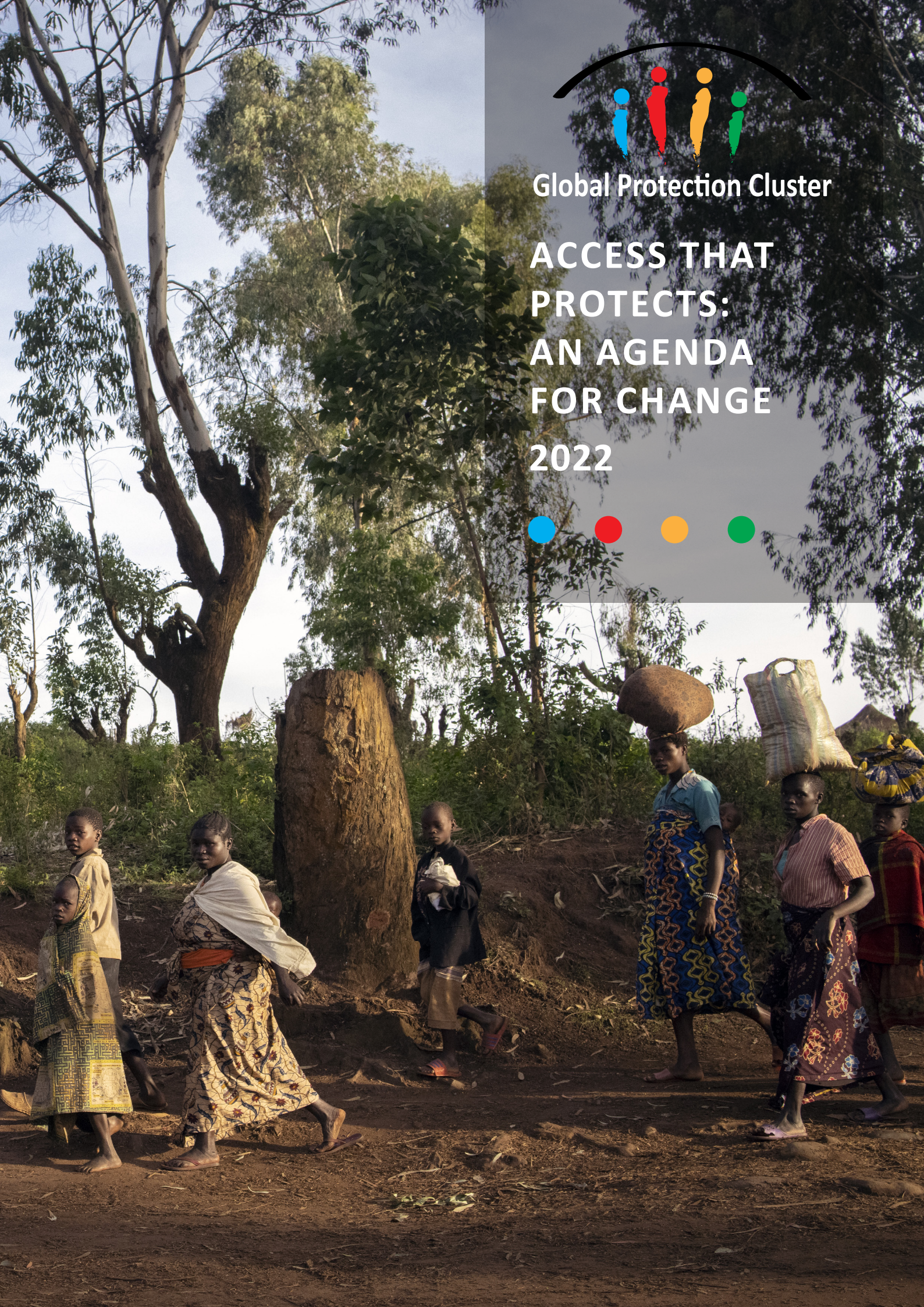Global Protection Cluster

ACCESS THAT PROTECTS: AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE 2022

Opening Note: Humanitarian Access

Facilitating and coordinating efforts to establish and maintain access is central to the mandates of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and OCHA. As highlighted in General Assembly's resolution 46/182, the ERC is to *"[a]ctively facilitating, including through negotiation if needed, the access by the operational organizations to emergency areas for the rapid provision of emergency assistance by obtaining the consent of all parties concerned, through modalities such as the establishment of temporary relief corridors where needed, days and zones of tranquility and other forms."*

This mandate translates into the following priorities for OCHA:

- Strengthen the global normative framework;
- Foster collaboration amongst humanitarian actors to promote a coherent and coordinated approach;
- Support humanitarian advocacy and negotiations, and promote compliance with and respect for humanitarian principles and IHL;
- Facilitate efforts to monitor access trends and developments in order to identify constraints and their implications for people in need;
- Build the capacity of humanitarian partners and relevant stakeholders on access and humanitarian negotiations.

At the **global level**, OCHA advocates for the safe, timely and unimpeded access to people in need. In 2007[1], the ERC committed to establishing more systematic monitoring and reporting on access, reporting instances of grave concern to the Security Council, and supporting efforts to increase access on the ground. Since then, the ERC has repeatedly emphasized the critical importance of improving access in the Security Council and other fora.

At the **country level**, OCHA plays a critical role in facilitating and coordinating efforts to establish and maintain principled humanitarian access to and/or by people in need, and to overcome factors that inhibit access. OCHA develops tools and provides guidance and support to the HC and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) to address access-related issues, including humanitarian engagement with non-State armed groups and respect for humanitarian principles by both warring parties and the humanitarian community. OCHA also facilitates efforts to monitor access in order to identify constraints and their implications for affected populations. This data can then be used to build common approaches to resolve issues and to inform advocacy and negotiation solutions.

As member of the Global Protection Cluster and as per its own mandate, OCHA is supporting the Agenda for Change and will co-lead the initiative.

---

* Front and back cover Image photo credit: © UNHCR/Hélène Caux
1 Constraints on humanitarian access was one of the priority issues highlighted in the Secretary-General's sixth report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict and discussed by the Security Council in November 2007.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why access that protects?

