



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

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**Policy on  
UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement**

Approved by: Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Filippo Grandi', written over the word 'Signature:'.

Approval date: 18 September 2019

Contact: Internal Displacement Section, Field Support Service, Division of International Protection

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## 1. Purpose

This Policy reaffirms UNHCR's commitment to a decisive and predictable engagement in situations of internal displacement, as an integral aspect of our operations worldwide, and of our protection leadership role in humanitarian crises.

The Policy requires country, regional and global operations to mobilize and deploy resources and capacities in support of UNHCR's longstanding pledge to work in partnership with others to strengthen protection and secure solutions for internally displaced people (IDPs).

In line with UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2017-2021, it commits UNHCR to leveraging fully the synergies between our engagement with refugees, internally displaced people, returnees, stateless people and others affected by humanitarian crises, while taking into account our different responsibilities vis-à-vis different categories of forcibly displaced people, and relevant inter-agency arrangements. It also commits UNHCR to progressively adjusting internal systems and processes to enable the organization to work seamlessly and effectively across the full spectrum of forced displacement.

The Policy empowers and requires Representatives to be proactive in preparing for and stepping into emergencies that result in significant internal displacement, as part of a humanitarian response under the UN country leadership, and based on a sound protection and context analysis. Representatives will be supported to follow through on inter-agency commitments, to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action and to design, implement and sustain a meaningful, solutions-oriented operational response to internal displacement that is backed up by global advocacy and resource mobilization.

## 2. Scope

This Policy covers all aspects of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement, including in relation to preparing for and delivering protection and solutions as part of a collective response in support of States and affected populations. It applies to the work of all UNHCR personnel at field, country, regional and headquarters level.

Compliance with this Policy is mandatory.

## 3. Rationale

Responding rapidly and robustly to humanitarian crises with large-scale forced displacement is a reflex that sits deep within UNHCR's organizational culture. UNHCR's capacity to save and secure lives, to protect rights and pursue solutions to forced displacement has been built over decades. Yet, UNHCR's operational engagement with the internally displaced has not always been as consistent and predictable as its support to refugees, and the volume, scope and results of our activities in situations of internal displacement have been variable.

As the causes of conflict, violence and forced displacement become more complex, with climate change being an accelerating factor in many instances, it is vital for UNHCR to ensure more coherence and consistency across all areas of our work – from prevention, response to internal displacement, to statelessness, to cross-border flows, to solutions. A number of regions are increasingly affected by overlapping refugee movements, internal displacement and statelessness, thereby necessitating a strategic and joined-up approach to forced displacement that UNHCR is uniquely positioned to provide.

It is upon this foundation that the High Commissioner has resolutely committed to reposition UNHCR to be more predictable and decisive in situations of internal displacement, working

intensively with partners in planning, framing and delivering a protection-driven response that helps advance solutions to forced displacement for all.

#### 4. Vision

All internally displaced people can find protection from harm, live peacefully, learn, work and flourish as contributing members of the communities in which they live, and find longer term solutions to build a secure future.

In support of this vision, UNHCR will pursue measures and approaches that equip us to anticipate and respond effectively to situations of internal displacement within an evolving UN system and with an expanding network of partners, including development and financial institutions, ensuring a firm emphasis on reinforcing State responsibility and enhancing national and local protection capacities – including those of forcibly displaced and wider displacement-affected communities.

Our engagement is grounded in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and emphasizes the centrality of protection in humanitarian action. It enables UNHCR to contribute to collective outcomes that enhance protection and promote solutions for IDPs and wider displacement-affected communities, as well as paving the way for the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees where relevant.

#### 5. Guiding considerations

In each instance where we engage with IDPs and wider displacement-affected communities, UNHCR will:

- Promote the primary responsibility of the State, and where relevant, non-State actors, to prevent, respond to and resolve internal displacement while complementing and reinforcing national response efforts, and taking into account the political complexities and particular challenges presented when displacement is itself a result of government action or inaction;
- Promote respect for human rights and international law, as a core purpose of the United Nations, informing programming, joint interventions, advocacy and stakeholder engagement;
- Place protection and solutions at the centre of humanitarian action through direct engagement with displacement-affected communities, prioritizing protection analysis and strategy-setting, the timely and effective delivery of protection services and mainstreaming protection across all sectors/clusters;
- Uphold humanitarian principles, including by responding to the most urgent risks, threats and needs, and never taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, racial, religious or ideological controversies;
- Put in place safeguards so that our actions, assistance and advocacy do not cause any unintended harm;
- Be accountable to all those that we serve by ensuring, to the extent feasible, the proximity and community engagement that gives a first-hand understanding of their diverse perspectives, priorities, risks, needs, capacities and expectations, through an age, gender, disability and diversity lens, and by enabling them to participate in decision-making and claim their rights. This culture of accountability is underpinned by zero-tolerance for sexual

exploitation and abuse alongside awareness raising and enhanced detection and response;

