



Protection Messages Lake Chad Basin Conference January 2023

The Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region continues to face a humanitarian and protection crisis, severely impacting civilian populations, particularly women and children, in an increasingly unstable context. The following messages reflect priority protection issues and needed actions in the Lake Chad Basin, based on analysis and key messages from the Protection Clusters¹ in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria and from UNHCR as lead agency. Additional contributions were made by the Global Protection Cluster's Advocacy Task Team. These messages are being shared with relevant stakeholders ahead of the Lake Chad Basin Conference, which is set for 23-24 January 2023.

Key Protection Messages for the Lake Basin Chad

1. The Lake Chad Basin remains a protection crisis: protection risks are on the rise while the protection response is limited and sometimes not available.

Violent extremism, conflict and persecution in the Lake Chad Basin, mainly due to attacks on civilians by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), continue to cause severe human rights violations and protection risks while driving forced displacement internally as well as across borders. According to UNHCR, more than 3.4 million people were forcibly displaced in 2022. Abductions, suicide attacks, forced religious conversion, forced recruitment, gender-based violence and other human rights' violations continue to be increasingly reported. Women and children continue to bear the brunt of the crisis, including through disproportionately borne risks such as early and forced marriage, conflict-related sexual violence and child recruitment. The critical lack of state presence and rule of law to adequately address such violations is perpetuating a cycle of violence and impunity. The fragile socio-economic context is further weakening the protection environment and exacerbating vulnerabilities as levels of poverty and food insecurity are extremely high.

Protection actors, many of whom are women's rights organizations and other local actors, are responding to a range of protection risks and providing life-saving support to crisis-affected communities across the region. Paradoxically, however, the protection response is increasingly limited, reflecting decreasing resources and shrinking humanitarian space. Alongside needed investments in the protection response, the grave violations of human rights, including the six grave violations of children's rights, happening in the region must be further monitored and reported on, with clear prioritization of prevention and accountability efforts by national duty bearers and the international community.

Recommendations:

- *State and national authorities* have the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians. They and all actors in the region must approach the situation in the Lake Chad Basin as a protection crisis with a focus on ensuring the drivers of risks, underlying root causes and the fundamental rights of communities are at the forefront of the national authorities' and international community's response. Advocacy for the implementation of the Centrality of Protection principles and approach remains critical.

¹ Each of these Protection Clusters comprises a broad membership of national and international protection organizations and experts, many of whom are engaged in regular protection monitoring and a wide range of protection programmes.

- *Donors and Member States* should invest in protection-response efforts across the triple nexus, strengthening protection services in support of strengthened respect for human rights, greater security and enhanced resilience of affected people while contributing to prevent and mitigate protection risks. This should include dedicated resources for child protection and GBV prevention and response interventions.
- *The international community* must support and further encourage national authorities in taking urgent steps to stop the upsurge in killings of civilians, gender-based violence and violations of children's rights, and to ensure the investigation of alleged abuses and violations while also strengthening the judicial system to ensure access to justice for civilians – ultimately strengthening the protection environment, fighting impunity and promoting longer-term stabilization.

2. The humanitarian space is shrinking, leaving populations in need out of reach of protection and assistance.

Attacks by NSAGs, military interventions, and declared “no-go” zones are restricting freedom of movement and access to livelihood opportunities by affected populations while also severely limiting humanitarian access, both in terms of their access to assistance and protection, as well as the ability for humanitarians to reach these communities. Furthermore, humanitarian actors continue to be targeted, jeopardizing efforts to ensure protection by presence and provide evidence-based protection response. In an increasingly complex environment with shrinking humanitarian space, ensuring the respect of humanitarian principles is essential. Functional Civil-Military Coordination mechanisms must be further reinforced to support the protection of affected civilian populations.

Recommendations:

- *State actors and other armed groups* must (re)affirm and (re)commit to respect for international humanitarian law and human rights law as well as humanitarian principles which aim to protect and safeguard humanitarian assistance. Unimpeded access to affected areas is essential to ensure populations' access to protection and assistance.
- *Civil authorities, military and humanitarian actors* must continue to invest in strengthened capacity for cohesive and effective civil-military coordination mechanisms at sub-national, country, regional and cross-border levels.
- *Civil authorities and humanitarian actors* can pursue more in-depth and continuous community consultations to inform the development of tailored approaches to security needs by different communities, aiming at addressing their concerns as well as their access constraints.

3. The violation of the humanitarian and civilian character of displacement sites continues to be a grave concern.

Displacement sites hosting internally displaced persons and refugees continue to be targeted and infiltrated by armed elements resulting in death, looting and destruction of property, forced recruitment, forced religious conversion and other human rights violations. The risk of armed elements infiltrating displacement sites remains high, jeopardizing the civilian and humanitarian character of camps and sites. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) strategies and programs and mine action interventions also need to be strengthened. Over the years, IDP camp closures conducted to incite returns, without alternatives and durable solutions, have furthered

displacement and generated new protection risks while compromising the quality of the protection response.

Recommendations:

- *National authorities* should enhance security measures in and around displacement sites, including through the identification and separation of armed elements in order to maintain the humanitarian and civilian character of displacement sites and to protect civilians in accordance with international standards.
- *Donors* should support strong national DDR programmes and their harmonization across the Lake Chad Basin region to prevent risks of re-recruitment of demobilized combatants. This should include tailored reintegration programmes for children formerly associated with armed forces or groups.
- *Donors* should support mine action interventions and explosive ordnance risk education to be strengthened as a tool for the protection of civilians, to enhance humanitarian access, freedom of movement and create conducive environment for durable solutions, including in areas of return.
- *State actors* should ensure the return of IDPs and repatriation is done in a coordinated manner, protection oriented and people centered while exploring other alternatives and durable solutions for affected people.

4. The implementation of legal frameworks on internal displacement remains limited, despite efforts.

Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria are all parties to the 2009 Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa. Niger remains the first and only country in West and Central Africa to have incorporated the Kampala Convention into its domestic law in 2018. In Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria, similar processes have also advanced, with draft laws under review at various levels. In August 2021, the Government of Nigeria adopted a national policy on internal displacement that had been over 10 years in the making, clarifying roles and responsibilities in the national IDP response. However, the implementation of relevant legal and policy frameworks for the protection of IDPs and others affected by the humanitarian crisis remains limited. In particular, limited access to identity and civil documentation continues to hamper access to protection and durable solutions across the region. The rate of birth registration in the Lake Chad Basin remains very low, for example at an average of 20 per cent, resulting in restricted access to rights and services.

Recommendations:

- *States* should continue to demonstrate a commitment to adopting and implementing national protection frameworks on internal displacement in line with international and regional standards, and also to further developing national plans regarding the protection of civilians .
- *State and national authorities* should scale up access to civil registration and documentation, including through legislative reforms to ensure the inclusion of the forcibly displaced in national civil registration and identity management systems and strengthen their protection, access to services and solutions.