While access impediments continue to hamper the delivery of humanitarian assistance as a whole, protection actors and services are often disproportionately affected. Communities or groups experiencing severe protection risks are often those with the least amount of access to life-saving support and some of the hardest to reach. In some contexts, this is by design, with access-related restrictions part of the strategies used by parties to a conflict to inflict harm on civilians. Protection-related actions can also be perceived as particularly sensitive or threatening by relevant authorities or parties to conflict, which at times results in self-censoring by humanitarians. Protection-related activities require safe, timely and sustained access for proximity, ongoing trust-building, engagement and the delivery of specialized services. It is a constant struggle to ensure that much needed protection is provided and accessible in contexts where often protection itself is not allowed or not feasible.

The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) campaign on access that protects is about greater complementarity and impact between efforts to improve humanitarian access and those to strengthen protection for and with people affected by crises.

Ultimately, humanitarian access forms the foundation for life-saving humanitarian action and protection. The deprivation, denial of, or impediment to access to basic services and assistance, crucial to survival, is a grave protection risk – one that threatens the safety, rights and wellbeing of people – and one that must be addressed collectively as an integral aspect of response efforts.

In 2022, the GPC has undertaken a focused effort to better understand how access constraints globally are impacting protection action specifically and what can be done to address these challenges. Based on a series of consultations, events, and reflections throughout the year, the GPC has developed two priority areas for change, reflecting the opportunity to further ensure that humanitarian access is centered around protection objectives.

Each of the two priorities represents an aspect through which the GPC, together with Protection Clusters and other stakeholders – including Humanitarian Country Teams and Access Working Groups – can help 'move the needle' on the kind of sustained, quality access that is critical for protection. They complement and align with existing initiatives, bringing forward the overarching objective of protection that all humanitarians share. The GPC is committed to working closely with a range of members, partners and allies to take these priorities forward.

Priority 1: Protection as a Collective Objective and Outcome of Access Efforts

- Negotiating with Duty Bearers
- Protection at the Core of Access Mechanisms

Priority 2: Sustainable and Quality Access for Protection

- Communities' Capacities with Strong Backing
- Evidence-based, Robust Advocacy

---

* The quotes included throughout the report were shared by protection partners and allies during the consultation and reflection process carried out in 2022, including at roundtable discussions and as part of the Global Protection Forum.

INTRODUCTION

We are, collectively, faced with a staggering protection crisis around the world. As we come to the end of 2022, there are more active armed conflicts than at any time since the end of the Second World War.[2] Conflict-induced internal displacement is at the highest level in a decade[3]. A staggering 150 million people were estimated to be in need of protection globally in 2022[4]. The climate crisis is further worsening many of the risks experienced by people affected by conflict, while economic shocks and the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are similarly clawing away at people's capacities to manage in already desperate circumstances.

Against this bleak backdrop, protection actors are pursuing impactful work that is saving lives and strengthening rights – from local women's groups who are organizing counselling and peer-support for survivors of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) to protection actors negotiating daily access to schools for children living in areas with active hostilities. However, it is also clear that as a protection community, we are simply not keeping pace with the increasing scale and complex nature of protection risks and resulting needs – and it is not just because of limited funding. Humanitarian access – be it the access of affected communities to humanitarian relief and protection or the ability of protection actors to reach a community – is increasingly constrained.

As the GPC, we see the profound reverberations such constraints have on protection actors and affected communities playing out across the 32 Protection Cluster operations currently active globally[5]. Protection Clusters, with membership comprising a range of local, national and international protection actors, are seeing a growing number of access constraints directly limiting the ability of those most impacted by crises to access the assistance and protection they so urgently need. Despite significant efforts by the humanitarian community to strengthen humanitarian access, there remains a dire need to better understand how access constraints are specifically impacting people's access to protection and to explore how access strategies can further contribute to protection aims and outcomes.

With this in mind, over the course of the year, the GPC has pursued a range of conversations, consultations and dialogues on the linkages between access and protection, exploring ways the complementarity between the two areas of action can be further strengthened, and ultimately harnessed to advance protection outcomes for affected communities.

These consultations have included a series of three roundtable discussions, one with technical experts at the global level hosted with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a second with frontline practitioners hosted with the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) and a third with member state representatives hosted with the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The GPC also organized its annual Global Protection Forum, held in October, around the theme of 'Access that Protects', with 12 sessions convened by a range of protection

---

2 UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report: 2022. Available here

3 ALNAP, SOHS 2022. Available here

4 GPC, Where Do We Stand Mid-Year 2022? A Spotlight on Operational Access for Protection, June 2022. Available here

5 The Global Protection Cluster is a network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations and United Nations (UN) agencies, engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises including armed conflict, climate change related and natural disaster. The GPC is mandated by the IASC, led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), governed by a Strategic Advisory Group and serviced by a multi-partner Operations Cell. More information about the GPC and our 32 Protection Cluster operations is available on our website: https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/

partners exploring different aspects of how access and protection can be furthered in mutually supportive ways.

Other spaces for dialogue and reflection have been pursued as well, including a peer exchange on advocacy in protracted crises for communities living under Non State Armed Groups' (NSAG) control[6], a public event with panel discussion exploring different tensions and opportunities linked to access and advocacy[7] and a Global Protection Update with a thematic focus on access and protection (Beyond Trucks, Access That Protects). This also builds on the foundational work done in 2020 by the GPC, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Association of Professionals in

Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) through the 'Access and Protection' webinar series.

Supporting and facilitating humanitarian access is a core part of the mandate of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinators and of OCHA in support to humanitarian partners. Our hope in putting forward this Agenda for Change is to galvanize our own efforts as the broader GPC network and to spur on collective action across the humanitarian community throughout 2023, complementing on-going humanitarian access and negotiation efforts and embedding protection as a collective objective and outcome.

Photo credit: © UNHCR/Gwenn Dubourthoumieu

---

6 GPC, Peer Exchange on Advocacy in Protracted Crises for Communities Living under NSAGs' Control, May 2022. Available here

7 Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week, Webinar on Collaborative Advocacy by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors Linked to Access and Advocacy, May 2022. Available here

ACCESS AND PROTECTION

While the exact magnitude and the impact of humanitarian access constraints is difficult to capture, it is clear from multiple stakeholders and methodologies that, amidst spiralling humanitarian needs, humanitarian access is under intense pressure in crisis contexts around the world[8]. As described by the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) 2022 report, more than half the people assessed to be in need of humanitarian assistance do not receive it; while according to the 2022 Global Humanitarian Overview, 26 out of 34 countries with a Humanitarian Response Plan in place are experiencing high to extreme access constraints.

