Protection Cluster

10 October 2023

Key points

- Try to achieve consensus with cluster members on as many issues and questions as possible, both on cluster products and initiatives and on how the cluster functions. The cluster belongs to its members: empower them to decide how it works, so they can feel responsible for it.

- Engage with cluster members. The cluster lead agency should support the work of all the cluster's members, and make sure the response always meets minimum standards. Do not try to achieve these goals alone.

- Engage with the sub-cluster lead agencies. They bring their technical expertise, knowledge and institutional capacity to the cluster.

- Engage with national authorities and international actors, both civilian and military. Advocacy is a key component of any response: it starts by establishing contacts and working relationships with all key stakeholders.

- Engage with other clusters and relevant interlocutors (such as peacekeeping missions). The protection cluster has expertise in, and is responsible for, protection activities. However, protection is not achieved by protection cluster activities alone. Engage other clusters and actors and understand the impact of their activities on the protection of affected populations. The protection cluster should facilitate analysis of protection risks for other actors and help to design appropriate responses. In particular, protection clusters should work closely with CCCM and shelter clusters, which UNHCR also leads, to make sure that activities, advocacy, and protection responses are complementary.

1. Overview

Protection clusters bring together protection partners who have the necessary expertise, resources, access and capacity. They are integral to the cluster approach adopted by the Inter-
UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) and co-leads the Global Cluster for Shelter and the Global Cluster for Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM). Its priorities are to ensure effective leadership, coordination, advocacy and operational delivery at country level, and to drive and influence the development of global policy on protection in humanitarian action, including protection of IDPs in particular.

2. Main guidance

Underlying rationale / objective of the approach or system

At sector level, protection clusters should make it possible to prevent and respond to human rights violations and meet the protection needs of affected populations in a coordinated and predictable manner. By collecting and sharing information on protection risks and needs, and applying an integrated approach to assessment, monitoring and analysis, protection clusters can identify protection priorities that should guide the development and implementation of sectoral strategies.

At inter-agency level, the protection cluster is responsible of supporting the development of overarching multi-sector protection strategies in light of the 2013 IASC Statement on the Centrality of Protection emphasizing the protection clusters fundamental role in providing sound protection analysis, promoting protection and guiding decision-making as well as the priorities of a humanitarian response.

Equally valuable is the technical guidance and advice that they can provide the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), for example when it mainstreams protection in programmes or implements IASC commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP).

Protection clusters (and UNHCR Representatives by virtue of their leadership role):
- Coordinate [community-based protection](#) and solution-oriented interventions and services.
- Promote the [Centrality of Protection](#) in the overall humanitarian response.
- Provide comprehensive and timely protection analysis to HCTs.
- Train and guide other clusters in mainstreaming protection and promoting AAP.
- Seek to ensure that protection drives HCT strategies, advocacy and response plans.
Policy, strategy and/or guidance

The IASC’s Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level (July 2015) is the principal reference document for clusters. It describes their activation, de-activation, core functions, and other features.

Under the Transformative Agenda, IASC Principals have agreed that the activation of clusters should be more strategic, less automatic, and time limited. Accordingly, Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) should recommend their activation only when gaps in the enabling environment warrant. The criteria for cluster activation are met when:

- Response and coordination gaps exist due to a sharp deterioration or significant change in the humanitarian situation.
- Existing national response or coordination capacity is unable to meet needs in a manner that respects humanitarian principles, due to the scale of need, the number of actors involved, the need for a more complex multi-sectoral approach, or other constraints on the ability to respond or apply humanitarian principles.

Before recommending the activation of a cluster, the HC must consult the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and secure its agreement (including on which clusters to activate). The HC’s recommendation is then sent to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), who consults the IASC Principals and communicates their decision to the HC.

Structure and responsibilities of a protection cluster at field level

The structure of a protection cluster should be flexible, and adequate to respond to the scale and complexity of a particular crisis, and to work with sub clusters and sub-national clusters.

In accordance with the Transformative Agenda, UNHCR leads protection clusters in conflict-induced crises. Areas of Responsibility (AORs) are coordinated by the following agency focal points: Child Protection by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); Gender-Based Violence by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF; Housing, Land and Property by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UN-Habitat; and Mine Action by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS). Final arrangements at country-level should be dictated by operational circumstances, including the presence and capacity of protection actors.

