



Afghanistan Humanitarian Country Team Centrality of Protection Strategy

August 2024 to July 2027

“By this declaration, the members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee undertake to give a central place to protection in humanitarian action and to the role of humanitarian action coordinators, country teams for humanitarian action and sectoral groups in order to honor this commitment in all aspects of humanitarian action. This is part of the measures that will be adopted by the Committee to ensure more effective protection of populations in humanitarian crisis situations.”

- *The IASC Principals Statement, The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2013*

Afghanistan Humanitarian Country Team

Centrality of Protection Strategy

August 2024 – July 2027

Endorsed on 22 August 2024

1. Introduction

The objective of having a Humanitarian Country Team’s (HCT) Centrality of Protection (CoP) strategy is to mobilize a holistic, multi-sectoral, system-wide effort to prevent, mitigate and respond to Critical Protection Risks (CPRs) facing affected populations. It aims to facilitate humanitarian dialogue, negotiation, and advocacy actions on protection as well as the engagement of the HCT with a broader range of stakeholders to encourage them to assume their responsibilities to ensure protection is central to humanitarian action.

The strategy complements, but does not duplicate, other existing frameworks, including the protection cluster strategy, the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP), HCT Gender and Access strategies, and the National Action Plan on Solutions for Internal Displacement in Afghanistan. It includes a plan of action along with a monitoring and evaluation framework.

2. Humanitarian context

The protection situation in Afghanistan is critical. The country is undergoing a severe multidimensional crisis after four decades of armed conflicts, political instability, entrenched poverty, increasing climate-induced crises, marginalization, and discriminatory norms and practices. All these factors have contributed to displacement, with the majority of IDPs living in protracted displacement. *An estimated 6.3 million Afghans are still currently displaced¹*, many have been displaced multiple times. Simultaneously, Afghanistan is also facing large-scale returns from Pakistan, including more than 679,000 returnees from Pakistan since 15 September 2023.²

The identified *protection risks are complex* and based on analysis of the deteriorating protection environment which largely affects women, girls, persons living with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, older persons, youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, and other vulnerable groups.

The *suspension of large-scale bilateral development cooperation* in August 2021 resulted in a drastic economic downturn that exacerbates underlying fragilities including limited livelihood opportunities. The declining socio-economic conditions and food insecurity have led households to resort to negative coping

¹ [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 \(December 2023\) \[EN/Dari/PS\] - Afghanistan | ReliefWeb](#)

² IOM Dashboard, August 2024, [Returns from Pakistan](#)

mechanisms, notably with child labor and child/forced marriage. *Acute malnutrition is above emergency thresholds* in 25 out of 34 provinces and is expected to worsen over time. ³

In Afghanistan, widespread protection risks persist, characterized by significant protracted displacement, mine and explosive ordnance contamination, discrimination, and denial of access to services, resources and humanitarian assistance, restrictions to freedom of movement, growing threat of forced evictions, increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), child labour, early marriage and heightened needs for mental health and psychosocial support. The protection space is shrinking and is affecting particularly women, girls, IDPs, returnees, persons living with disabilities, elderly, and other vulnerable groups.⁴

Targeted violence and human rights violations persist, and continues to deteriorate, exposing specific groups, especially the most vulnerable, to continuous protection risks, specifically women, girls, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, semi-nomadic communities, persons with disabilities, human rights defenders, journalists as well as former government officials and military and security personnel.

The ban on women and girls has significantly impacted delivery of services while also constraining the ability of women to access humanitarian assistance, employment and other livelihood opportunities. After the political transition, the DfA reversed their promise to ensure girls' education and other freedoms. Schools reopened in September 2021, but girls' access to education beyond grade 6 was suspended. About 1.4 million of girls are currently out of school⁵.

According to the latest World Bank estimates (2022), there are more than 20 million women in Afghanistan⁶ with about 13 million at risk of *gender-based violence*⁷ including IPV, sexual violence, child marriage, denial of opportunities, etc. Women headed households are reported to comprise more than 10% of the population and are disproportionately affected by gender discrimination and the restrictions.⁸ Fear of attacks on women appearing in the public sphere has *increased psychological distress and desperation*.⁹

Forty years of armed conflict resulted in Afghanistan having *one of the highest levels of explosive ordnance (EO) contamination in the world*. These hazards include landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices. Children make up most of the casualties due to their natural curiosity and lack of awareness about the dangers of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Poverty has also forced many children to engage in child labor, often in dangerous conditions including scrap metal collection, which exposes them to explosive ordnance risk.

Since August 2021, the DfA, has continued to impose restrictions on humanitarian operations which negatively impacts the extent to which humanitarian agencies can respond to people's needs. The restrictions imposed by the DfA have also negatively affected donor contributions and the engagement of the international community, resulting in a *significant shortage of humanitarian funding*. Six months into

³ WFP, 2024, [Afghanistan emergency](#)

⁴ [Afghanistan Protection Analysis Update](#)

⁵ UNICEF, Education in Afghanistan, 2024

⁶ World Bank Data, 2022, [Female population in Afghanistan](#)

⁷ UNOCHA, 2024, [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#)

⁸ UNOCHA, 2023, [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023](#)

⁹ Global protection update, GPC, June 2023

2024, the HNRP is only 20 per cent funded, thereby hampering the humanitarian efforts¹⁰. Moreover, the DfA's regulations and monitoring of UN organizations and I/NNGOs continue to interfere in the delivery of humanitarian response.