This reflects multiple dynamics that are shaking the foundation of the humanitarian system. The intensity of hostilities and the growing number of attacks on humanitarian personnel reflect one driver of this diminishing access, with attacks on aid workers rising by 54% between 2017 and 2020. In 2020, national staff represented 95% of the victims of these attacks.[9] Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments (BAI) imposed by state and non-state actors are also recognized as severely constraining access in many conflict contexts, with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) describing them as a "significant and growing barrier to humanitarian operations"[10].

The sheer number of armed groups operating globally is also complicating access in many contexts, with an estimated 60 to 80 million people living under the direct State-like governance of such groups, creating an increasingly fragmented context for engagement and negotiations.[11] According to the SOHS 2022, only 36% of crisis-affected people think aid reaches the people who need it most, reflecting a range of challenges, including interference or pressure by authorities to alter or control distribution lists, for instance.

Critical barriers identified by protection actors[12] in relation to their ability **to access affected populations** include (i) on-going insecurity or hostilities, (ii) environmental and logistical constraints, (iii) bureaucratic and administrative constraints, (iv) direct attacks or threats against protection actors, (v) interference into the implementation of protection activities from local authorities or non-state actors.

Critical barriers identified by protection actors in relation to the ability of **affected populations to access protection services** include (i) unavailability of protection services, (ii) ongoing insecurity and hostilities, (iii) direct attacks or threats against affected populations, (iv) environmental and logistical constraints and (v) restriction and obstruction of access to protection services by local authorities or non-state actors.

---

8   ALNAP, State of Humanitarian System (SOHS) 2022 Report, available here; OCHA, Presence and Proximity, available here; CSIS, Overcoming Access Challenges, available here

9   ALNAP, SOHS Report 2022. Available here

10 IASC, Understanding and Addressing Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian action: Framework for a System-Wide Approach, 2022. Available here

11 ICRC, Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups. Available here

12 Data collected from Protection Clusters on a quarterly basis in 2022 and available via the GPC's Global Protection Updates.

Protection is often disproportionately impacted by access constraints

It is clear that amidst growing barriers for humanitarian access affecting the system as a whole, protection actors often face particular challenges. Protection Clusters have observed deteriorating access in 30% of contexts throughout the last three quarters of 2022. Similarly, Protection Clusters reported the access of affected populations to protection services has deteriorated in 25% of contexts throughout the last three quarters of 2022. In several situations, like in Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique, Yemen or Somalia, it is estimated that less than a quarter of the affected population can be reached by protection actors or can actually reach any type of protection service[13].
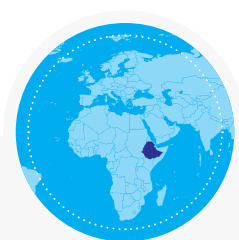
Case Study:
Ethiopia: A Crisis where Access is Critical for Protection

Humanitarian access in Tigray, since the beginning of the war in northern Ethiopia in 2020, has been severely constrained. Amidst very limited availability of basic services, food and fuel, all parties to the conflict were accused of restricting humanitarian access, particularly food assistance.[14] Throughout the conflict, the Protection Cluster noted a sharp rise in protection risks stemming from human rights abuses, displacement and negative coping strategies amongst affected populations.[15] Such negative coping strategies included child labour and intimate partner violence, as affected people struggled to survive amidst the stark lack of access to the very basics. Deaths linked to starvation and the lack of access to health care were reported in several areas. The specific impacts that access constraints have had on protection actors in Tigray included the inability for partners to safely access numerous conflict-affected communities to understand the threats facing civilians and identify those most in need of life-saving assistance, severe limitations on GBV response efforts and significant challenges with family tracing for the large number of separated and unaccompanied children. In 2022, the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia found reasonable grounds to believe that in Tigray the Federal Government and its allies had denied some six million people access to basic services for over a year and that the Federal Government was using starvation as a method of warfare.[16]

---

13 Data collected from Protection Clusters on a quarterly basis in 2022 and available via the GPC's Global Protection Updates

14 Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021. Available here

15 Northern Ethiopia Protection Cluster, Protection Analysis Update, May 2022. Available here

16 Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, September 2022. Available here

Case Study:
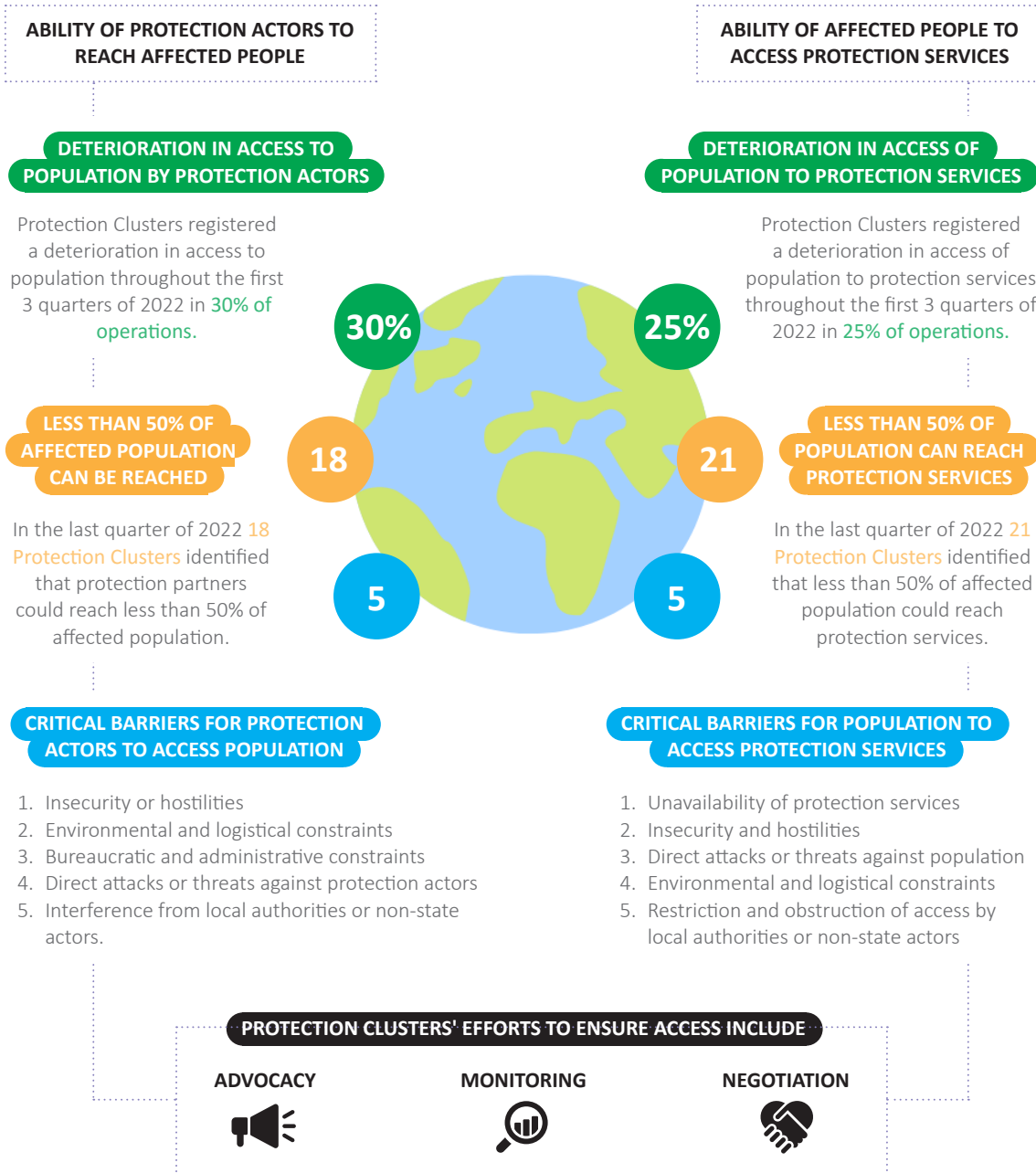How Access Constraints are Impacting Protection in Afghanistan