- Promote solutions for IDPs from the outset of our engagement while, simultaneously, strengthening their resilience, including through their inclusion in local and national systems and services and access to economic opportunities, and pursuing early engagement by development and financial institutions, to mitigate the risk of protracted displacement; and
- Contribute to a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-society approach to internal displacement through wide ranging and inclusive partnerships with local and national authorities; local civil society, community-based organizations, local women's organizations, and faith-based groups; UN entities including political and peacekeeping missions; regional and international organizations; development actors and financial institutions; the private sector; and internally displaced people and wider displacement-affected communities.

## 6. Operationalizing UNHCR's commitments

The scope of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement consists of global and country leadership, advocacy and coordination responsibilities, including those set out in arrangements agreed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator,<sup>1</sup> as well as our operational involvement in line with relevant General Assembly resolutions.<sup>2</sup>

The parameters of UNHCR's operational involvement in humanitarian crises characterized by internal displacement will normally be aligned with our leadership and coordination responsibilities related to protection, camp coordination and camp management and shelter, with a particular emphasis on displacement owing to conflict and violence, in line with IASC arrangements.

We will at all times strive to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action through strategic leadership of the three UNHCR-led clusters and ensuring, together with partners, an evidence-based analysis that informs inter-agency decision-making and operational delivery.

UNHCR will also contribute to any inter-agency response to disaster-induced internal displacement, taking the lead on protection, whenever the three criteria of field presence, a government request and inter-agency agreement are met. The scope of UNHCR's engagement in such situations will generally be time-limited, and will be determined in consultation with the Senior Executive Team.

UNHCR may also make available its protection expertise in the context of national, regional and international preparedness and response measures related to forced displacement or planned relocations arising from development projects, climate change and environmental degradation.

The implementation of the Policy requires concerted organization-wide commitment and effort to ensure the predictable exercise of leadership and coordination responsibilities in line with

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<sup>1</sup>At the global level, UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster (GPC). It also co-leads the Global Shelter Cluster with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

<sup>2</sup> UN GA Resolution 53/125 (1998), §16, the General Assembly "[n]otes the relevance of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, reaffirms its support for the role of the Office of the High Commissioner in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to internally displaced persons, on the basis of specific requests from the Secretary-General or the competent organs of the United Nations and with the consent of the State concerned, taking into account the complementarities of the mandates and expertise of other relevant organizations, and emphasizes that activities on behalf of internally displaced persons must not undermine the institution of asylum."

IASC agreements, and an operational stance that is fit for purpose at each stage of our engagement.

Notably:

- The Senior Executive Team (SET), namely the High Commissioner, Deputy High Commissioner and Assistant High Commissioners for Operations and Protection shall ensure that our IDP commitments are fully reflected in the exercise of their leadership, oversight, management and support responsibilities, including in relation to strategic planning and resource allocation;
- Regional Bureaux Directors and Representatives have a crucial accountability and responsibility for ensuring prompt and robust engagement in humanitarian crises characterized by internal displacement, from prevention through to solutions, on a 'no regrets' basis; and
- Directors of Divisions and Heads of Services are responsible for mainstreaming internal displacement in their respective areas of work and ensuring that the necessary capabilities, systems, processes and procedures are in place to resource, guide and support Regional Bureaux and country operations in preventing and responding to internal displacement, including through strategic and effective global cluster leadership, strategic communications and advocacy, and contributing to global policy development and standard-setting.

### **6.1. Preparing for emergencies**

In countries prone to conflict, violence or disaster-induced displacement, UNHCR will participate in inter-agency emergency preparedness measures, contribute to UN system-wide, and government-led or supported prevention and early warning mechanisms, and strengthen local and national capacity to prevent and mitigate displacement risks.

In all aspects of preparedness, UNHCR will contribute protection expertise and seek to embed protection across preparedness efforts in all sectors or clusters, including those led by UNHCR. We will also analyze potential displacement patterns and use our shelter and site coordination and management expertise in scenario planning.