3. Objectives

3.1 General objective

This strategy is based on the fundamental principles of humanitarian assistance – the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – to establish a vision shared by all members of the HCT and guide them individually and collectively with the main objective of ensuring that people affected by the humanitarian crisis and populations at risk are able to enjoy their rights.

The HCT's general objective is to collectively contribute to improving the environment by upholding the rights of Afghan citizens, particularly those who experience discrimination and marginalisation, and preventing, mitigating and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse.

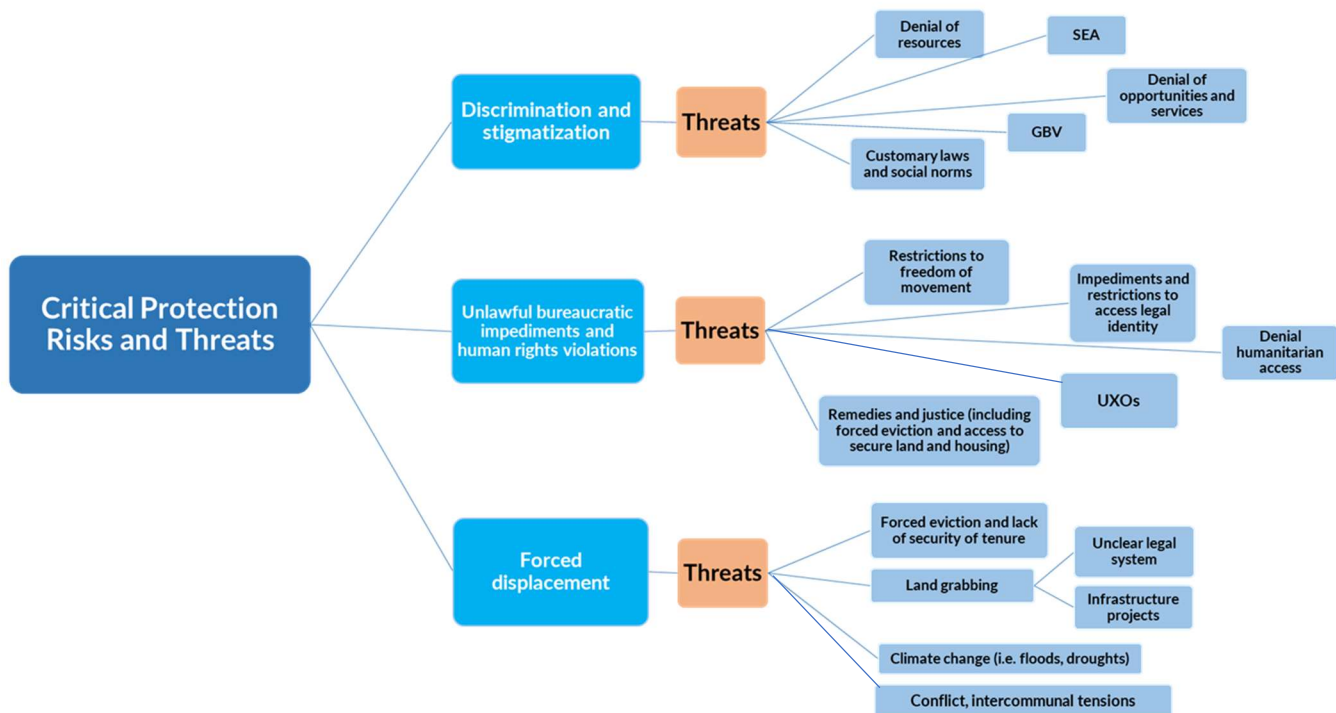
3.2 Specific objectives

To translate this vision into action, the HCT sets three specific priority objectives that require the individual and collective commitment of all its members and the support of all relevant actors in Afghanistan. The spectrum of protection issues related to the specific objectives are further developed in *Annex 1* dedicated to the protection analysis and the reminder of theoretical concepts.

The HCT will ensure that priorities involve all senior officials among its members, not just the agencies mandated for protection, and that they complement each other and do not duplicate the work of other coordination forums, including the Protection Cluster.

