

Summary report Workshop on R2P at 20: The Search for Effective Atrocity's Prevention and Protection in the Region Phnom Penh, Cambodia

The workshop was designed to discuss the twenty-year legacy of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and address the widening gap between global principles and regional implementation in Southeast Asia.

The Cambodian Center for Regional Studies, the Nelson Mandela Centre (at Chulalongkorn University), and the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (at The University of Queensland) co-hosted a workshop on 23–24 March 2026, to evaluate the twenty-year legacy of the R2P norm. Held in Phnom Penh, the event brought together over 50 participants (including representatives from the Cambodian Senate and National Assembly, government officials, academic researchers, and university students) to address the gap between global atrocity prevention principles and regional implementation in Southeast Asia.

Opening Session

During the opening session, the organizers emphasized that R2P remains an essential moral framework in an increasingly volatile global landscape. Mr. Him Raksme, Executive Director of CCRS, said that sovereignty must be viewed as a responsibility rather than an absolute shield against accountability, and mentioned that R2P remains one of the most important principles around which individual states and the international community can collectively work together through enhancing state capacities, and international cooperation to protect vulnerable populations who face the threat of atrocity crimes.

Dr. Sarah Teitt, Director of APR2P, argued that R2P provides the necessary moral clarity to prevent a descent into “the law of the jungle”, where power alone dictates legitimacy. She noted that R2P is consistent with existing international law and the UN Charter and was designed to constrain unilateral interventions and promote multilateral collective action through the UN. R2P serves to anchor the international community in a people-centered, rules-based order.

Adding a regional perspective, Dr. Bhanubatra Jittiang, Director of NMC, highlighted the profound interdependence of Southeast Asia, urging states to move beyond political mistrust and strengthen habits of cooperation to protect human dignity across borders. He emphasized that if Southeast Asia is to contribute meaningfully to atrocity prevention, it must do so in ways that are regionally grounded, politically thoughtful, and centered on the protection of people.

Session 1: The Progress and Challenges to R2P

Focusing on the evolution of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) over the past twenty years, the session provided an in-depth analysis of its current standing. Dr. Noel Morada, a Research Professor at NMC and Fellow at APR2P, highlighted the norm's progress and setbacks, specifically championing a “bottom-up” strategy. He emphasized that international standards like R2P do not naturally filter down to regional or national levels without deliberate local engagement. Instead, he emphasized that the principle must resonate with local stakeholders by deepening understanding through engagement with domestic advocates and building capacity through educational partnerships with academic institutions.

Professor Kevin Nauen, Senior Fellow at CCRS, examined the “Libya hangover,” describing how the 2011 intervention damaged R2P’s reputation by making it look like a mechanism for regime change. This shift has led to a return of veto-induced gridlock within the UN Security Council concerning crises in Gaza and Myanmar.

Nevertheless, he pointed to the "judicialisation" of the norm as a promising modern alternative, where middle powers leverage the ICJ and ICC to pursue accountability.

Dr. Kittipos Phuttivanich, Assistant Professor, Ramkhamhaeng University, concluded the session by identifying structural paradoxes, specifically how major powers weaponize protection concerns to justify aggression and how the R2P framework remains dangerously limited to the physical domain, ignoring the rising threats in cyber and cognitive spheres.

The following Q&A session, led by CCRS Deputy Director Mr. Chhuon Vannadasambath, addressed the collapse of global protection systems and how R2P can remain functional. The dialogue stressed that when national governments fail, it is vital to empower non-state actors—like the media and civil society—to step in.

Key insights from the discussion included:

- **Sovereignty as Responsibility:** R2P supports state sovereignty rather than undermining it, provided sovereignty is viewed as a state's duty to protect its citizens through effective governance.
- **The Bottom-Up Approach:** To ensure R2P isn't dismissed as a "Western" concept, it must be rooted locally through partnerships with universities, think tanks, and community organizations.
- **The Multi-Domain Challenge:** Modern prevention strategies must expand into the cognitive and cyber realms, as AI-driven hate speech and digital misinformation are increasingly the catalysts for real-world violence.

Session 2: Relevance of R2P in the context of Southeast Asia

In Session 2 entitled "Relevance of R2P in the context of Southeast Asia", the presenters explored the "uncomfortable relevance" of the Responsibility to Protect norm within a region characterized by a rigid adherence to non-interference.

Dr. Noel Morada argued that while ASEAN possesses visible normative architecture—including the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission for Human Rights (AICHR)—it fundamentally lacks the political courage to prioritize civilian protection over state sovereignty. Using the Myanmar crisis as a primary case study, he pointed out that states in the region still use traditional conception of sovereignty as a shield against accountability instead of upholding the primary responsibility of states to protect populations from atrocity crimes.

Dr. Sarah Teitt expanded the scope of R2P to include non-traditional multi-domain threats, specifically identifying the systematic abuse within regional scam compounds as potential crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute. The presentations collectively highlighted that R2P is most relevant in Southeast Asia not for its successes, but for how the ongoing suffering in places like Myanmar and the border regions of Cambodia and Thailand exposes the urgent need for a shift from event-based reaction to risk-based prevention.

