

Onward and Upward

Five lessons from coordinating the Global Protection Cluster

The drive, passion, responsiveness, and expertise of protection advocates and aid workers has turned a previously underprioritized area of humanitarian work – protection – to one at its centre. And yet, conference room confusion about protection and its centrality to all humanitarian action grows increasingly disconnected from a field reality where protection responsibilities are crystal clear. As the baton is passed to the next leadership, here are five ideas that shaped our work in the last three years.

1- Beat invisibility

On the frontlines, the picture is clear. Conflict is the largest driver of protection risks, breaches of humanitarian law and human rights abuses. Every day, thousands of people living in warzones and fleeing them are subjected to horrific violence. People are killed in South Sudan, Centrafrique, Haiti, the Sahel. Disappeared, arbitrarily detained, tortured, sexually assaulted in DR Congo, Nigeria, Venezuela, Ethiopia. Forced to flee and in sieges in Cameroon, Syria, Central America. Water systems, schools, hospitals targeted and littered with explosives in Ukraine, Yemen, Mozambique.

In these places, socio-economic meltdowns, lack of food and climate shocks are both driving and deteriorating the situation – leaving families with little capacity to cope, pushed into harm compounded by harm. Leaving homes, working in slavery-like conditions, marrying-off girls, children dropping out of schools, youth pulled towards armed groups.

It doesn't stop there. Then comes what I believe hurts the most: invisibility. Millions go through these experiences in solitude, wondering if anyone knows or cares; wondering if they matter at all. Invisibility of survivors is the escape route of criminals and men with guns. It is invisibility from one's community to come to the rescue, from humanitarians, from political solutions, from justice.

It is crucial that we do not succumb to this invisibility and remain comfortable in responding only to the visible and reachable. We must make the invisible visible, by expanding our partnerships to peace and development actors, growing our presence, supporting frontline responders, and consistently and systematically telling the story where it matters.

2- Follow the leaders

Where the rubber hits the road is most often in the villages, camps and neighbourhoods. Of course, there is significant support delivered through Humanitarian Country Teams and Non-Governmental Organisations forums, but at the end of the day, much of the impact is realized by local responders.

The risk burden is also there – on the frontlines, primarily shouldered by local actors. They are, every day, speaking with armed actors and authorities, negotiating, organizing communities, and providing services. If things go wrong, they don't have the luxury of being *Persona Non Grata*.

This reality is recognized. We must continue doubling down on our commitment to always stand by and get out of the way, when we must, of local protection responders. Only then can we ensure that international protection actors are taking on their equitable share of risk – both those related to funding and fiduciary as well as operational and advocacy ones.

3- Inspire trust

Inspiring trust is probably the most vital component for protection responses. Without it, we can't work with local communities. Without it no organisation, local or international will attract the right people to work on stubborn protection issues.

There is much about protection work that is rock-solid with a strong body of law behind it, organisations with mandates and expertise on protection, dedicated individuals, and networks. Yet, our protection advocacy seems to be stuck in a culture of nagging instead of embracing what made protection work feasible to begin with: inspiring trust.

My field colleagues, I am sure you know well the nagging tone – it's hard to avoid. Complaining to the Humanitarian Country Team to do more on protection, reminding donors that protection is once again underfunded, lifting an eyebrow to other clusters because they haven't mainstreamed protection. These are worthy things to nag about. The problem is, it's just not an effective approach, and is divorced from the can-do attitude of protection work.

When we are strategic and seek to attract support and buy-in for protection through showing the impact of our work as a diverse and dynamic sector, we see results. Rallying partners for protection work by bringing people along on the ride – showing them the possibilities, awakening the protection champions in them, making sure they want to be part of something that works – is our key.

We have so much to be proud of as a sector. The impact protection actors have, including community-based and local actors, is enormous. When we better track success and better tell the story, we energise action and inspire trust that makes our impact possible.

4- Simple and specialised

Over the last 15 years of clusters existence, our ways of working have adapted to the shifting operational environment. We are now at the point where the next evolution is required.

We must simplify coordination to a point where all protection response matters are represented by one simple, accountable leadership – circumventing the current multiplicity of representation of specialised protection issues in coordination forums. Specialisation is key operationally. However, it is not necessary and at times counterproductive in interagency forums. To ensure simplicity and efficiency, protection responders need unified office locations, strategic plans, monitoring and analysis, case management and referrals systems, advocacy and coordination tools under one cluster supported by one integrated Global Operations Cell.

We should support the step up, accountability and predictability for all protection issues through operational areas of specialisation on youth protection, legal rights and documentation, trafficking in persons, protection of civilians' advocacy, protection of the elderly, detention and disappearance, and inclusion of persons with disability, alongside the current protection response accountability on child protection, gender-based violence, mine action, and housing land and property.

We should continue making localisation a reality in our sphere of work by promoting area-based approaches where sub-national coordination mechanisms are led by actors who are operational in these areas while guided by national clusters. This would give a real chance to incorporate the peace and development angle to address deep-rooted protection issues.

5- Keep protection central

There is much momentum to refocus humanitarian responses on the centrality of protection. Beyond processes, the humanitarian leadership must step up three approaches that would further put protection at the centre.

Humanitarian access is under major pressure. For protection response, the picture is more severe, owing to the nature of the issues we deal with. Access for protection requires sustained presence on the ground. It is by being there alongside active local partners that we build trust with communities, with authorities and armed groups. It is only by being there that we can monitor, understand, and engage to change behaviours, address issues, and run services. It is by being there that we send a signal of caring and solidarity and can tell the story when need be. We need a new way of thinking. We need to complement 'service delivery-oriented access negotiation' with negotiating for access that protects.

Despite finding itself at the core of protection work, changing behaviours and engagement with armed actors is not consistently done by a broad range of protection actors. Negotiating with an armed group to ensure safe passage for children to the local school. Engaging with parties to the conflict about the role and principles of humanitarian organizations and building agreement to access a community under siege. Sensitizing armed actors about the impacts of sexual and gender-based violence. This should be the bread and butter of many protection actors who are operational in crisis contexts.

Keeping protection central, also means that context by context, we must take the largest humanitarian programmes, be it food, water, shelter or otherwise and make sure that in addition to delivering what they must in a safe way that doesn't do harm, but they are also reducing protection risks and convincing communities and authorities to change behaviours and find solutions.

People in crisis hear what we say. They also hear our silence.

Leading a community of protection responders is to be the chief advocate, sometimes publicly, sometimes behind closed doors, sometimes yourself, sometimes through others. Most people we work for and with have lost a lot – but their stories must be heard. We need to be a global protection advocate, ensuring that voices from the field are heard, at the right place, at the right time, at the right volume. This requires consistency, predictability, courage and clarity of moral standing.

We must prevent when we can, reduce risks when we are able, build capacity when it helps, respond, and assist when harm is done and always, always tell the true story. Silence should never reign.

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