UNHCR will seek to ensure that protection monitoring and community engagement mechanisms are established, as a means of identifying, preventing and mitigating conflict and violence, and their consequences, including forced displacement. We will also seek opportunities for partners to exchange information, mobilize resources and coordinate preparedness activities for protection, camp/site coordination and management and shelter. Guidance and technical advice will be provided to enable States to develop and implement national laws and policies on internal displacement as well as protection-sensitive response capacity.

As part of these efforts, UNHCR will ensure that a sound risk analysis, carried out together with partners, drives its own organizational preparedness and, as the context dictates, UNHCR emergency declarations, in accordance with UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response.

## 6.2. Delivering a protection and solutions response

UNHCR will support Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators and UN/Humanitarian Country Teams to develop an overarching protection and solutions strategy, based on an evidence-based protection analysis. UN and humanitarian partners will be able to rely on UNHCR for expertise and advice on protection priorities and Representatives will participate actively in UN/Humanitarian Country Teams, to help ensure that protection is placed at the centre of the humanitarian response.

When cluster or cluster-like arrangements are established, UNHCR will assume leadership and coordination functions in line with our global responsibilities. These will be supported by dedicated cluster coordination capacities, underpinned by a robust operational response – with both aspects supported by information management capacities.

In our cluster leadership capacity, UNHCR will support and steer the development and implementation of comprehensive cluster strategies while, as Provider of Last Resort, mobilizing internal and external resources and engaging a range of stakeholders to fill response gaps.

UNHCR will promote protection mainstreaming, working with all clusters to design and deliver an inter-agency response that is shaped by protection considerations. Appropriate opportunities will be identified to reinforce local and national actors, including those responsible for development, to engage in and eventually lead the response to internal displacement.

In its operational capacity, UNHCR will ensure a community-based protection approach and prioritize interventions to prevent, respond to and mitigate the most urgent and immediate protection risks and needs, including protection against sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child protection. UNHCR will apply and integrate systematically to its work with IDPs its longstanding expertise in shelter, and camp and site management, including experience gained in the refugee context in transitioning from camps into inclusive settlements.

We will also prioritize actions that contribute to the conditions conducive for safe, dignified and comprehensive solutions, including (where relevant) for refugees returning from countries of asylum. Special areas of focus will include community engagement, law and policy, documentation, shelter, secure land tenure, livelihoods, peaceful co-existence and conflict resolution.

UNHCR will galvanize and contribute to government-led efforts to address the needs of IDPs – including those who are integrating locally, returning to places of origin or settling in another part of the country, as well as the wider displacement-affected community.

In line with the 2030 Agenda and the principle of “leaving no-one behind,” we will work together with partners to secure the inclusion of IDPs in national services, such as education, health, access to livelihoods and social services, including social safety nets; promote the participation of IDPs in local and national social and economic development, including through an enabling legal framework; and build effective approaches to resilience and solutions that assist IDPs, wider displacement-affected communities and their governments to better manage and overcome the consequences and effects of displacement. In our pursuit of solutions, we will contribute to transition strategies that link humanitarian and development action, and activities that build and sustain peace.

Results from protection monitoring and assessments, and other monitoring systems, will be systematically utilized to generate an evidence-base to inform analysis, advocacy, programme

design, resource mobilization and communications. Protection assessments and monitoring will also be used to reinforce community-based protection work and to ensure that the humanitarian response takes full account of age, gender, disability and other diversity elements.

Protection and conflict analysis will also be used to ensure a “do no harm” approach to solutions. In this regard, UNHCR will initiate and participate in multi-stakeholder assessments, profiling and analysis, engaging relevant national bodies and other actors to develop a comprehensive understanding of the longer term protection and assistance needs, vulnerabilities, socio-economic conditions, capacities and aspirations of IDPs, returning refugees and wider displacement-affected communities.

### **6.3. Disengaging responsibly**

UNHCR will disengage responsibly when local and national actors can meaningfully take over operational delivery, coordination and monitoring in relation to protection and solutions for IDPs. This will require UNHCR, from the outset of its involvement, to undertake interventions and measures aimed at enhancing national response capacity, including technical advice and support for national laws and policies on internal displacement, training and capacity development. UNHCR will work alongside others in the UN/Humanitarian Country Team to support the gradual de-activation of clusters in support of government-led coordination arrangements, including in the transition of any IDP sites to governments and/or other agreed approaches.

## **7. Enablers of engagement**

### **7.1. Integrated programming**

As per our commitment to work across the full spectrum of forced displacement and to promote socio-economic inclusion of persons of concern, UNHCR will seek to maximize opportunities to respond through area-based approaches and integrated programming that are inclusive of all relevant population groups in a given operational context. This includes situations where populations of concern live together (e.g., IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers from other countries, returning refugees and IDPs), and/or with host communities.