While recognizing the multitude of serious protection challenges in Afghanistan, the HCT's protection strategy must focus on a limited number of priorities requiring a holistic response. Based on a continuous analysis of risks, threats, and needs, as well as protection monitoring, these Critical Protection Risks - generic risks from which many protection dimensions arise in a systemic approach - in Afghanistan are:

¹⁰ UNOCHA, June 2024, [The cost of inaction](#)



Conducting advocacy in Afghanistan is faced with several constraints due to the hard stance on key issues by the de facto authorities, donors' reluctance on engagement with the DFA, absence of a legal operating framework, limitations posed by sanctions, and centralization of authority. Failure to engage the DFA, especially by donors, who could have more leverage, has led the DFA to continue issuing restrictions that severely limit access to humanitarian services and enjoyment of rights especially by women and girls as well as other vulnerable groups. Expectations of prompt positive responses to advocacy must be realistic. Upon that understanding, the HC/HCT and heads of agencies will mobilize and sustain efforts towards influencing authorities at national and provincial levels towards prevention and protection of the most vulnerable with a view of contributing to longer term cumulative and incremental impact.

3.2.1 Specific objective #1

The risk of discrimination and stigmatization against women, girls, and other vulnerable groups is reduced through improving the safety and dignity of all women, girls, and ethnic as well as religious minorities.

Globally, we have seen a backlash against women's and girl's rights in recent years. However, nowhere has this been more profound and all-encompassing than in Afghanistan since the Taliban took power in mid-August 2021. Despite repeatedly asserting that women's rights will be protected within the framework of Shari'a, over the past 22 months, every aspect of women's and girls' lives has been restricted. They are discriminated against in every way. Edict after edict has been issued, the cumulative effect of which has been to erase women and girls from public life and prevent them from accessing and

enjoying their fundamental rights and freedoms.¹¹ In view of this, the HCT will work towards enhancing the operational protection efforts of humanitarian agencies and HCT member organizations, clusters and working groups to lead, guide and/or support efforts to address the needs and threats faced by women, girls, and the most vulnerable people.

In view of this, the HCT will work towards enhancing the operational protection efforts of humanitarian agencies and HCT member organizations, clusters and working groups to lead, guide and/or support efforts to address the needs and threats faced by women, girls, and the most vulnerable people. Vulnerability stems from marginalisation and discrimination which will require addressing deep-rooted discriminatory norms and behaviours as part of a comprehensive approach by the HCT.

As a matter of priority, the HCT will engage with the DFA on the delivery of and access to protection services and programmes (particularly GBV) that contribute to the protection of women, girls, ethnic minorities through coordinated advocacy. Due to the spiraling poverty levels, limited access to services and consequent increase in adopting negative coping strategies, a nexus approach and collaboration among humanitarian and basic needs actors will be sought to maximize response. Community-based approaches will be enhanced through community driven and practical approaches with demonstrable impact. The approaches will cut across all pillars of protection i.e. mainstreaming, integration and stand-alone approaches.

3.2.2 Specific objective #2

The engagement to address unlawful bureaucratic impediments and human rights violations, is enhanced.

The HCT recognizes that bureaucratic impediments and diplomatic limitations to engage with the DFA continue to limit the operations of humanitarian agencies. Also, access to civil documentation for the most vulnerable constrains their access to services and enjoyment of their rights and limitations to access justice, especially for women. Protection and human rights monitoring regularly identifies and reports on human rights violations occurring in the country. The HCT members will engage with the DFA and provincial authorities to improve the overall operating environment of humanitarian agencies as well as promote and protect the enjoyment of fundamental rights for all communities – noting the heightened threats to people without civil documents.

The HCT's harmonized advocacy should address: improving access to birth registration, legal identity documentation; safeguarding HLP rights, especially for displaced and returning Afghan people; livelihood opportunities, and basic services; access to justice for women and girls as well as female lawyers right to practice; addressing mine risks and associated threats. Separate advocacy will also be sustained for improved acceptability and favorable operating environment for protection services including GBV. In addition, the HCT will advocate with donors/diplomatic community to explore more flexible approaches to work with DFAs without compromising protection and humanitarian principles, and clarify the parameters of intervention, enhance access, and deliver humanitarian assistance.

¹¹ Enhanced Interactive Dialogue on the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, Nada Al-Nashif, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, 19 June 2023

3.2.3 Specific objective #3

Durable solutions for forcibly displaced and returning Afghan people are found and operationalized.

The HCT members acknowledge that efforts in finding durable solutions for IDPs and Afghanistan returnees must be directed towards mobilizing and strengthening collaboration among humanitarian and basic needs actors to invest in solutions, including food security, skills development/livelihoods, developing land management/reform programmes and disaster risk reduction plans, undertaking peace building and social cohesion initiatives at national and provincial level in collaboration with the DFA.

The HCT will develop measures to collectively respond to a deterioration of the protection environment in the event of shocks/emergencies. These measures include step-up of the protection response, area-based mechanisms for advocacy and response. Multiple monitoring and data collection systems, within UN agencies, national and international NGOs, are currently in place for various purposes. The HCT encourage the different agencies to coordinate information sharing, in accordance with the HCT approved information sharing protocols, and facilitate a process for improved utilization, coherence, synergy and improving age and sex segregated data collection.

4. Plan of action, monitoring, and evaluation

4.1 Introduction

This strategy is developed and implemented under the authority of the Humanitarian Coordinator who will monitor it overall. It is triennial and its action plan will be updated on a quarterly and annual basis. The action plan in *Annex 2*, once the programming of activities will be established in chronological sequences, will serve as an operational framework and timetable for the implementation of the strategy.

