

The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action

Statement by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals

Endorsed by the IASC Principals on 17 December 2013

This statement affirms the commitment of the IASC Principals to ensuring the centrality of protection in humanitarian action and the role of Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams and Clusters to implement this commitment in all aspects of humanitarian action. It is part of a number of measures that will be adopted by IASC to ensure more effective protection of people in humanitarian crises.

When natural disasters strike, or violence and conflict erupt, people are often subject to threats to their lives, safety and security, discrimination, loss of access to basic services and other risks. Violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, and pre-existing threats and vulnerabilities, may be amongst the principal causes and consequences of humanitarian crises.

People look to their national and local authorities, the United Nations and the broader humanitarian community to support and strengthen their protection: to save their lives, ensure their safety and security, alleviate their suffering and restore their dignity – in accordance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law as well as internationally recognized protection standards, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

The primary responsibility to protect people in such situations lies with States. In addition, in situations of armed conflict, non-State parties to conflict are obliged to protect persons affected and at risk in accordance with international humanitarian law. The humanitarian community has an essential role to engage with these actors to protect and assist people in need.

The United Nations “Rights Up Front” Plan of Action emphasises the imperative for the United Nations to protect people, wherever they may be, in accordance with their human rights and in a manner that prevents and responds to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. This same imperative to protect people lies also at the heart of humanitarian action.

Protection of all persons affected and at risk must inform humanitarian decision-making and response, including engagement with States and non-State parties to conflict. It must be central to our preparedness efforts, as part of immediate and life-saving activities, and throughout the duration of humanitarian response and beyond.

In practical terms, this means identifying who is at risk, how and why at the very outset of a crisis and thereafter, taking into account the specific vulnerabilities that underlie these risks, including those experienced by men, women, girls and boys, and groups such as internally displaced persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons belonging to sexual and other minorities.

It means that HCs, HCTs and Clusters need to develop and implement a comprehensive protection strategy to address these risks and to prevent and stop the recurrence of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law – a strategy that clearly articulates and identifies the

complementary roles and responsibilities among humanitarian actors to contribute to protection outcomes; that identifies and makes use of all available tools to effectively protect those affected by humanitarian crises; that takes into account the role and contribution of other relevant actors, such as peacekeeping and political missions and development actors, to achieve protection goals and develop durable solutions. These strategies must be regularly revised to reflect changing circumstances, priorities and needs. Resources commensurate to the realisation of these efforts must be mobilised.

It also means that HCs, HCTs and Clusters need to strengthen the collection, management and analysis of information to inform and adjust early warning, preparedness, response, recovery and policy efforts, and support strategic and coordinated advocacy, dialogue and humanitarian negotiations on behalf of persons affected and at risk, and in a manner that addresses the risks they face in conflict, violence and natural disasters. In this regard, the complementary roles, mandates and means of action of all relevant actors need to be recognized and reinforced.

In all undertakings, primary consideration will be given to our accountability to affected populations, to identify, understand and support their own protection measures. Different segments of affected populations need to be meaningfully engaged in all decisions and actions that have a direct impact on their well-being. A commitment to support national and local civil society in their important role to enhance the protection of persons affected and at risk is central to this endeavour.

At the field level, the responsibility for placing protection at the centre of international humanitarian action rests with Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams, and all Cluster Coordinators. Protection Clusters play a crucial role in supporting humanitarian actors to develop protection strategies, including to mainstream protection throughout all sectors and to coordinate specialised protection services for affected populations.

But the responsibility is not theirs alone. We, the IASC Principals, recognize our leadership in supporting their efforts in a consistent, principled and impartial manner, including through policy development, dialogue, advocacy, and engagement with States. We commit to provide the necessary support and to work with them and all IASC members to ensure the centrality of protection in humanitarian action.