt 25: 40).*

instead of the state's obligation to protect or the needs of those civilians at risk. The result was that it was difficult to reach any decision to act and the international community was rarely compelled to act unless the atrocities became so bad, and the media coverage so great, that they were compelled by public opinion to act, and by that time the damage was usually done.

Over the past five years, however, the focus of the debate has changed enormously.

**In 2006, the World Council of Churches endorsed the responsibility to protect doctrine, calling it "an ecumenical responsibility [to protect the vulnerable], conceiving the world as one household of God, who is the creator of all."**

## The responsibility to protect doctrine

In 2005, the UN Summit of world leaders and then the UN Security Council adopted an unprecedented new international doctrine: the 'responsibility to protect' civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

The doctrine has far reaching consequences, but most importantly it removes the international community's excuse for inaction and creates a benchmark which all countries must now uphold.



**The responsibility to protect doctrine changes the definition of sovereignty. Sovereignty no longer means “the right to control” people and borders at all costs, but now means “the responsibility to protect” civilians, especially from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. When a state is failing to protect its civilians, the responsibility to protect falls on the international community to prevent, react and rebuild areas affected by mass suffering and atrocities.**

### A responsibility to prevent, react and rebuild

The responsibility to protect doctrine (R2P) recognises and addresses the root causes of civil conflict, in order to **prevent** atrocities. However, it also recognises that prevention efforts may fail, or arrive too late, and so it also offers a spectrum of **reaction** options. Finally, R2P recognises that without effective **rebuilding** measures that establish the rule of law, good government and reconstruction, regions recovering from violent conflict are likely to erupt again.

#### Preventing and Rebuilding

**Prevention** is the most important aspect of the responsibility to protect doctrine. It is also the broadest responsibility, because any activity that positively contributes to the stability and well being of a country and its people, helps to prevent future civil conflict and mass human suffering. Such activities are also vital to recreate stability after violent conflicts, and form part of the responsibility to **rebuild**. This means that development and poverty reduction programs like education, health, water and food security projects, and injustice response programs like peace building, human security and refugee assistance projects, are encompassed in the responsibility to protect doctrine.

#### Reacting

“From the church and ecumenical perspectives, if intervention occurs, it is because prevention has failed.” WCC statement, Feb 2006.

At the most extreme, **reaction** may include military intervention. However, the large majority of reaction measures are non-violent, including things like targeted sanctions and political pressure from neighbouring countries. If military intervention becomes necessary, it must satisfy the “just cause” threshold, which states that large scale loss of life must be imminent or actually happening before any action can be authorised. It must also meet the ‘threshold criteria’, which includes things like “right intention” and “reasonable prospects of averting suffering”. These criteria mean that the R2P doctrine could never be used to justify military interventions like the one in Iraq because its primary purpose was not humanitarian.

### Christian Perspectives

We recognise that some churches refuse the use of force in all circumstances, and that this approach should be respected as an expression of Christian Responsibility. However, the World Council of Churches also points out that “just as individuals and communities in stable and affluent societies are able in emergencies to call on armed police to come to their aid when they experience unusual or extraordinary threats of violence, churches recognise that people in much more perilous circumstances should have the right to call for and have access to protection.”

#### Why is it important to think about the Responsibility to Protect within my church community?

As members of the global Christian Community, we recognise the universality of human dignity, and our personal responsibilities to assist those in need. It is important for you to consider for yourself, and as a group, how these principles should apply on the global scale, especially when the people most in need may be across oceans and beyond foreign borders.

**“To act before a crisis is present requires a special sensitivity to and understanding of the conditions and needs of people, which in turn requires the active cooperation of civil society, and especially the faith communities which are rooted in the daily spiritual and physical realities of people. Faith communities are playing a major role in trust-building and trust finding processes in many contexts of crisis, such as truth and reconciliation commissions, trauma-healing centres, providing safe meeting places for adversarial groups, etc.” WCC statement, Feb 2006.**

In developing countries, faith-based groups like NCCA-Christian World Service’s overseas partners are often the first source of assistance for vulnerable people in emergencies, and are best placed to provide on-the-ground support for prevention and rebuilding programs. They also play a vital role in alerting the international community to the threat of mass violence in their region. In developed nations like Australia, support for the doctrine of R2P by groups like CWS signals to our political leaders that protecting civilians from mass atrocities is a moral imperative.

It may be too late to answer the calls of those who perished in Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Sierra Leone. But for those suffering extreme insecurity and imminent ethnic cleansing in Darfur, Sudan today, and victims of crimes against humanity in Burma right now, the responsibility to protect doctrine has come not a moment too soon.