The power shift in August 2021 in Afghanistan has resulted in improvements in the overall security situation and has meant improved access for humanitarian organisations to some remote areas that were previously inaccessible. However, these changes have not reflected an improved quality or degree of access more broadly. The institutional and legal changes imposed by the de facto authorities, including for instance, the closing of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, together with the economic crisis, have dismantled basic services previously available to the population. Protection-focused services have been particularly impacted with, for example, access to justice, civil documentation and gender-based violence services no longer available through state systems. The imposition of restrictions on the participation and movement of female staff by the de facto authorities is another example of policy-induced access constraints impacting the ability of protection actors to provide safe and confidential services, with particular impacts for women and girls. The lack of clarity on how to engage with local de facto authorities is compounded by the fear among agency staff of sharing information with or explaining to de facto authorities what they do and especially, what protection services they provide, making acceptance and negotiation efforts on protection very challenging.

In addition, communities or groups experiencing severe protection risks, such as restrictions to freedom of movement, discrimination or siege-like situations, are often those with the least access to life-saving support and some of the hardest to reach. For example, populations facing severe protection risks may be living in active conflict zones or hard-to-reach locations, with highly constrained access to protection or other forms of assistance. In various instances, those faced with severe protection risks may be experiencing persecution or abuse by parties to conflict who have limited desire to enable access to assistance and protection or are actively blocking such access as part of a strategy to inflict harm. These dynamics, evident at different times in places such as Tigray, Myanmar, Syria and Somalia, reflect a reality where access restrictions can form part of efforts to harm particular ethnic or social groups and civilians by host governments and/ or NSAGs.

ACCESS TO AND FOR PROTECTION SERVICES

ABILITY OF PROTECTION ACTORS TO REACH AFFECTED PEOPLE

ABILITY OF AFFECTED PEOPLE TO ACCESS PROTECTION SERVICES

DETERIORATION IN ACCESS TO POPULATION BY PROTECTION ACTORS

Protection Clusters registered a deterioration in access to population throughout the first 3 quarters of 2022 in 30% of operations.

DETERIORATION IN ACCESS OF POPULATION TO PROTECTION SERVICES

Protection Clusters registered a deterioration in access of population to protection services throughout the first 3 quarters of 2022 in 25% of operations.

30%

25%

18

21

5

5

LESS THAN 50% OF AFFECTED POPULATION CAN BE REACHED

In the last quarter of 2022 18 Protection Clusters identified that protection partners could reach less than 50% of affected population.

LESS THAN 50% OF POPULATION CAN REACH PROTECTION SERVICES

In the last quarter of 2022 21 Protection Clusters identified that less than 50% of affected population could reach protection services.

CRITICAL BARRIERS FOR PROTECTION ACTORS TO ACCESS POPULATION

1. Insecurity or hostilities
2. Environmental and logistical constraints
3. Bureaucratic and administrative constraints
4. Direct attacks or threats against protection actors
5. Interference from local authorities or non-state actors.

CRITICAL BARRIERS FOR POPULATION TO ACCESS PROTECTION SERVICES

1. Unavailability of protection services
2. Insecurity and hostilities
3. Direct attacks or threats against population
4. Environmental and logistical constraints
5. Restriction and obstruction of access by local authorities or non-state actors

PROTECTION CLUSTERS' EFFORTS TO ENSURE ACCESS INCLUDE

ADVOCACY

MONITORING

NEGOTIATION

Protection is perceived as sensitive and more difficult

Protection-related actions are often perceived as particularly sensitive or threatening by relevant authorities or parties to conflict, which at times results in self-censoring by humanitarians.

This suspicion or distrust of protection activities by parties to conflict is often rooted in perceived linkages of protection monitoring and reporting activities to the documentation of human rights violations and related accountability processes. Even the act of 'bearing witness' with protection actors present in active conflict areas or other contexts where abuses

are happening may be perceived as a threat. Likewise, efforts by protection actors to sensitise state and non-state armed groups on issues like child recruitment, for instance, may be seen by perpetrators as drawing attention to such violations and potentially contributing to accountability processes. Engagement with NSAGs by protection actors may also be perceived as conferring legitimacy on these armed actors and cause consequent tensions or provoke backlash.