The ultimate aim of area-based approaches and integrated programming is to ensure that UNHCR leverages available opportunities and resources to advance protection and solutions to forced displacement for all in a way that supports local protection systems. UNHCR’s programmes will be designed to achieve objectives developed with the UN/Humanitarian Country Team and thus will be informed by joint assessments and analysis. Our programmes will furthermore define a mutually supportive and complementary set of actions for UNHCR within multi-stakeholder plans. UNHCR’s programming and resource allocation will be directed towards the greatest needs and risks, irrespective of whether or not IDPs are in the same areas as refugees and asylum-seekers, and while taking into account our differentiated responsibilities for different groups, and relevant inter-agency arrangements.

### **7.2. Data, information management and identity management**

When engaging in IDP situations, UNHCR will ensure that a sound protection analysis is conducted together with partners, including in preparedness and other stages of internal displacement. This requires accurate, up-to-date, comprehensive and quality data and information that can support evidence-informed advocacy, programming, monitoring, assistance and service delivery by UNHCR and the rest of the humanitarian community, and contribute to solid protection and solutions outcomes. We will also invest in and maximize use



of standard information products – including protection and other monitoring reports, needs analyses, technical assessments, service and presence mapping and other products – in support of our operational engagement and our cluster responsibilities. Information products will be shared in accordance with responsible data approaches, including through UNHCR and inter-agency web-based platforms and portals. UNHCR's Data Protection Policy will be applied in relation to the collection or processing of personal data.

Generally, comprehensive individual registration by UNHCR is not desirable in situations of internal displacement. Rather, UNHCR will prioritize one or more of the following approaches to population data management, depending on the operational context and the role and capacity of other actors: i) estimation; ii) enrolment; and iii) profiling and surveys. The collection of personally identifiable data may be undertaken where necessary or appropriate from a protection perspective, for the purposes of providing assistance or services, including documentation or shelter, and should be tailored to specific and predefined purposes. Where the collection of personally identifiable data is undertaken by national authorities or others, UNHCR should seek to ensure that this guarantees the full and informed consent of IDPs as to the collection, use and sharing of personal data, in line with the principles and standards set out in UNHCR's Data Protection Policy and national data protection standards.

### **7.3. Resource mobilization and funding**

UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement will be underpinned by an agency-wide resource mobilization strategy. At global, regional and country level, resource mobilization will be intensified at the onset of an emergency and sustained throughout our engagement. It will be supported by an evidence-based analysis that articulates the protection and life-saving impact of UNHCR's response. At the global level, UNHCR will promote and highlight our work with IDPs – from preparedness through to the delivery of protection and solutions – giving it an appropriate profile and prominence in all external relations and fundraising efforts.

### **7.4. Workforce management**

UNHCR will support UNHCR personnel, and where possible the personnel of our partners, to acquire the diverse skills and competencies necessary to work across the full spectrum of forced displacement, including in situations of internal displacement. We will also reinforce ongoing efforts to identify, train and maintain a cadre of staff with specialized skills and competencies, including those related to coordination and information management in both cluster and non-cluster situations, for deployment as needed, especially in emergencies.

## **8. Terms and definitions**

*Area-based approach:* A multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach that responds to the whole population living in a specific geographic area.

*Collective outcomes:* The result that development, humanitarian and other relevant actors contribute to achieving in order to reduce risks and vulnerabilities, address needs and facilitate durable solutions.

*Displacement-affected communities:* Displaced persons, including refugees and internally displaced persons, and the local communities affected by their presence in areas of displacement and as well in areas of return and (re)integration.

*Disaster risk reduction:* Preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk, and as well strengthening the resilience of people, systems and approaches.<sup>3</sup>

*Durable solutions for IDPs:* According to the IASC, durable solutions are achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. This can be achieved through sustainable return and reintegration at the place of origin; sustainable local integration in areas where IDPs take refuge; or sustainable integration in another part of the country (settlement elsewhere in the country).<sup>4</sup>

*Enrolment:* The collection, at either the household or individual level, of biographical data, including biometric data, of internally displaced persons, for the purposes of delivering and monitoring services and assistance, including cash-based interventions.

*Global Cluster Lead Agency:* An agency/organization at global level that has been designated by the IASC as cluster lead agency for a particular sector.

*Integrated programming:* For UNHCR, integrated programming is i) multi-sector; ii) inclusive of persons of concern (asylum-seekers, refugees, IDPs, returnees and stateless people) and host communities; and iii) multi-stakeholder.

