

# Opening Remarks – Global Protection Forum 2021 - Engagement with Armed Actors: Exploring Modalities for Community-Led Negotiations for Protection and Access

William Chemaly, Global Protection Cluster Coordinator, 27 October 2021, 1600

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This session is going to be an exciting one – it is asking us to focus ourselves, from the very outset, on the agency and leadership of communities in advancing protection solutions.

We aren't going to get there just at the end, and it's not an afterthought that will be tacked on.

Rather, the entire premise is to look at the actions and influence of communities in engaging in negotiations with state and non-state armed actors and to understand the factors of success and risks associated.

These negotiations must be understood as a critical form of self-protection that communities are undertaking, and something they are really uniquely situated to be leading on with very tangible impacts

– from securing agreement about students being able to travel safely to school or ensuring safe access to health clinics and other essential services to communities directly negotiating with armed groups on child demobilization - these efforts are having powerful protection impacts.

Let's not forget - they are the first and last responders when it comes to protection.

For me, this conversation also offers us the opportunity to collectively explore how we can further accelerate towards a more systematic approach to strengthening civilian self-protection in the humanitarian sector, including ensuring a 'do no harm' approach.

There have been some excellent efforts in this area over the past several years – with lots of leadership from NRC, Save and many others in the room today.

And so I think we're now in a position to be focusing on what we've learned so far and where we can build on what have been very impactful but too often ad hoc interventions around self-protection and get to a place where we are far more consistently integrating such civilian self-protection interventions across protection and humanitarian response, being cognizant of risks and how to manage them.

For me this is all integral to getting to a place where we collectively more broadly recognize, further enable and complement the leadership of communities in protection efforts.

From the perspective of the GPC, where everything we do is about leveraging our collective added-value and strength across the sector, I am very keen to look for ways that we can further facilitate and elevate the sharing of emerging and best practices with regards to negotiation and civilian self-protection, based on the learnings being generated by local and national protection actors, and civil society organizations.

And as part of this, to further articulate the different roles local, national and global protection actors can play to support and strengthen such efforts.

Thank you to the organizers and to the speakers – I'm really looking forward to this dialogue.

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**Background:** For years protection has been viewed through state-centric and legalistic lenses. Protection is the foremost responsibility of the state. Strategies for protection typically focus on influencing or changing the behaviour of state or non-state actors towards the civilians they govern, with the civilians "role" typically seen as a beneficiary – one who benefits from the protection of or provided by another. Civilians are seen as passive "recipients" of protection with little or no agency. Knowing where armed actors are going to be present informs dialogue with them about current harms posed to communities, particularly to children, and what these armed actors can do to minimize risks of these harms. The dialogues involve elements of advocating for improved behaviour and respect for applicable protection and prevention of, for example, the grave violations against children in conflict.

In addition to this top-down, state-centric mode of protection work, we should also be conceiving of protection as an activity done *by* civilians, not *to* civilians. We should view it as a process or set of activities that supports civilians in strengthening their own agency in conflict, of ownership over one's own safety, and ability to mitigate the risks they may face. Civilians engage in self-protection actions daily to keep themselves and their families safe while hostilities are ongoing.

With this rationale, advisers from Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children are exploring how their organisations and humanitarians generally can support communities (if and when they need it, and they explicitly ask for it) on community-led negotiations for access and protection. In particular, we are exploring how we can appropriately support communities' capacities to negotiate and engage armed actors and other relevant duty bearers for communities' own protection and access to services. We are learning from what Save the Children and War Child Holland found from their development of an evidence-based community-led approach to child protection, applicable in all contexts. We are exploring what modalities are appropriate for engaging armed actors in order to support and guide field teams to consider ways of engaging with and supporting communities.

This event will cover engagement with state and non-state armed actors and other relevant counterparts in the community and at leadership levels as a form of prevention work (which can also inform or shape response. These preventive efforts can involve directly conducting or pursuing structured dialogues via key partners at points where the counterparts presence and influence intersects with the root causes of risks or specific threats and could help to reduce the longer-term impact of harm and violence on affected persons.