Reflecting such dynamics, protection actors and activities are often disproportionately targeted with interference, restrictions or outright blockages by relevant duty bearers. This also often implicitly impacts the perceptions and support of other humanitarian actors vis-a-vis protection work and protection actors themselves may even feel the need to self-censor their programming and advocacy for fear of retaliation and impacts on operations, staff and communities. As pointed out in the independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy, there is a need to strengthen protection advocacy by humanitarian leadership, with such efforts too often limited due to assumed or unaddressed risks.[17]

"How do you do protection when protection is not allowed?"

Protection requires quality and sustained access

Protection-related activities require safe, timely and sustained access for proximity, ongoing trust-building, engagement and the delivery of specialized services.

One-off or heavily restricted access is not conducive to humanitarian action but is particularly limiting for protection action. The provision of comprehensive medical, psycho-social, legal and case management support to survivors of violations requires sustained access, a degree of acceptance by communities and strong linkages with existing community systems, including for referral pathways to function. Many protection efforts are grounded in ongoing engagement with communities and duty bearers and focused on building trust and acceptance, which requires quality and sustained presence.

Likewise, the ability for protection actors to carry out protection monitoring and assessment activities is severely compromised when access is geographically limited or timebound. One-off access can also cause harm as people seeking protection support and/or raising related concerns may be particularly exposed or targeted. 'Protection by presence' and similar approaches are also entirely reliant on proximity and sustained access, including unarmed civilian protection efforts aimed at interrupting and deterring violence.

Humanitarian access restrictions are a protection risk

Importantly, humanitarian access is an obligation under international humanitarian law. Customary International Humanitarian Law, as well as Additional Protocols I and II of the Geneva Conventions, establish that parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction[18]. Importantly, each party to the conflict must refrain from deliberately impeding

---

17 Cocking, J., Davies, G., Finney, N. et al., Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy, 2022. Available here

18 ICRC, What does IHL provide for in terms of humanitarian access and assistance?, 2017. Available here

the delivery of relief supplies in areas under its control. "Intentionally impeding relief supplies as part of the use of starvation as a method of warfare is a war crime, while deprivation of food and medicines, with the aim of bringing about the destruction of part of a population may constitute a crime against humanity." Furthermore, as noted in a joint OHCHR-UNHCR paper, "in as much as a violation of the right to life is a violation of international law, so is the denial or obstruction of humanitarian access (Article 6 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and Article 70 of Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions respectively)."[19] Undue or unjustified restrictions imposed by the State on humanitarian relief could amount to a violation of the State's obligations under International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The IASC defines protection as: "…all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee law (IRL))." Grounded in relevant legal frameworks as well as reflecting impacts on safety, rights and wellbeing of affected people, it is clear the deprivation, denial of or impediment to access to basic services and assistance, crucial to survival, is a grave protection risk and one that must be addressed collectively as an integral aspect of response efforts.
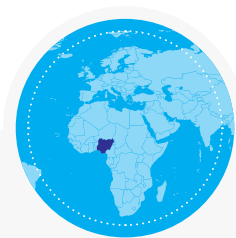

Case Study:
Mobile Protection Response in Hard-to-Reach Areas in South Sudan

Humanitarian access in South Sudan continues to be adversely affected by sub-national and intercommunal violence, bureaucratic impediments, and physical constraints due to unprecedented flooding, combined with poor road conditions. The Protection Cluster has re-established a Mobile Protection Working Group to mitigate access challenges and coordinate the delivery of timely protection services in the most hard-to-reach areas. Through thorough context analysis and stakeholder mapping and recruitment of local staff from the community, protection partners negotiate sustained access with local authorities or parties to the conflict. As an example, in 2018, during active hostilities in Unity State, protection actors were able to secure "longer" access gains through community connections, allowing NGOs to conduct six to eight weeks missions where actors were able to talk about protection, engage with communities, build relationships and gain trust. Through this approach, full protection programming was established and maintained in those locations. The Protection Cluster also actively participates in the Access Working Group, led by OCHA, where it strives to bring a narrative in access negotiation with protection at its core - leveraging protection frontliners to engage with communities and conducting comprehensive protection risk analysis. The protection monitoring system which aims to cover 95% of South Sudan is also utilized to inform where advocacy, programming and access efforts should be reinforced.

---

19 OHCHR-UNHCR, The protection of human rights in humanitarian crises: background paper, 2013. Available here

Case Study:
Leveraging Advocacy for Strengthened Access that Protects in Nigeria

Humanitarian access in Borno State, the epicentre of the conflict in Northeast Nigeria, is very limited and continues to be restricted to major towns under government control. In a context highly influenced by counter-terrorism policies and narratives, access is so limited that even reliable data about the number of people living in extremely hard-to-reach areas remains a major challenge, with some estimates putting it as high as 1 million people who live in areas under the control of, or heavily contested by, NSAGs. Access to relief and protection for affected communities is being further compromised by the government-led camp closure process, which is forcing IDPs to leave camps in the face of limited or no humanitarian assistance and move, including to insecure areas where they are vulnerable to NSAG attacks and with limited access to basic services. There is currently a renewed effort to improve data collection and reporting on access constraints through the Access Working Group (AWG), co-led by the UN and NGOs, to support greater situational awareness, a more unified humanitarian position and advocacy. The Protection Sector in Northeast Nigeria is an active participant of the Access Working Group, aiming to bring forward an understanding of what access means for affected communities, relevant principles and how local protection actors can be further included in meaningful ways in access mechanisms. Protection actors are also actively engaging with humanitarian leadership and sector leads and taking forward related advocacy to highlight the impact of government policies on IDPs' access to basic services in areas of relocation but most importantly in IDP camps set to be closed, where some assistance has been discontinued.

Case Study:
Community-led protection in Central African Republic

Based on an evaluation of Oxfam's community-led protection work in Central African Republic, a number of verified changes were noted in support of access and protection.[20] 54 Community Protection Committees formed the backbone of this work, with members representing

---

20 Oxfam, Now It Is For Us To Continue: Summary of the study into the effectiveness and sustainability of Oxfam's community gender and protection programme in Central African Republic, 2018. Available here

volunteers from conflict-affected communities who received training and support to take forward engagement, awareness-raising and advocacy. Much of the efforts of the Committee members included door-to-door work aimed at sensitising community members about protection risks, such as early marriage and domestic violence, and providing relevant advice and referrals to services. Committee members also engaged regularly with local armed groups and the evaluation found their dialogue and advocacy work resulted in gains such as the lifting of various roadblocks that had been limiting the free movement of community members. A community protection committee in Bangui worked in collaboration with MSF and local authorities to leverage their networks to help influence armed actors to stop entering medical facilities and removing patients. A medical clinic in the community had been closed by the MSF teams following an intrusion of armed men - reaching this agreement with the armed actors was a prerequisite for MSF to be able to reopen the clinic and continue providing life-saving services.