*Internally displaced persons:* Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this Policy, the terms 'Internally Displaced Person(s)' and 'Internally Displaced People' are used interchangeably.

*No regrets basis:* The principle established in UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response that UNHCR shall not under any circumstances permit that persons of concern face avoidable harm or endure undue suffering.<sup>6</sup>

*Population estimation:* Aggregate population figures gathered by triangulating the best available primary and secondary data sources for a defined population group in a given geographic area and timeframe, which are verified, validated and endorsed through an inter-agency mechanism, to inform advocacy and programming.

*Profiling or displacement profiling:* A collaborative information-gathering process that provides disaggregated, comparative data about displacement situations to guide programming, advocate for protection and assistance, and inform policy and long-term solutions.<sup>7</sup> While profiling is used especially in contexts of internal displacement, it is relevant for other displacement situations as well, including those with refugees, migrants, besieged populations and populations at risk of displacement.

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) for a fuller definition.

<sup>4</sup> Please refer to the IASC Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons, available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/documents-public/iasc-framework-durable-solutions-internally-displaced-persons>

<sup>5</sup> UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR/HCP/2017/1/Rev.1 Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response. See paragraphs 5.6 and 5.7: 'UNHCR shall not under any circumstances permit that persons of concern face avoidable harm or endure undue suffering. Managers will be empowered, supported and held accountable to take all decisions and actions necessary to ensure that refugees and other persons of concern receive protection and life-saving humanitarian assistance in a timely and effective manner that stems or diminishes harm, suffering and untoward hardship. Managers who take decisions and/or act on the basis of "no regrets" should document their reasoning and share it with those to whom they report.'

<sup>7</sup> Please refer to the Joint IDP Profiling Service, available at: <https://www.iips.org/tools-and-guidance/urban-profiling-guidance>

*Protection:* 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 (IHL) and International Refugee law (IRL)).

*Protection mainstreaming:* The process of incorporating protection principles and promoting meaningful access, safety and dignity in humanitarian aid.

*Provider of Last Resort:* A concept established by the IASC that translates into a commitment by the Cluster Lead Agency to do the utmost to ensure an adequate and appropriate response. This means calling upon all relevant humanitarian partners to address critical gaps, and if this fails, depending on the urgency, and subject to access, security and funding availability, the cluster lead may need to commit itself to filling the gap.

*Resilience:* The ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions and systems to prevent, absorb and recover from shocks, while continuing to function and adapt in a way that supports long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights.

## 9. Monitoring and compliance

Compliance with this Policy will be monitored by the Division of International Protection in close collaboration with the Regional Bureaux and Headquarters Divisions.

## 10. Dates

This Policy will come into effect immediately and will be reviewed in September 2024, including to reflect any significant developments in the United Nations and inter-agency arrangements and architecture for coordination and response to internal displacement.

## 11. Contact

The contact for this Policy is the Chief of Section (Internally Displaced Persons) in the Division of International Protection.

## 12. History

This Policy incorporates certain elements of and supersedes all previously issued internal policies on UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement. These include:

1997 IOM/FOM/87 – UNHCR's role with Internally Displaced Persons  
2000 IOM/FOM/12 – UNHCR and Internally Displaced Persons  
2001 IOM/FOM/77 – Operational Guidelines for UNHCR's Involvement with IDPs  
2004 IOM/FOM/46 – Involvement with IDP situations: a process for decision-making  
2006 IOM/FOM/35 – UNHCR involvement with new IDP situations  
2007 IOM/FOM/26 – UNHCR's role in support of an enhanced humanitarian response to situations of internal displacement: policy framework and implementation strategy  
2007 IOM/FOM/28 – The Protection of Internally Displaced Persons and the Role of UNHCR  
UNHCR/OG/2016/2 – Operational Guidelines on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement

## 13. References

African Union, [\*African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa\*](#) ("Kampala Convention"), 23 October 2009

Global Protection Cluster Working Group, [Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons](#), June 2010

IASC, [Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons](#), 2010

IASC, [Guidelines on Emergency Response Preparedness \(ERP\)](#), July 2015

IASC, [Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), 2016

IASC, [Principals' statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), 2013

IASC, [Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level](#), July 2015

UNHCR, [Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#), 2017 UNHCR/HCP/2017/Rev.1

UNHCR, [Age, Gender and Diversity Policy](#), 2018

UNHCR, [Policy on the Protection of Personal Data on Persons of Concern to UNHCR](#), 2015

UNHCR, [Internal Note for UNHCR Representatives: Protection Leadership in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies](#), 2016

UN OCHA, [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), 2004