4.2 Monitoring and Evaluation

The HCT will lead the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of this strategy and ensure course correction actions based on findings from monitoring and evaluations. The HCT will constitute an *Implementation Support Group (ISG)* to support the HCT to monitor the strategy's implementation. The ISG will be composed of protection and durable solutions representatives nominated by HCT members. Members of the ICCT may be nominated and/or engaged to support the implementation of the strategy. Details are in the Terms of Reference in Annex 3. Key ISG responsibilities:

- Every quarter an update on the implementation of the strategy Action Plan as well as any critical protection risks will be compiled and submitted/presented to the HCT.
- Prepare recommendations / messages to be raised on the HCT agenda, in particular with regard to:
 - o Protection advocacy priorities
 - o Other actions required to ensure implementation of Protection Strategy
- Advise HCT and HC/RC on centrality of protection in humanitarian response in Afghanistan and implementation of the CoP Strategy
- At the end of every implementation year, a mini evaluation will be conducted. As needed, the strategy and protection analysis will be updated and presented to the HCT.

5. Conclusions and way forward

5.1 Conclusions

The HC/HCT, supported by the protection community, will conduct continuous protection analysis, including at regional level to identify emerging protection concerns.

The identified protection risks are complex and impede humanitarian operations in general, the protection response. The strategy focuses on preventing and reducing the most critical protection risks, based on a coherent analysis that considers the prevalence, nature and scope of risks, the drivers, consequences on the most affected population groups, and perpetrators.

The strategy also aims to enhance access to services and opportunities with a focus on the most vulnerable persons, identifying where HCT-level decisions and actions are needed.

5.2. Way forward

Given the utmost importance of the Centrality of Protection, ***the HC and HCT must mobilize other actors within and beyond the humanitarian system***, as appropriate, to contribute to collective protection outcomes. Addressing protection risks often goes beyond the capacity of the humanitarian community which requires engagement and advocacy with a broad range of stakeholders beyond the humanitarian response.

The HCT is to lead and provide guidance on the implementation of all activities and to hold accountable all designated lead agencies. ***Coordination and accountability mechanisms*** must be regularly assessed to ensure effective coordination within the whole system and the Inter Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT), the Protection Cluster and its Areas of Responsibilities in particular.

When it comes to ***resources and capacities***, donors hold HCT members accountable regarding the implementation of the strategy. Therefore, they must strive to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to the protection response, including funding, staffing, operational guidance, and support from HQs and regional platforms.

Increased international dialogue and engagement with the DFA on the type of support that can be provided to bring about improved humanitarian and basic human needs outcomes. This engagement must be treated differently than discussions or progress on the political track, and support concrete actions – be it knowledge transfer, technical assistance or capacity building – that helps reduce the humanitarian portfolio over time.¹² Such ***advocacy strategies***, led by the HC, can be undertaken as a group or by individual members of an HCT (such as a task force or a working group), with the support of the protection cluster, but should be part of a collective protection engagement strategy or approach.

Regarding the IASC Gender Policy and Afghanistan Gender Strategy in particular, the humanitarian community, led by the HC and the HCT, must continue to safeguard gender inclusive and gender-responsive humanitarian action by ensuring safe, equitable access to basic services and human rights for all vulnerable groups, especially women and girls.

¹² UNOCHA, June 2024, [The cost of inaction](#)

The identification and the reduction of protection risks must be understood first and foremost from the perspective of crisis-affected people. Considering the IASC Operational Framework on **Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)**, crisis-affected people should be actively engaged in and have meaningful influence over the HCT's response: analysis, planning, response, monitoring and learning processes.

Additionally, in alignment with the **IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises**, special attention will be devoted to ensuring the meaningful engagement of adolescents and youth, acknowledging their significant presence in the country's population and their immense potential to create positive change.

Wide-ranging partnerships are essential to mitigate multifaceted protection risks to affected people. Existing policy frameworks, such as Collective Outcomes, can be used to support such outreach and strengthening of partnerships particularly with peace, development, and human rights actors. Such strengthened partnerships may trigger donors' genuine interest and increased contributions.

Accountability to Affected Populations in practice means that a broad spectrum of the community must be able to participate in decision-making in a way that is inclusive, non-discriminatory and has real influence in the humanitarian response. Therefore, all surveys focusing on the perception of the affected populations must be thoroughly reflected upon for appropriate implementation.

Annex 1 – Protection analysis and theoretical concepts

1. PROTECTION ANALYSIS

Afghanistan is facing a complex and multifaceted protection crisis, characterized by multiple and interlinked protection risks that significantly impact the lives of Afghan people, especially the most vulnerable groups.

Below are listed the most vivid and impactful protection concerns. More details, figures and updates are produced by the protection community on a regular basis.