AGENDA FOR CHANGE

The Global Protection Cluster has undertaken a focused effort to better understand how access constraints are impacting protection action specifically and what can be done, including by the GPC, to address these challenges. Based on a series of consultations, events, and reflections throughout the year, the GPC has developed two core priority areas for change, where, together with Protection Clusters and other stakeholders, we can help 'move the needle' on access that protects.

The following priorities are meant to complement and align with existing initiatives, bringing forward opportunities to do more to understand and address the implications of access constraints for the protection of communities, and leverage access strategies and mechanisms to promote protection outcomes. The GPC is committed to working closely with a range of members, partners and allies to take these priorities forward.

PRIORITY 1

PROTECTION AS A COLLECTIVE OBJECTIVE AND OUTCOME OF ACCESS EFFORTS

NEGOTIATING WITH DUTY-BEARERS

Strengthen the negotiations skills and capacities of protection actors and the humanitarian community in engaging with parties to the conflict and other relevant actors.

To change behaviors, reduce harm and contribute to improving access, we must strengthen the capacity, skills and confidence of relevant protection actors in terms of engaging and negotiating with duty bearers and armed groups. While not every protection actor will necessarily be well positioned to take on specialized negotiations, engagement with parties to conflict is core to protection action. This must be premised on strengthened understanding and practice of how protection actors can influence and encourage armed groups to comply with norms and obligations.

This must be grounded in robust learning related to the effectiveness of different modes of engagement.

In parallel, increased collaboration by protection actors with specialized negotiation actors as well as affected communities themselves is a critical aspect of steering such engagement.

> **"Protection is a negotiation"**

While initiatives are ongoing in terms of strengthening negotiation capacities, and support from donors is effective, we must ensure that protection is at the core of these investments – including with intentional efforts

to further document learnings, best practices and impacts of such protection-focused negotiation capacity and action. Likewise, across the humanitarian system, we must ensure that diplomacy and negotiation on humanitarian access is strengthened so that protection is elevated as a collective objective, and that access efforts never come at the expense of protection.

GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER COMMITMENTS

▶ Support capacity-building and skills strengthening of frontline protection actors through partnerships with specialized agencies on negotiation. This can include the piloting of negotiation capacity-building in at least three Protection Clusters in 2023.

▶ Support the active engagement of Protection Cluster Coordinators and members in developing and advancing joint negotiation strategies and efforts, including via Access Working Groups and Humanitarian Country Teams.

▶ Convene peer exchange and capacity building efforts regarding engagement with duty-bearers and national authorities for Protection Cluster members.

CALL TO ACTION FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Donors

▶ Ensure increased funding is provided to improve learning and capacities of protection actors on humanitarian negotiations. Explore opportunities to take forward this agenda through existing donors' platforms.

Member States

▶ Ensure humanitarian diplomacy efforts have protection as a core aim and ensure complementarity between negotiation tracks focused on immediate access and protection considerations and longer peace.

PROTECTION AT THE CORE OF ACCESS MECHANISMS

More firmly incorporate protection analysis and objectives into access mechanisms.

More explicitly advancing protection objectives through existing humanitarian access mechanisms at global and country levels, such as the Access Working Groups and OCHA's Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework, is a critical opportunity. This includes actions such as further incorporating access strategies with explicit protection aims and ensuring that evaluation of progress towards securing and sustaining access is considered in terms of the extent to which it has resulted in improved protection of affected people.

Likewise, another important area for action relates to protection actors being active and predictable partners that contribute to shared efforts related to access, including the mapping of armed groups, understanding entry points with local actors, and leveraging existing trusted relationships in communities. Protection actors also have important roles to play in supporting the engagement and the negotiations efforts of Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) by translating strategic engagement into concrete, protection-oriented actions. Protection actors should complement and feed into an agreed HCT framework of engagement such as access strategies, ground rules or joint operating principles.

Critically, it is not about creating separate processes, but rather seeking further complementarity and linkages between access and protection-focused mechanisms and actions.

> **"Evaluating progress towards securing or sustaining access must be looked at in terms of the extent to which our approaches have led to improvement in protection of affected people. At an operational level, this should translate to Protection Clusters strengthening inputs to existing monitoring efforts and collaborating with Access Working Groups."**

Example:
Leveraging Access Working Groups to Advance Joined-Up Analysis and Action

Protection actors have a critical role to play in supporting the efforts of the ERC, HC and OCHA in supporting and facilitating humanitarian access, including through contributions to the analysis and monitoring of access constraints and developing related actions to address them. Access Working Groups, present in 85% of operations globally, represent a key platform to advance such protection-focused analysis and action, including through the development of shared advocacy, operational and policy efforts. Protection Clusters are increasingly represented in AWGs, including in contexts like Venezuela, Mali, Somalia, NE Nigeria and South Sudan, leveraging the unique data points and analysis protection actors have and contributing to actions that address access constraints from the perspective of reducing harm and strengthening the protection of affected communities.

GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER COMMITMENTS

▶ Encourage the systematic participation of Protection Clusters in Access Working Groups and other collective platforms for enhanced access coordination. Likewise, encourage and support protection partners to report access incidents through OCHA's existing access monitoring and reporting mechanisms and take forward related collective negotiation and advocacy efforts.

▶ Ensure Protection Clusters systematically provide an analysis of the impact of access constraints on people in need of protection, including by overlapping OCHA's access severity mapping with the number of people in need for the Protection Cluster.

▶ Introduce in the GPC Global Protection Updates an enhanced set of qualitative indicators that Protection Clusters will use to consistently track how access constraints are impacting protection actors and services.

▶ Systematically document lessons-learned and best practices on successful access efforts by protection actors or community-led approaches in different contexts.

OCHA COMMITMENTS

▶ Advocate for the inclusion of protection outcomes in HCT Access Strategies.

▶ Ensure the inclusion of protection concerns in ground rules or joint operating principles linked to access, in close collaboration with the Protection Cluster.