Mr. Ek Bunly, Senior Fellow at CCRS, emphasized the importance of the relationship between political will of states and institutionalization of atrocity prevention in the context of Southeast Asia. He said that ASEAN should stop treating humanitarian assistance as a substitute for political strategy; and civilian protection should be institutionalized inside ASEAN regional practice.

During the Q&A session moderated by Mr. Him Raksmeay, participants explored the practical obstacles to making R2P a formal institution, weighing the influence of political will against structural design. A key point of the discussion was the "empathy gap" within ASEAN; speakers proposed that incorporating empathy-based

assessments into policy decisions could help turn official rhetoric into meaningful action. The key takeaways from this panel comprised:

- From Reaction to Prevention: The region must move away from “event-based reaction” toward “risk-based prevention”, which includes establishing formal atrocity-risk assessments and early-warning mechanisms.
- Utilizing Alternative Platforms: When ASEAN is deadlocked by the “non-interference” norm, member states and civil society should utilize international platforms like the UN Human Rights Council and the ICJ to seek accountability and protection.
- Digital Literacy as Prevention: In the “multi-domain” world, digital and AI literacy are essential tools for atrocity prevention to counter the mis/disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric that often trigger physical violence.
- The Role of the Next Generation: Long-term regional change depends on young people internalizing R2P principles and pursuing leadership roles to create a “bottom-up” culture of accountability within state institutions.

Session 3: Pathways for Advancing Atrocity Prevention and Civilian Protection

In Session 3, speakers proposed practical steps for integrating R2P principles into the ASEAN framework. Mr. Soy Kimsan, a lecturer at RULE, highlighted the importance of a “bottom-up” strategy to foster a culture of prevention and respect for international laws like R2P. He advocated for academic mentorship and suggested launching a joint Cambodian-Thai digital platform to counter nationalist misinformation on social media, which often acts as a catalyst for physical violence

Dr. Sarah Teitt built on this by advocating for the operationalization of the ASEAN Declaration on the Culture of Prevention, arguing that the region should focus on national prevention strategies that address root causes like identity-based exclusion and digital-era risks.

From a regional policy perspective, H.E. Edmund Bon, Representative of Malaysia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), proposed an eight-point roadmap for ASEAN, which included expanding the AHA Centre’s mandate to address human-made disasters and strengthening conflict resolution protocols.

Amb. Pou Sothirak, Distinguished Senior Advisor to CCRS, stated that Cambodia’s tragic history with the Khmer Rouge grants it the moral authority to lead ASEAN by example, specifically through the creation of a National R2P Plan that filters high-level political will down into institutional reality.

The discussion, moderated by Mr. Him Rotha, Deputy Director of CCRS, examined why ASEAN prioritises state interests over human protection. The panel identified a widespread misunderstanding of R2P as a primary obstacle, specifically how the region often uses humanitarian aid as a placeholder or substitute for actual political strategy.

Crucially, the discussion argued that ASEAN’s “non-interference” principle must not result in impunity; instead, stakeholders should turn to international bodies like the ICJ or the UN Human Rights Council when regional efforts stall. A major highlight was the concept of “People-to-People R2P,” where students and youth advocates explored how digital diplomacy and cross-border tolerance can drive long-term atrocity prevention.

The key takeaways of the third session pertained:

- Operationalize Existing Frameworks: Rather than creating new doctrines, ASEAN should use existing tools like the Culture of Prevention to address modern risks such as hate speech and disinformation.
- Expand Humanitarian Mandates: The mandate of the AHA Centre should be formally expanded beyond natural disasters to provide a framework for responding to human-made atrocity crises.
- National Prevention Plans: States should move from vague commitments to evidenced-based National R2P/Prevention Plans that include domestic risk assessments and early warning systems.

Closing Session

At the closing, Dr. Noel Morada reiterated his view that the bottom-up, whole-of-society' approach to atrocity prevention is still an important strategy for promoting R2P in the region.

It is vital to stress that R2P is not fundamentally about intervention; rather, it supports sovereignty when grounded in good governance, the rule of law, and human rights. Success requires a collective effort: society must denounce abuses, develop early warning systems, combat hate speech, and foster empathy for those in need

Dr. Sarah Teitt shared three vital insights: (1) R2P offers a clear normative framework that reinforces the duty of both states and the global community to prevent atrocities; (2) it challenges us to broaden our moral perspective, viewing atrocities anywhere not as isolated tragedies, but as a collective failure; and (3) it is rooted in a people-centric, rules-based order that upholds international law and the UN Charter. She recommended that CCRS create a concrete work plan to transition from dialogue to coalition-building, reaffirming the APR2P Centre's commitment to supporting Cambodia in advancing R2P and atrocity prevention.

In closing, Ambassador Pou Sothirak framed the workshop as a critical "wake-up call" for Southeast Asia. He emphasized that fostering regional maturity and empathy is essential to transforming the area into one free from atrocities and suffering—specifically by resolving the ongoing conflict between Cambodia and Thailand through improved relations.

He also addressed the state of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), noting that while this 2005 UN commitment aims to prevent mass crimes like genocide and ethnic cleansing, it faces significant political and implementation challenges. Ultimately, he called on every individual to take personal responsibility for promoting and implementing R2P within their own borders to stop such crimes from occurring.

CCRS expressed their appreciation to APR2P and NMC for the collaboration in making this workshop possible and to the participants for their active engagements in the workshop.