Introduction

My aim in this presentation is to analyze the extent to which African governments have supported the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle. After providing a short overview of the scope and focus of the R2P principle I then describe some of the main areas of contention that still surround it. In the second section I map out a spectrum of possible positions that states could plausibly adopt towards the R2P principle. I also offer some examples of where African governments seem to fall along this spectrum. Finally, I've been asked to briefly address the two issues of African agency and the extent to which International Relations (IR) theory is useful in thinking about these issues.

What is R2P?

I understand R2P in the sense used by the UN’s member states in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Since then, the UN Secretary-General and his special adviser, Edward Luck, have engaged in an effort to operationalize the R2P principle. The result was the Secretary-General's report, Implementing the Responsibility to Protect of January 2009. This argued that R2P rested on three pillars:

1. **State responsibility:** each state is responsible for using appropriate and necessary means to protect its own population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, as well as from their incitement.

2. **International assistance:** UN member states will help each other exercise this responsibility. This includes specific commitments to help states build the capacity to protect their populations from the four crimes and to assist those which are under stress before crises and conflicts erupt.

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3. **Timely and decisive action:** the third pillar refers to international society’s collective responsibility to respond through the UN in a timely and decisive manner, using Chapters VI, VII and VIII of the UN Charter as appropriate, when national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from the four crimes listed above.

Understood in this manner, we can quickly clarify the scope of R2P and dispel some pernicious myths about it.³

1. R2P’s scope is limited to the four crimes of genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes. It is not about responding to relatively minor abuses of human rights or natural disasters; although it is fair to say that there is some debate about what constitutes a crime against humanity and whether these might plausible occur in the aftermath of such disasters.

2. The overriding objective of R2P is the prevention of these atrocity crimes.

3. R2P is in the UN Secretary-General’s phrase an ‘ally of sovereignty’.⁴ More specifically, it is premised upon, and seeks to promote, an idea of responsible sovereignty which is based on the will of the people.

4. R2P is not synonymous with military intervention. Although the Sudanese government recently claimed that R2P ‘equals humanitarian intervention’, this is incorrect.⁵ Under pillar three, the UN Security Council can respond to the four crimes by employing coercive measures, including military force. But a) military force is not the only possible response, and b) this is nothing new – the Security Council has always been able to use coercion to address threats to international peace and security.

5. As a consequence, the R2P principle does not change the international law on the use of force. Rather, it is a political and moral principle which adds greater weight to calls for states to live up to their existing obligations under international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and the laws of war.

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⁵ Statement to the UN General Assembly, July 2009, p.4. Available at http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/Sudan_ENG.pdf
While these points help clarify the scope of R2P some key questions and areas of controversy remain. These have tended to revolve around the trigger mechanism for R2P action and the role of the UN Security Council:

- Who gets to determine when mass atrocities have been committed?
- When should coercive measures be employed?
- What happens when the UN Security Council chooses not to engage in decisive action while atrocities are committed (e.g. Rwanda’s genocide in 1994)?
- What happens when the UN Security Council is unable to agree on the appropriate response to atrocities (e.g. Kosovo in 1999)?
- What happens when the UN Security Council ignores the commission of atrocities (e.g. Burundi in 1993)?

### International Support for R2P

The R2P principle has clearly come a long way in the last ten years. But it is not without its detractors. Indeed, it is relatively easy to identify the primary opponents of the R2P principle; among the most vocal have been Venezuela, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Pakistan and Nicaragua.⁶

But it is also important to remember that there are considerable differences among states that claim to be supporters of R2P. At an abstract level, it is possible to identify at least six different degrees of support for a principle like R2P.

- **Hypocrites**: these governments offer rhetorical support for the principle but engage in contradictory action which undermines it in practice. In Africa, an example of hypocritical behaviour would be Rwanda’s claim to support the idea that non-combatants should not be massacred while at the same time permitting its troops to indiscriminately targeted civilians in displacement camps in eastern Zaire. A similar point could be made about many governments that use force against their own civilians.

- **Waiverers**: these governments publicly claim to support the general principle but raise questions and concerns about certain aspects of it and prove unwilling to invest significant resources to promote it in particular cases. African examples might include Morocco, Egypt, the Gambia and Algeria,

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each of which has raised concerns or questions about the current formulation of R2P.

- **Instrumentalists**: these governments claim to support the principle but will act only when doing so is useful to promote their own instrumental purposes. Thus while they may sometimes act in accordance with the principle it is not out of a respect for that principle. It is rather difficult to find good examples of this type of activity, in part because there have been relatively few cases of R2P-inspired action. However, it seems fair to suggest that given the significant ways in which the response to the war in Darfur, Sudan was linked to R2P those countries that claimed to support the R2P but did not act to support the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) would be susceptible to charges of instrumentalism.\(^7\)

- **Institutionalists**: these governments not only provide rhetorical support and act in response to particular cases but are also willing to support the building of institutions which embody the values at the heart of the principle. Apart from the European Union, the African continent has taken the greatest steps towards institutionalizing the principles of R2P into its peace and security architecture.\(^8\) Given the significant resonance between Africa’s new peace and security architecture and the themes set out in R2P, it would not be unreasonable to place the major players in the process of developing the African Union and its supporting institutions within this category. Prime examples would include South Africa, Nigeria and Senegal.