Discrimination is compounded by denial of resources, opportunities, access to services, humanitarian assistance, and violation of rights that are significantly prevalent across Afghanistan, especially for women, girls, persons living with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, elderly, IDPs, returnees, refugees and asylum seekers, and other vulnerable groups. The established traditional and patriarchal norms reinforce the exclusion of women, girls, persons with disabilities, some ethnic and religious minorities, and places them at a disadvantage in all economic, social, and political aspects of life.

After the political transition in August 2021, the DfA reversed their promise to ensure girls' education and other freedoms. Now, over 80% of Afghan girls and young women are out of school, along with 100,000 female university students. This reversal severely impacts their mental health and well-being. Poverty, domestic violence, and negative outcomes like early marriage and child labor are also prevalent.

Access constraints to civil documentation, due to the overall legal void, information and access barriers, financial constraints, and lengthy and complex procedures, have a direct impact on access to basic rights and services and freedom of movements across Afghanistan and beyond its borders. Women, children, persons with disabilities, IDPs, returnees, ethnic and religious minorities, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, refugees and asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, are particularly vulnerable. The lack of a national identity document, passport, birth/marriage certificates limit the obtention of other essential documentation, limits access to essential services, opportunities and restricts freedoms.

Violence, repression, and abuse persists. There are reports of serious violations, killings, and targeted attacks on religious sites, including instances of forced evictions. Since the power change, the already high prevalence of gender-based violence against women, girls, men, and boys, including intimate partner and domestic violence due to their confinement to their homes—has reportedly increased.¹³ There have also been reports of honor killing targeting girls informed by culturally sanctioned beliefs while some women have reportedly committed suicide, and many continue to suffer in silence. This is attributed to limited access to GBV services. Girls unable to attend school are at heightened risks of abuse, early and forced marriage, exploitation, and domestic violence. Early and forced marriage increases the risk of intimate partner violence and domestic violence against women, girls, men, and boys. This increases vulnerabilities and reduces capacities of women and girls to overcome shocks in a complex economic and humanitarian crisis.¹⁴

¹³ UNAMA, 2023, [Divergence of Practice: The Handling of complaints of gender-based violence against women, girls by Afghanistan's de facto Authorities \(December 2023\)](#)

¹⁴ UNOCHA, 2023, [Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023](#)

Denial of opportunities and access to services. The increased exposure of women and girls to GBV results in the decrease in availability of services including specialized psychosocial, medical, legal services and safety for GBV survivors e.g. safe shelters, women friendly spaces. Also, restrictions on education, and the adoption of measures, have severely impacted access to work, access to learning opportunities, access to free media, and access to information especially for women and girls. Moreover, access to services is even more constrained for women headed households and widows with no male relative or *mahram* who face restricted movement or may be denied entry to public services. Services are especially fewer or non-existent in certain rural areas. The overall situation worsens living conditions, increases food insecurity, risks of maternal mortality and malnutrition, and may lead to poor health conditions.

Most vulnerable groups are forced to resort to **harmful coping mechanisms** to meet their basic needs, such as borrowing money, selling assets, skipping meals, or reducing meal size, engaging children in exploitative acts such as child labor. Other extreme strategies encompass early and forced marriage of daughters, family members migrating abroad to engaging in hazardous work, begging, sale of organs and children, or suicidality. These challenges are compounding mental health and psychosocial distress among the most vulnerable. Those risk factors are associated with an increase of suicide rates.¹⁵

Access constraints to justice and remedies. Given the suspension of all domestic laws in August 2021, access to justice and remedies has been significantly hindered. Women lawyers are unable to practice law under the current administration. Consequently, the legal aid system has shrunk especially for women, coupled with an almost absent legal and policy framework, which has constrained access to independent legal counsel for remedies and resolution of disputes. Informal dispute resolution mechanisms to address cases of land ownership and violence against women, girls, men and boys exist but are led by men (shuras, family members), which discourages women from pursuing justice, especially in situations involving divorce, intimate partner violence or violence against women, girls.¹⁶ The lack of a legal framework for housing, land and property (HLP) administration and the ambiguity regarding the enforcement of property law since 2021, raises further risks for vulnerable groups. The lack of practicing women lawyers also impedes progress on women's HLP rights.

Access barriers to protection and multi-sectoral lifesaving services. The authorities' regulations and monitoring of UN organizations and I/NNGOs keep interfering in the delivery of timely humanitarian response and deprive aid recipients and vulnerable groups of life-saving assistance. In December 2023, the Ministry of Economy issued a letter prohibiting "soft activities" e.g. protection monitoring and awareness raising, most of which are related to protection and negatively affecting operations of protection-focused NGOs. Additionally, the ban on I/NNGOs Afghan women aid workers has hindered access to women beneficiaries, in a context where an inclusive and gendered-appropriate response is necessary.¹⁷ This, coupled with socio-cultural barriers, has left many women and girls suffering silently. Equally impacted are persons with disabilities and other vulnerable persons.