In situations of natural disaster, leadership of the protection cluster is determined by the relative in-country capacities of UNHCR, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and UNICEF. These three agencies agree on leadership, under the overall leadership of the HC, after consulting each other.

The IASC included the concept of ‘provider of last resort’ in its cluster approach to guarantee predictability and accountability in humanitarian action. It is an essential element of UNHCR’s accountability as cluster lead. UNHCR is expected to do its utmost to fill critical gaps in funding, access to populations, or security, while working with the Humanitarian Coordinator and donors.
to mobilize resources, meet security challenges and remove obstacles to access.

Protection clusters are increasingly co-facilitated by an NGO. This can enhance overall support and improve coordination by bringing in specific expertise and analysis and expanding the partnership network. Co-facilitation with an NGO requires a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the NGO co-facilitator.

Under the Transformative Agenda, a cluster's core functions include:

- Needs assessment, analysis and prioritization, to inform strategic decision-making;
- Service delivery support (including elimination of gaps and duplication);
- Planning and strategy development; and
- Advocacy and fundraising.

To fulfil UNHCR’s protection cluster commitments, the following posts are recommended at country level, at a minimum, under the overall direction of the Representative:

- A dedicated Protection Cluster Coordinator (PCC) (P4 or P5). He or she should be supervised by the Representative and have direct access to the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Operations Cell for advice and guidance. (See Field Protection Cluster Coordinators Model Terms of Reference and UNHCR's internal job descriptions).
- A dedicated Protection Information Management Officer (P2 or P3), to be supervised by the PCC.
- Depending on the humanitarian response's size and scale, it may be necessary to designate a full time post (P3 or P4) to coordinate sub-national protection clusters under the supervision of the Head of Sub- or Field Office(s).
- A Protection Officer for protection cluster support (P2 or P3), to be supervised by the PCC.
- A Protection Officer (P3 or P4), to represent UNHCR as an operational partner in the protection cluster.

UNHCR's protection cluster commitments are to:

- Identify and engage partners (including government bodies) to participate in the protection cluster.
- Develop terms of reference for the protection cluster, covering its scope, criteria for participation, and structure (including sub-clusters and sub-national clusters).
- Lead preparation of a cluster strategy with cluster partners.
- Undertake advocacy on protection.
- Promote community-based engagement, including for the purpose of carrying out comprehensive assessments and analysing protection risks.
- Provide the HCT with sound protection analysis, which can guide its decision-making and help set priorities for advocacy and programming.
- Engage other clusters, both in analysing protection risks and needs and in assessing the impact of programmes on the protection of crisis-affected communities.
- Support efforts by each sector to mainstream protection in their assessments and in the design, implementation and monitoring of programmes.
- Manage protection information products, including those that report on progress and
assess the overall impact of the activities of protection cluster partners.
- Mobilize resources, and coordinate and monitor the implementation of resource plans to support the activities of protection cluster partners.
- Ensure coordination of protection delivery and outreach services, such as child protection, gender-based violence (GBV), mine action, and housing, land and property (HLP), in close collaboration with sub-clusters.
- Assist sub-national protection clusters to fulfil their responsibilities (to develop strategy, collect and share information, do assessments and analysis, report, etc.).
- Promote and monitor compliance with protection policies, standards and guidelines.
- Strengthen preparedness capacity and contingency planning.
- Consider the creation of a Strategic Advisory Group, for example to develop and update the protection cluster's strategic framework, priorities and work plan.
- Monitor coordination (including through self-assessments), making improvements as necessary.
- Develop the outline of a transition plan, within three months (in sudden onset emergencies) or annually (in protracted crises).
- Maintain a dialogue with the GPC Coordinator and GPC Operations Cell to make sure that timely and effective support and guidance are available.
- Provide secretariat functions for the protection cluster.

Via the GPC Operations Cell, protection clusters can access additional support through the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and rosters managed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC Surge) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NorCap). Support missions can be requested for short-term assistance on strategy development, capacity building, and specific programmatic or advocacy activities. Through its global network, the GPC can also provide targeted capacity building and resources, for example on IDP law and policy and on protection information management. Finally, protection clusters can access tools and guidance through the GPC web portal (see below: Policy documents, references and tools).