- **True believers**: governments in this category not only provide rhetorical and practical support for the principle, they also internalize it to the extent that its values form a core part of their identity and self-image. In Africa, governments that seem to come closest to the idea of R2P true believers would include Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Lesotho and Benin.

- **Champions**: these are true believers who actively try and disseminate their beliefs and persuade others of their virtues. In Africa, I think Ghana most closely fits the bill. In addition, it is worth noting that despite its sometimes

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\(^7\) The key contributors of troops and police to AMIS between 2004 and 2007 were Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, Ghana, and Gambia (each of whom contributed more than 300 uniformed personnel). As of 31 August 2007, another 23 African states also contributed uniformed personnel. This means that, excluding Sudan, 23 members of the AU did not provide uniformed personnel to AMIS (Angola, Benin, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, the Comoros, DRC, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, SADR, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Zimbabwe). See *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2008* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), p.360.

hypocritical behaviour, Paul Kagame’s government in Rwanda has also played the role of championing the R2P idea.

Having created these pigeonholes I should acknowledge that it is difficult and somewhat misleading to try and force states into one category: their policies are usually more complex and shifting than this framework suggests and they may also fit into more than one category. Nevertheless, I think these distinctions draw our attention to different ways in which states might support (and undermine) R2P and hence provide clues to some of the policy challenges that might be needed to bolster the principle.

It is also important to note that my analysis is based primarily on the public statements made by African governments in a variety of international forums (including the 2005 World Summit, the UN Security Council’s debates about civilian protection, the debate over how to respond to the war in Darfur, and the General Assembly debate on R2P in July 2009). It is therefore impossible to place the large number of African states which have tended to say very little about the R2P in such public. At the General Assembly debate in July 2009, for instance, only 18 African states made statements (although more were represented if we take account of statements made on behalf of international institutions such as the Non-Aligned Movement which contains many African members).

**African Agency and International Relations Theory**

Finally, I’ve been asked to address two other issues concerning IR theory and questions of African agency.

My general sense is that African states have always enjoyed a significant degree of agency (although some clearly have more influence than others and we shouldn’t generalize about a mythical and monolithic “Africa”). This is because of several factors:

1. In the post-Cold War period, Africa has not been a high strategic priority for Western governments. As a consequence, there has been an unwillingness to invest large amounts of resources (financial, military or political) in order to change outcomes on the ground.

2. The fear of looking colonial is still important in Western calculations.

3. Particularly when dealing with authoritarian African governments, external powers have generated rather little in the way of leverage. Think of how difficult it has been for the UK to generate the kind of outcomes it wanted to see in Zimbabwe, Sudan, the DRC or even Sierra Leone. The latter should be

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For a discussion on the first four of these issues see Williams, ‘The “Responsibility to Protect”’. 

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a particularly worrying case given that after nearly a decade of serious engagement by the UK government, Sierra Leone continues to languish near the very bottom of the UN Development Programme’s most recent Human Development Index.\textsuperscript{10}

In terms of IR theory, I think that much of it is not particularly helpful for thinking about these issues – indeed, I find myself reading less and less of the explicitly theoretical debates in the field because I think they are too divorced from these issues. IR theory is still generally engaged in debates about how the world’s most powerful states think and behave; there is much less emphasis on the view from the margins. That said, I think two areas are particularly helpful:

1. **Critical Security Studies (CSS):** this is an approach that puts the most vulnerable humans at the centre of the agenda and tries to think of ways that they might be made more secure.\textsuperscript{11} It suggests that African (and foreign) governments are often a major part of the security problem as well as part of the potential solution.\textsuperscript{12}

2. **International norm dynamics:**\textsuperscript{13} Of particular relevance is Amitav Acharya’s emphasis on global-regional interaction and what he calls “norm localization.” For Acharya, localization is about ‘a dynamic congruence-building process’ where ‘transnational norms’ meet ‘preexisting regional and normative social orders’. The key agents in this process are what he calls ‘insider proponents’ because ultimately in the localization process, ‘the initiative to seek change normally belongs to the local agent.’\textsuperscript{14} These proponents will build congruence between transnational norms and local beliefs and practices. If opportunities for localization are not apparent, successful norm diffusion is unlikely, at least not beyond a rhetorical or instrumental level of commitment. In Acharya’s framework, localization ‘may start with a reinterpretation and re-representation of the outside norm … but may extend into more complex processes of reconstitution to make an outside norm congruent with a preexisting local


\textsuperscript{12} For an attempt to apply these ideas to contemporary Africa see Paul D. Williams, ‘Thinking about security in Africa’, *International Affairs*, 83:6 (2007), pp.1021-38.


normative order. It is also a process in which the role of local actors is more crucial than that of outside actors.\textsuperscript{15}

**Conclusions**

Events on the continent (especially the atrocities in Rwanda and Darfur) have played an important catalytic role in the development of the R2P idea.

Compared to some other parts of the world, Africa has made a significant degree of headway in institutionalizing the core values of the R2P, at least on paper.

There is no consensus within African international society about R2P; either among its governments or its peoples. Nevertheless, within the continent some patterns are starting to emerge about the status of the R2P principle.

Challenge hypocrites; persuade the waiverers; watch out for the instrumentalists; support the institutionalists, true believers and especially the champions.

\textsuperscript{15} Acharya, ‘How Ideas Spread’, p.244.