▶ Ensure protection elements are clearly articulated as part of access key messages, including by building on the latest Protection Analysis Update published by the Protection Cluster in-country and further focusing on the impacts of access constraints on protection.

CALL TO ACTION FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Donors

▶ Engage actively with Humanitarian Country Teams to influence, support and contribute to advancing protection outcomes within collective humanitarian access strategies and actions at the country level.

COMMUNITIES' CAPACITIES WITH STRONG BACKING

Sustainable and quality access means strengthening our investment in community-led protection approaches that can improve the protective environment

Rather than one-off or heavily restricted access, protection actors need sustainable and quality access to reduce protection risks. In many contexts, this means shifting power and increasing investment in community and locally-led protection action, and better recognizing and supporting the unique roles, expertise and relationships of local actors in facilitating access to protection.

While access may be impeded for international actors, we also recognize the diverse community and local protection actors who are often part of affected communities themselves and, in many contexts, tend to have greater access than international counterparts. Their positioning and presence translate into their ability to leverage extensive networks and relationships within communities, to influence the behaviour of duty bearers (including armed actors) and to negotiate both communities' access to aid, and aid providers' access to communities.[21]

From negotiating with armed actors to reach agreement on a community's access to local markets or ensuring armed groups vacate

a health clinic so that services can resume, protection actors are often on the frontlines of engagement and negotiation for access. Across the humanitarian sector, we must better enable, on the one hand, the relationships protection actors have with local communities and authorities for improved access and, on the other hand, further leverage access strategies to support protection outcomes. This includes through community-based protection, early warning networks and referral systems, for instance, as well as via dialogue and engagement taken forward by local community leaders.

> **"Community actors play a leading role in negotiating access for humanitarian actors, thanks to their networks and connections. Trust and understanding of the local context put them at the heart of this process. "**

At the same time, we must encourage '**protection by presence**' and similar approaches, supporting local and community actors, with the strong backing and strategic support of international actors. Active presence can enable the use of different protective strategies on the ground to reduce protection risks that cannot be done as effectively without presence, active

---

21 Oxfam (forthcoming), Advocacy, Influencing and Negotiation for Protection: The Work of Local and Community Protection Actors.

engagement and advocacy in solidarity with affected communities.

As part of these efforts to further ground protection action at the community level, across the humanitarian sector we need to further improve risk-sharing strategies, reducing the risk transfer from donors and international humanitarian actors to local and national stakeholders. This includes careful consideration of advocacy, partnership and subcontracting arrangements, as well as enabling local actors to enhance their duty of care to their own staff and meet the security requirements of operating in high-risk contexts[22].

GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER COMMITMENTS

▶ Develop common understandings of and core messaging on community-led protection and protective strategies grounded in presence and how they contribute to access that protects for donor advocacy and engagement.

▶ Establish a time-bound GPC Community-led Protection Task Team with the aim of collecting and sharing promising practices regarding community-led negotiations, advocacy, protection in hard-to-reach contexts – building a community of practice to ensure greater sharing of knowledge for enhanced impact.

▶ Elevate visibility of and support for locally led action in protection coordination mechanisms and processes, including the Humanitarian Response Plans and pooled funds.

CALL TO ACTION FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Donors

▶ Provide more direct, flexible and quality funding and capacity building to local protection actors and groups involved in community-led protection through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Importantly, such funds should support and enable local actors to further invest in relationship building and dialogue with duty bearers, to meet the costs and requirements of safely operating in high-risk environments and advance further risk-sharing in relation to partnerships and advocacy.

▶ Support community engagement and outreach, protection monitoring, referral networks and other actions grounded in local leadership and presence, as foundational elements that support strengthened protection, access and humanitarian action more broadly.

---

22 OCHA, Presence and Proximity, To Stay and Deliver, Five Years On. Available here

EVIDENCE-BASED, ROBUST ADVOCACY

Evidence-driven advocacy, grounded in shared data and messages, is critical to advancing sustained, quality access that protects.

Protection monitoring and referral systems, based on networks of protection monitors, community focal points and local protection committees, are critical complements to services delivered. Such efforts, grounded in proximity to and engagement with affected communities, are foundational to humanitarian relief efforts. This allows protection partners, the humanitarian community and donors to understand protection risks and trends, and tailor their protection services to the experiences and priorities of those living through crisis.

In addition, there is a need for better data and evidence to understand when constraints have particular implications for protection actors and services, and what those implications are. Advocacy efforts, including through HC/HCT, provide a key opportunity for protection actors to consistently emphasize what is needed to support the protection of affected communities and what the impacts are when sustained access is denied. Importantly, such efforts must also seek to tackle the underlying assumptions that raising protection concerns or advocating for rights will inevitably hinder humanitarian access or result in negative repercussions for the delivery of programmes.

"Our silence isn't buying us access"

A better evidence base and messaging can also help drive needed advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy efforts across humanitarian and political leadership. Member States in particular have critical roles to play in helping to address access barriers for protection actors through their leadership and influencing efforts. Ensuring their own implementation of the IASC Guidance on Understanding and Addressing Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian Action would represent a positive step forward. Furthermore, this could be extended to championing related efforts by Humanitarian Country Teams, with consideration of the implications for protection actors and action. Efforts like that of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members in assuring the carving out and continuation of humanitarian action from the sanctions regime must be further scaled up, as well as global reporting and accountability efforts. A positive example of what is possible by Member States is demonstrated by UNSCR 2417 on Conflict and Hunger, which integrated improved reporting and greater accountability for relevant violations of International Humanitarian Law.

GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER COMMITMENTS

▶ Amplify the story of access restrictions as experienced by those most affected, building on enhanced data collection by the GPC, Protection Cluster and allies.

▶ Undertake a review of recent Protection Cluster advocacy actions carried out in high-risk contexts to further understand the specific implications to access for protection actors, how they were managed (or not) and what can be learned for strengthened, risk-informed advocacy going forward.

- ▶ Document a series of 'advocacy snapshots' that demonstrate how advocacy is being used as a key tool to sustain humanitarian access for protection activities and actors.

- ▶ Continue efforts to engage more strategically with donors, going beyond a focus on humanitarian funding exclusively and explore ways to channel access and protection messaging, leveraging their positions and commitments.