Presence of mines and related consequences. Explosive ordnance contamination poses severe risks of injury and fatality, particularly among children, and its impact extends beyond the tragedy suffered by victims and their families. According to current mine action data, these hazards affect approximately 1,720 communities and obstruct access to 217 health facilities and 425 educational facilities located within 1 km

¹⁵ *Suicide attempts may be underreported due to cultural taboo.* [UNHCR, December 2023, Protection Brief](#); GiHA, 2023, [Rapid Gender Analysis](#)

¹⁶ GiHA, 2023, [Rapid Gender Analysis](#)

¹⁷ GiHA, 2023, [Gender update #2 Returnees from Pakistan](#)

of hazardous areas. The hazardous contamination drastically limits economic activities and thereby affects local economies and restricts growth and investment opportunities.

Returnees are particularly exposed to dangers of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and landmines due to their unfamiliarity with their area of return. Movement restrictions due to weapon contamination further limit access to essential services and basic needs, exacerbate food insecurity, reduce livelihoods, and cause physical harm, psychological distress, and trauma. This persistent threat remains a critical issue for protection efforts and continues to be one of the leading causes of death in Afghanistan.

Safety, security and escalating communal conflicts. Disputes between communities e.g. over land and water, access and control over natural resources, ethnic and religious divides, political affiliations, and other social factors are raising security and safety concerns. The situation increasingly worsens due to ethnic and social differences. Moreover, an increase in attacks carried out by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), such as the ISKP, results in escalating insecurity.

Various drivers of **displacement**, including conflict, human rights violations, climate shocks and natural disasters lead to different forms of internal and cross-border displacements. One of them is induced by the insecurity of tenure. Many people in Afghanistan face **insecure housing** arrangements and threats of **forced eviction**. The growing threat of forced evictions from informal settlements and the influx of returnees from neighboring countries continue to drive housing, land, and property needs. People who are subjected to forced eviction and displacement also face intimidation, harassment, and violence, compounded by a lack of access to legal or other remedies. Families are separated, resulting in **minors being unaccompanied**. In addition, localized conflict-related displacement is leading to violence, inter-communal tensions, loss of properties and secondary displacement. This has been exacerbated by returns from neighboring countries.

Vulnerable displaced persons often face depleted resources, fractured community support networks and have experienced abuse, violence, including gender-based violence, or family separation during their return, with profound impacts on their psychological state. Return movements also increase the risks for safety and security including **trafficking** especially for women and girls.

Natural disasters such as drought, floods, and earthquakes are increasingly frequent and severe and are displacing millions of people across the country.¹⁸ Afghanistan ranks among the 10 most climate change-vulnerable countries in the world and is amongst the least prepared to adapt to those changes. It is important to highlight that the foundation of Afghan livelihoods and the backbone of the country's economy is agriculture. At least 25 out of 34 provinces are suffering from either severe or catastrophic drought conditions, affecting more than half the 40 million population.¹⁹ These climatic shocks expose millions of people to critical losses in livelihoods and assets, fuels hunger and induce more internal and cross-border displacement.

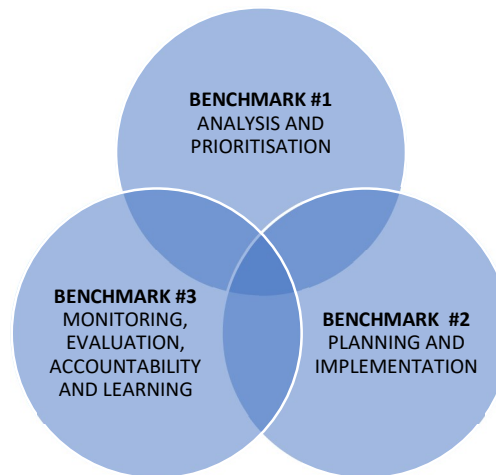
¹⁸ More detailed reading on the topic through: ACAPS Afghanistan Analysis Hub, 31 July 2024, [The key risks Afghans face between 2024–2030 that are driven or compounded by climate change](#)

¹⁹ UNOCHA, 2023, [Afghanistan: The alarming effects of climate change by UN Humanitarian - Exposure](#)

2. PROTECTION – REMINDER OF THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND OPERATIONAL APPROACHES

Fundamentally, protection encompasses efforts pursued by humanitarian actors in all sectors to ensure that the rights of affected persons and the obligations of duty bearers under international law are understood, respected, protected and fulfilled without discrimination.²⁰

Benchmarks for HCT collective implementation of the IASC Policy on Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action: a risk-based approach



Benchmark #1 – Analysis and prioritization

The HCT makes sure that continuous comprehensive intersectoral analysis of protection risks are undertaken that:

- includes comprehensive analysis of the threats, vulnerabilities and local/national capacities as articulated by crisis-affected people;
- includes analysis of the longer-term drivers of rights violations, violence, armed conflict, and other shocks (e.g. natural hazards, health risks, the key actors involved (e.g. their character, agenda, etc.) and any exacerbating factors (e.g. food insecurity, climate change, health risks, etc.);
- is based on data and analysis available from within and outside the HCT; and
- is used as the basis for identifying 1-3 *priority* risk(s) requiring *collective* HCT action.