**Role of partners involved**

Participation in protection clusters is open to all protection actors that are ready to contribute to information collection and sharing, strategy development, prioritization, and preparation of work plans. Minimum commitments for participation in the protection cluster include:

- Commitment to humanitarian principles and the Principles of Partnership, including the Secretary-General’s Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.
- Readiness to participate in actions that improve AAP, in line with the IASC’s commitments.
- Demonstrated understanding of responsibilities associated with cluster participation, including in relation to agreed terms of reference at country level.
- Active participation in the cluster and consistent engagement in the cluster’s collective work.
Capacity and willingness to contribute to the cluster's strategic response plan and activities, including inter-cluster coordination.
Commitment to work cooperatively with other cluster partners to ensure the best and most strategic use of available resources, including sharing information on organizational resources.
Willingness to take on responsibilities as needed, taking account of capacity and mandates.
Readiness to help draft and disseminate advocacy and messages targeted inter alia at affected communities, national authorities, donors, the HCT, cluster lead agencies, and the media.

As Protection Cluster lead agency, UNHCR needs to work to ensure the protection cluster reaches out to and engages with a diverse group of stakeholders, including:

- Crisis-affected communities in general and internally displaced people and their host communities in particular.
- National authorities.
- UN and inter-governmental agencies.
- Local and national NGOs and civil society.
- National human rights commissions.
- International NGOs.
- Peacekeeping missions.
- Donors.

For an explanation of how protection clusters engage with peacekeeping missions, see Diagnostic Tool and Guidance on the Interaction between Field Protection Clusters and UN missions.

**UNHCR's role and accountabilities**

Under the UN Humanitarian Reform and the subsequent Transformative Agenda, the Representative is responsible for ensuring that, as protection cluster lead agency, UNHCR:

- Ensures that coordination mechanisms are established and properly supported.
- Serves as first point of call for the protection cluster with regard to the Government and HC.
- Raises cluster-specific issues, concerns and challenges with the HC and HCT.
- Acts as ‘provider of last resort’.

As Protection Cluster lead agency, UNHCR has undertaken to:

- Promote a timely, evidence-based and holistic approach to protection based on direct and meaningful engagement with crisis-affected communities, both to achieve accountability and to deliver well-informed analysis of protection risks and needs.
- Recommend to the HC and HCT priority actions (in the context of a system-wide strategic
response) that address the most urgent and immediate protection risks and needs of crisis-affected populations in a manner that is responsive to differences of age, gender and diversity.

- Work to align and represent the views of protection actors on advocacy and operational matters, in the UN Country Team and HCT, as part of an integrated approach to protection.
- Initiate the development of an overarching strategy for protection (owned and implemented by the Resident Coordinator (RC) or HC and the UNCT or HCT) that leverages each actor's expertise and experience to maximize protection and, ultimately, find solutions.
- Outline an advocacy strategy, which supports the priorities of the protection strategy and identifies forms of action, key stakeholders, and intended impacts or anticipated changes with regard to the protection risks and needs of crisis-affected populations.
- Stay abreast of developments in global policies relevant to protection and increase understanding and appreciation of system-wide initiatives, such as the Human Rights Upfront initiative (designed to prevent or respond to major violations of human rights or international humanitarian law), that provide platforms for country-level protection advocacy as well as regional and headquarters' support and interventions.
- Build support and strategic alliances, inside and outside the humanitarian system, to increase support for protection priorities among organizations that do not have a protection mandate, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank.

**Annexes**

- Global Protection Cluster, Protection Mainstreaming Training Package 2014
- Global Protection Cluster, Guidance on the Humanitarian Programme Cycle for Protection Clusters
- IASC, Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level
- IASC, Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action - Statement by the Principals
- Joint UNHCR OCHA Note on Mixed Situations, Coordination in Practice
- UNHCR OG 2016 2 Operational Guidelines for UNHCR’s Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement
3. Links

Global Protection Cluster
Global Protection Cluster, Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility
Global Protection Cluster, Child Protection Area of Responsibility
Inter-Agency Standing Committee
OCHA, Indicator Registry
IASC, Accountability to Affected Populations
IASC, Transformative Agenda Protocols
IASC, Task Team

4. Main contacts

Contact the Global Protection Cluster Support Cell, Division of International Protection, UNHCR HQ. At GPC@unhcr.org.