

**The Responsibility to Protect: 10 years on
Canadian International Council
8 May 2015**

This year marks the 10th anniversary since the historic endorsement of R2P principle by the 150 heads of state and government at the 2005 World Summit. The Responsibility to Protect principle states that when a state fails to protect its own people from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity, the international community has the responsibility to do so. Since its first inception through the 2001 ICISS report (sponsored by the Canadian government), R2P has travelled a remarkable journey in the realm of international relations. In light of on-going crises in Syria, the Central African Republic, Yemen and many other parts of the world, R2P remains more relevant than ever before.

As part of the advocacy campaign, “R2P at Crossroads: Ten Years since the 2005 World Summit Outcome,” the Canadian Centre for R2P and OpenCanada.org have partnered to engage with some of R2P’s leading scholars, activists and political representatives to reflect upon the evolution of paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome in the last decade.

(...)

What turned your attention towards R2P?

My background is in political activism. I was active in the international anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s and then I worked for the movement in South Africa during the transition to democracy. My family comes from Northern Ireland, where I was also involved in political activism during the peace process of the 1990s. I also had an academic career that was largely focused, unsurprisingly, around understanding armed political conflict and how to resolve it. But I don’t think it was until I was working in East Timor in 2001 and 2002 that I started to think more seriously about mass atrocities and their aftermath. I also visited Rwanda with a group of university students from across the African continent and that experience, especially coming face to face with both survivors and perpetrators of the genocide, had a profound impact on me. Some years later, I met [former Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs] Gareth Evans and we started talking about R2P and how it could help break the politics of indifference, help end impunity and now here I am.

(...)

What turned your attention to R2P?

The increasingly urgent need for prevention, and the ability to respond effectively to mass atrocity crimes. Our collective failure to prevent atrocities in the Holocaust, the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and more recent tragedies, such as Syria, that highlight the failure of individual states to protect their populations.

Although my previous academic research did not focus on conflicts, it did focus on prevention and response, particularly the prevention of climate change and adverse health effects, as well as the prevention of and response to pandemic influenza outbreaks. With respect to influenza, I led an expedition to the Arctic to search for the cause of the 1918 influenza, which killed between 20-to-40 million people. I hoped that finding the cause and describing the causal agent might allow scientists to improve current influenza vaccines, test present drugs against the deadly flu, and be better prepared should a similarly deadly flu virus return. While the two fields are very different, *prevention* is the unifying element: we must examine and understand the root causes and drivers of mass atrocity crimes to better understand how to prevent them from recurring in the future.

(...)

What turned your attention towards R2P?

In 1999 to 2000, as Assistant Professor at the University of Exeter, I was writing a lot on humanitarian intervention – particularly after Kosovo – and this attracted the Research Analysts Department of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who regularly invited me to their symposiums and brainstorming seminars. When the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) decided to have one of its meetings in London, Adam Roberts (Oxford), Nick Wheeler (Aber) and I were invited to produce the concept paper to trigger the discussion. At that meeting, that FCO convened in London and I had the pleasure to meet Axworthy, Gareth Evans, Mohammad Sianoun, Michael Ignatieff, Ramesh Thakur and others and I was very honored to be part of this meeting which – together with other regional meetings – for the first time suggested to start using ‘R2P’ instead of ‘humanitarian intervention’, turning the focus from the interests of states to intervene (where there can never be any consensus) to the interests of victims of mass atrocities to survive. The report of ICISS – its bibliography and research – I consider to be still one of the best ever collection on this very controversial topic.

(...)

What turned your attention towards R2P?

While pursuing my Master’s degree I had the privilege of befriending a teacher who proved influential in encouraging and fostering my desire to contribute towards ending the commission of atrocity crimes.

I’ll never forget the stories shared with me about his experience as a boy fleeing with his family from Rwanda following the violence that began in 1959, seeking refuge in neighboring countries to escape attacks against him because of his Tutsi identity. Even decades later, he told the story with a sense of anxiety and fear, as if it were being relived in his mind in that very moment. My teacher would later introduce me to friends that had survived the 1994 genocide who, upon learning of my studies, were kind enough to share with me their stories of survival.

(...)

A necessary step for the future of R2P will be to increase understanding of how the norm relates with other agendas, which ties to the third point of the need for civil society actors to further engage across sectors. This will provide for a holistic comprehension of how various thematic issues and the actions taken to advance them support the prevention of and response to atrocity crimes (and vice versa), which will be instrumental for identifying policies and practices to institutionalize R2P at national, regional and international levels.

Please access the full interview [here](#)