

The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action -Questions and Answers-

Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) are responsible for ensuring that protection is central to humanitarian action. This expectation is reflected in the IASC Principals' Statement on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action from December 2013. Yet what concrete actions are expected of HCs and HCTs to fulfil this responsibility? And how do they relate to other stakeholders?

In this Q&A the GPC outlines **practical steps** that humanitarian leaders in field operations can take to ensure protection is central to humanitarian action.

1. Why is collective leadership by Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams important for ensuring that the centrality of protection is put into practice in field operations? Isn't it the responsibility of the protection cluster?

Protection is now recognized as the purpose and outcome of humanitarian action. This was the point made in the 2013 IASC Statement on the centrality of protection, which has now been turned into an IASC Policy on Protection this year.

The centrality of protection means more than protection mainstreaming. For UNHCR, it includes ensuring that leadership, coordination, and engagement in protection and all sectors is more strategic, aligned and directed toward a stronger protection response.

Whilst protection of the rights of people is primarily the duty of member states and, in conflict, the parties to a conflict, HCs and HCTs are responsible for ensuring that protection is central to the humanitarian response. The HC and the HCT have a responsibility that cannot be delegated to the Protection cluster or a single agency.

Collectively, HC and HCTs are responsible for ensuring good programming of billions of dollars in humanitarian aid. The protection sector alone is programming well over \$1bn through Humanitarian Response Plans. It is important to make sure that we are all programming effectively and towards a common goal. In general, we can see that protection is integrated well into Humanitarian Response Plans and some, like the 2016 Iraq plan, have protection as the thread binding sector objectives together. In some, however, we see the 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview describe a protection crisis but the 2017 Response Plan focuses on support to a single sector (Libya).

Aside from programming, HC and HCTs have a collective responsibility in a number of areas:

Addressing protection dilemmas which have system-wide implications. For example, in Iraq, humanitarians have to decide how to engage in centres set up to screen civilians fleeing areas of armed conflict even though human rights violations may be occurring in these centres. In this case, humanitarians need to strike a fine balance between upholding the humanitarian imperative whilst not compromising fundamental human rights norms. In the Central African Republic, humanitarians had to decide whether to support the relocation of ethnic groups being threatened with attacks in order to force their relocation. In this case, humanitarians need to choose whether to support the relocation and thereby potentially encourage further displacement, or not support the relocation and thereby potentially be complicit in atrocities. Both situations involve compromises, and both require clear direction from the humanitarian leadership on what positions should be taken across the response. The position of the Humanitarian Coordinator and HCT should be informed by the analysis and expertise of the Protection Cluster, and the UNHCR Representative should play a leading role in the HCT. However, the Humanitarian Coordinator and HCT cannot delegate these important system wide decisions.

Ensuring that the most critical protection concerns are addressed in a given context. However, every context will raise critical protection concerns. In order to work as a collective and address these concerns in a systematic and strategic manner, the HCT needs to prioritise the two or three most critical issues, articulate them in a short HCT strategy and ensure that they are taken forward in the advocacy and operations of all HCT members. The Global Protection Cluster has issued guidance to HCTs on the development of protection strategies, based on the experience of Palestine.

Resources:

- IASC, Protection Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016 ([LINK](#))
- IASC, Principals Statement on the Centrality of Protection, 2013 ([LINK](#))
- GPC, Humanitarian Country Team Protection Strategies – Provisional Guidance Note ([LINK](#))

2. Protection is often perceived as being too sensitive to take up with Governments and non-state armed actors (NSAA). It can be seen as a choice between protection and access. What is your advice to Humanitarian Coordinators and HCTs on the practical steps they can take in-country to show leadership on sensitive protection concerns despite the challenges?

Promoting human rights isn't an optional extra for HC and HCTs, it is one of the purposes of the UN clearly articulated in the UN Charter. The International Bill of Rights sets out what member states have committed themselves to as their obligation to uphold human rights.

Nonetheless, UNHCR well understands that protection of human rights is not an easy conversation to have with member states, particularly in situations of conflict. The Office's experience is that a sustained engagement with states and others over time creates confidence in the Office as a reliable partner. Our experience is also that principles have to be put into practice—it is often too easy to refuse to engage. In many cases, UNHCR's engagement extends over decades and the Office's protection and assistance activities are well-understood and, in some cases, used by people who become the leaders of their countries (e.g. South Sudan).