Benchmark #2 – Planning and implementation

The HCT designs and implements a collective, adaptative, multi-disciplinary protection action plan that is fully informed by the HCT analysis developed and that aims to achieve the interim and longer-term protection outcomes the HCT has agreed. It should comprise public advocacy and private diplomacy activities as well as multi-sectoral programming interventions and be complementary to the interventions of non-HCT partners.

²⁰ IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016

Benchmark #3 – Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Planning

The HCT “regularly documents interim and longer-term results” of its protection action plan and “adapts the action plan in real time in response to results being achieved and any changes in the risk pattern, and the wider context, identified”.

The policy sets out a ‘risk-based’ approach to protection in which the outcomes to be achieved are a reduction in identified risks to people affected by conflict and other crises. Measuring the impact of the HCT’s collective protection efforts must therefore consider the extent to which the HCT’s actions are reducing the risks to affected people that the HCT has committed to address.

Risk-based protection approach

RISK EQUATION

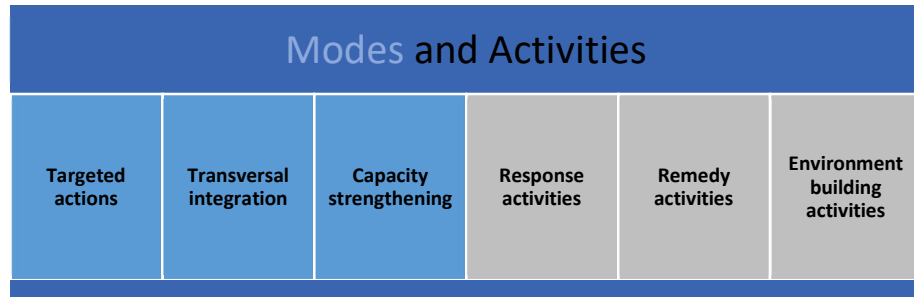


In practice, for a humanitarian response to be protection-oriented, it is essential to understand and seek to prevent, mitigate, or end actual and potential risks, including violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, producing the harm that affects people during a conflict or disaster.

The risk-based approach:

- Facilitates a multidisciplinary and integrated approach that integrates different perspectives and promotes the participation of a wide range of actors.
- Allows protection interventions to be tailored to the specificities of each crisis, as the entry points for action are protection risks rather than the type of crisis or the perpetrator.
- It allows interventions to be targeted based on reducing the risks experienced by specific individuals or groups, taking into account factors that may make certain individuals/groups inherently more vulnerable to the identified threats.

Protection modes and activities



Developing appropriate responses based on protection risk analysis involves deciding on the programmatic approach, the type and modality of the response, the targeting methodology, as well as assessing the risks related to the context and action of the proposed intervention. This process should be based on clearly defined results that are measured by risk reduction using a causal logic (informed by the context-specific protection analysis) that serves as a basis for designing interventions and identifying actors from other disciplines or sectors that will contribute to achieving the results.

Humanitarian protection is both a cross-cutting issue and a sector in its own right. Thus, three main approaches can be used:

- **Targeted actions:** Targeted actions comprise two distinct sub-approaches, namely *integrated protection programming* and *stand-alone protection programming*, which have the common objective to actively contribute to reducing risks and exposure of the affected population. Stand-alone protection programming include only protection sector activities, while integrated protection programming use responses from one or more traditional assistance sectors (shelter, water, sanitation, health, food assistance, nutrition, etc.) in order to achieve a protection outcome.
- **Transversal integration - *Mainstreaming of protection*** is the process of incorporating protection whereby the following elements must be taken into account in all humanitarian activities:
 - **Prioritize safety & dignity and avoid causing harm:** prevent and minimize as much as possible any unintended negative effects of the intervention which can increase people's vulnerability to both physical and psychosocial risks.
 - **Meaningful Access:** arrange for people's access to assistance and services – in proportion to need and without any barriers. Pay special attention to individuals and groups who may be particularly vulnerable or have difficulty accessing assistance and services.
 - **Accountability:** set-up appropriate mechanisms through which affected populations can measure the adequacy of interventions, and address concerns and complaints.

- Participation and Empowerment: support the development of self-protection capacities and assist people to claim their rights, including – not exclusively – the rights to shelter, food, water and sanitation, health, and education.

Moreover, HCT member organisations are prompted to go beyond mainstreaming protection and to proactively leverage their respective skills and specialisation as part of a HCT collective effort to reduce an identified risk(s). In practice, this means that organisations working in all sectors or clusters can and should contribute to reducing the identified risk through **integrating protection** objectives into their sectoral analysis, projects, and programmes.

HCT member organisations that have a **specialist protection expertise** engage in a range of specialist protection programmes. These programmes must be undertaken in *coordination with programmatic interventions by non-protection specialist organisations* in a multi-sectoral approach to reducing risk.

- Capacity strengthening - Humanitarian actors still have limited capacity to understand and respond to protection threats. There is a need for capacity strengthening for protection programming – whether a targeted or cross-cutting approach – in humanitarian action. Similarly, there is still a need to strengthen the capacity of the whole system and coordination, with clear leadership, roles, and responsibilities, to ensure that the centrality of protection is promoted and strengthened.