OCHA COMMITMENTS

- ▶ Ensure that OCHA's engagement with UNSC members reflects the protection dimensions of humanitarian access both for population at risk and protection actors and response, in collaboration with the GPC.

CALL TO ACTION FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Member States

- ▶ Put in place practical measures that allow for and facilitate the work of humanitarian actors, including alleviating bureaucratic and administrative impediments. This should include implementation of IASC Guidance on Understanding and Addressing BAI as well as championing and supporting related measures through Humanitarian Country Teams and through diplomatic efforts.

- ▶ Ensure that reference to humanitarian action in the UN General Assembly and Security Council related discussions, decisions and products better articulate the impact of access constraints on protection services and actors.

- ▶ Embed more qualitative and protection-focused considerations related to access in the development of National Protection of Civilians Action Plans.

Example:
Measuring the Protection Impacts of Humanitarian Access Constraints

In 2020, OCHA Iraq piloted an approach aiming to shift away from incident-reporting by measuring the impact of access constraints on communities. By overlapping access severity maps with the overall number of people targeted, disaggregated by Cluster, it showed that out of 300,000 people living in areas with severe access constraints, 200,000 people in need were part of the target of the Protection Cluster. This type of analysis supports advocacy messages grounded in the protection impacts of humanitarian access constraints while also supporting more collective action to identify and advance needed mitigation measures. In 2019, OCHA Syria looked at access from a different perspective - analysing the quality of access through a series of core criteria such as i) the presence of protection actors, ii) the ability to carry out assessments missions and maintain presence, iii) sustained interventions through static facilities and mobile services, and iv) the ability to carry our evidence-based advocacy on key protection concerns. This required close coordination between the Protection Cluster and the Access Working Groups and ultimately resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of how access constraints were impacting protection in particular ways.

CONCLUSION

The Global Protection Cluster aims to keep protection central to humanitarian action through ongoing analysis, dialogue with multiple stakeholders and enhanced advocacy on protection. Priority should always be given to ensuring the needs of persons most at risk are not overlooked.

The Agenda for Change is a further effort in this direction, with a focus on calling attention to the often-overlooked protection dimensions of humanitarian access and identifying collaborative ways to ensure greater complementarity between access and protection efforts. As protection and assistance needs rise and humanitarian access declines, this is an urgent area for action.

Through the development of the Agenda for Change, the GPC has leveraged the power of its network, and now, looking towards implementation, this collaborative approach is needed more than ever. This will require the support of and commitments from the GPC Strategic Advisory Group, Areas of Responsibilities, Task Teams and Operations Cell as well as field Protection Clusters, Humanitarian Country Teams, donors and Member States. The GPC will regularly review and report on progress made towards achieving the commitments in this Agenda for Change.

Many thanks to all who contributed to the conceptualization and drafting of this Agenda. This includes over 2,000 people who engaged in one way or another with the GPC consultations, roundtables, webinars this year and through the Global Protection Forum. Special thanks also go to the GPC SAG members and observers, who provided valuable leadership and support throughout the development of this Agenda.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALNAP, The State of the Humanitarian System in 2022. Available here

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), Proactive presence, Field Strategies for Civilian Protection. Available here

Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), Never More Necessary Overcoming Humanitarian Access Challenges. Available here

Cocking, J., Davies, G., Finney, N. et al., Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy, 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Update, Leaving Known Ones Behind: The Human Tool of War, March 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Update, Beyond Trucks: Access That Protects, June 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Update, Climate Crisis is a Human Rights Crisis, September 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Where Do We Stand Mid-Year 2022? A Spotlight on Operational Access for Protection, June 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Forum, Opening Ceremony: Placing Protection at the Heart of Access Negotiations, October 2022, available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Forum: Access That Protects, October 2022. Available here. Sessions covering topics such as: (1) Protection by Presence How Donors and Media Coverage Shape Ability of International and Local Organizations to Provide Protection, (2) Forward Leaning, Relationship-based Access, (3) Access Negotiations with Armed Groups for Protection, (4) Securing Access for Coordinated Protection in South Kordofan Sudan, (5) Access for Protection through Participation: Working with children, adolescents and their communities, (6) Interactive Simulation on Access Negotiations for Protection, (7) Advancing Risk Informed Advocacy in Support of Access that Protects, (8) Digitizing Access : Opportunities and Risks, (9) Access to Protection: the Role of Community Protection Actors, (10) Community Engagement with Armed Actors: Strengthening protection, prevention and response, (11) Engaging with Access Working Groups: Good Practices and Opportunities

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Global Protection Thematic Forum Report, October 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Expert Roundtable on Access and Protection, June 2022.

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), Practitioner Roundtable on Access and Protection, September 2022.

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Member State Roundtable on Access and Protection, November 2022.

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Peer Exchange on Advocacy in Protracted Crises for Communities Living under NSAGs' Control, May 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Launch of the ODI/HPG Policy Brief: Collaborative Advocacy by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors, May 2022. Available here

Global Protection Cluster (GPC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP), Webinars Series on Access and Protection, April 2020. Available here: (i) Access and Humanitarian Protection: Lessons from Restricted Operational Contexts and COVID, (ii) Negotiating Access for Humanitarian Protection,(iii), Access and Protection: Avoiding Putting People at Risk,(iv) Coordinating Access for Humanitarian Protection

Humanitarian Network and Partnership Week (HNPW), Webinar on Collaborative Advocacy by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors Linked to Access and Advocacy, May 2022. Available here

InterAction, Understanding the Complementarity between Access and Protection, October 2020. Available here

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Understanding and Addressing Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian action: Framework for a System-Wide Approach, 2022. Available here

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), ICRC Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG), March 2021. Available here

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), What does IHL provide for in terms of humanitarian access and assistance? 2017. Available here

OHCHR-UNHCR, The Protection of Human Rights in Humanitarian Crises: Background Paper, 2013. Available here

Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Collaborative Advocacy between Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors: Opportunities and Challenges, October 2021. Available here

Oxfam, forthcoming research on 'Advocacy, Influencing and Negotiation for Protection: The Work of Local and Community Protection Actors'.

Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2021. Available here

Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, September 2022. Available here

United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report: 2022. Available here

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), To Stay and Deliver, Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments, 2011. Available here

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Presence and Proximity, To Stay and Deliver Five Years On, 2016. Available here

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework. Available here

Global Protection Cluster