The former High Commissioner (and incoming Secretary-General) underlined the need to prevent conflict and build peace. In his report to the World Humanitarian Summit, the Secretary-General's call for greater efforts to prevent and end conflicts is a timely reminder to Member States of the UN of their primary duty. Conflict prevention, peaceful settlement of disputes and negotiated agreements have become more difficult recently as global and regional powers are increasingly taking adversarial positions in armed conflicts. Humanitarian Coordinators are often also Resident Coordinators and can bring to bear experience and resources, including political and development, to a situation before it creates humanitarian need.

The Secretary-General's emphasis on the responsibility of States to uphold and comply with international laws that protect people in armed conflict is an essential and much appreciated reaffirmation of the legal obligations of parties to a conflict.

Armed conflicts like Syria, South Sudan, Yemen and the Central African Republic are highly volatile, fragile and destructive contexts in which only the basics can be kept in place, and often not even this much. Seldom is there the possibility of an end to needs in armed conflicts and other situations of violence. Adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is the single most important way to reduce human suffering in armed conflicts, much of which arises from deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population and civilian objects, and from obstructing the delivery of sufficient and timely humanitarian assistance. Ensuring that parties to a conflict understand their responsibilities is a key activity of HC and HCTs.

Resources:

- United Nations, Secretary-General Report for the World Humanitarian Summit: One Humanity, Shared Responsibility, 2016 ([LINK](#))

3. What coordination should exist between the HCT and the protection cluster in order to ensure critical issues on protection are taken into account?

The HC/HCT should be guided by the analysis of the Protection Cluster, as the top strategic body within an interagency response.

In Myanmar, Protection is a standing agenda item at the Myanmar inter-cluster and HCT meetings. This helps engage the HC/HCT in the implementation of identified protection priorities as well as encourages other clusters to think about protection issues and responses. This is also key for the implementation of Myanmar's upcoming HCT protection strategy.

The Protection Working Group in Libya for instance plans to submit on a regular basis a Protection Note to the HC/HCT focusing on the most critical protection priorities as well as recommendations for HCT members.

The Iraq Protection Cluster already produces a Note for the HCT on critical protection issues, prioritizing concerns as the situation there develops.

Resources:

- GPC and STAIT | Centrality of Protection: Practical Steps for Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams ([LINK](#))

4. What role does the Humanitarian Coordinator and HCT have to ensure protection is mainstreamed within the response?

A good example of how this can be done in practice comes from Yemen, which developed a HCT Protection Strategy in 2016, including an action plan that sets out the practicalities for implementing the strategy. This protection action plan was merged with the HCT gender strategy in order to ensure efficient and effective implementation of HCT protection and gender outcomes, outputs and activities. The sustainability of the strategy depends upon roles and responsibilities being identified and taken on by clusters, agencies and other relevant bodies.

Donor support (including financial) for promoting the importance of implementation and roles and responsibilities of all humanitarian actors is important. In that regard, it is concerning that the recently published Global Humanitarian Overview 2017 indicates that only 29% of protection sector requirements globally were met, although some operations do better than others.

Resources:

- Global Protection Cluster, Provisional Guidance on HCT Protection Strategies, 2016 ([LINK](#))
- Humanitarian Country Team Yemen, Protection Strategy 2016-2017 ([LINK](#))
- OCHA, Global Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017 ([LINK](#))

5. How can protection outcomes be maximised?

Some key practical ways of achieving the outcomes and outputs of a HCT protection strategy could include;

- Having a stronger focus on tangibly including protection mainstreaming (showing how the four elements of protection mainstreaming will actually be implemented) and protection outcomes throughout the project cycle for any proposal/project;
- Providing funding for required assessment capability in order to ensure that humanitarian actors are able to collect sound protection and human rights data (which can then be used for programme planning, advocacy, Human Rights Up Front etc.)
- Showing how vulnerability criteria are developed and then used in practice, including as part of advocacy with all stakeholders (including authorities and affected populations);
- Indicating in proposals/projects how access challenges will be addressed and the potential/actual impact on affected populations of lack of access to humanitarian assistance; and supporting the target of 1% of each cluster's total HRP budget to achieving protection mainstreaming aims (including training, setting up accountability mechanisms, establishing community volunteer networks, conducting regular focus group discussions, establishing representative committees, providing sensitisation/information).