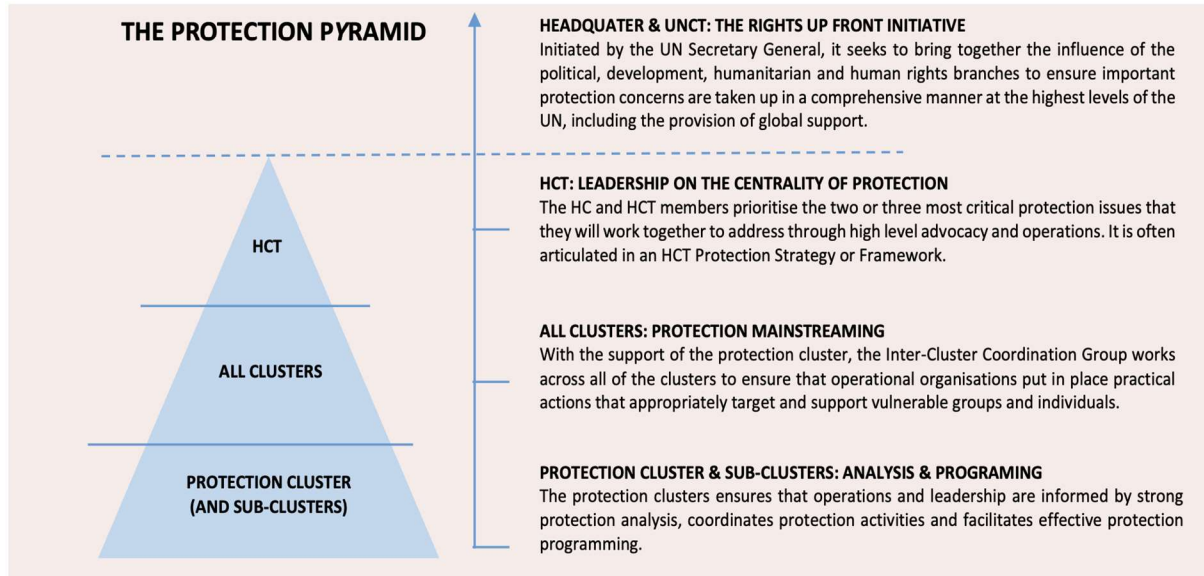
The types of activities to be considered are:

- Response activities: stopping, preventing, and mitigating the worst effects of human rights violations and patterns of ill-treatment. They are short-term, immediate, and urgent, targeting specific groups and/or specific individuals.

- Remedy activities: restoring dignity in the wake of human rights violations. Providing support to people living with the effects of these violations. They are mid-term and aim to have a preventive effect by avoiding secondary abuses.

- Environment building activities: aim to create an environment that allows for full respect for rights, by promoting a profound change in attitudes, policies, values, or beliefs. They concern prevention and long-term transformation of causes.

Roles and responsibilities



Given the multifaceted nature of protection threats and the complex contexts in which they arise, complementary, coordinated, and collaborative actions by multiple organizations and authorities are required. Making protection central to humanitarian action demands a *system-wide commitment*.

The HC/HCT are to address risks and related threats and therefore conduct continuous protection analysis, including at regional level, to assess, identify and mitigate emerging protection concerns.

The HCT's responsibility is to mobilize and guide humanitarian agencies with expertise, mandates, and capacities to lead the implementation of the identified priorities, especially regarding serious, prevalent, and widespread violations of human/women rights.

Annex 2 - Action Plan and Indicators

Priority Actions and Scope	Lead and Support agencies	Proposed timeline	Indicators	Progress
General Objective: The HCT collectively contributes to improving environment by upholding the rights of Afghan citizens, particularly those who experience discrimination and marginalisation, and preventing, mitigating and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse				
Specific Objective 1: The risk of discrimination and stigmatization against women, girls, and other vulnerable groups is reduced through improving the safety and dignity of all women, girls, and ethnic as well as religious minorities.				
1.1 The HCT will engage relevant line ministries and other related departments at national and provincial level to find avenues of strengthening social services support at all levels.	HC		# of ministries engaged	
1.2 To ensure protection integration and individual and collective responsibility, the HCT will provide directives regarding access to protection services through integration with other sectors.	HCT			
1.3 Develop guidance for clusters on targeting and prioritization of groups most at-risk (i.e. persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities) including guidelines on safe identification, safe and dignified distributions, inclusion and participation, and mechanisms for preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse.	OCHA Protection Cluster PSEA Network (UNFPA, IMC, RCO) WFP HAWG AAP WG GiHA DIWG FAO		Guidance developed and disseminated	
1.4 The HCT, in consultation with donors, will develop guidance for humanitarian agencies (emphasizing Do's and Don'ts) to ensure engagement with the DFA is principled and that it encourages empowerment and	HC OCHA		Guidance developed and disseminated	

protection of women, girls, ethnic, and religious minorities.	Donors			
<p>1.5 Build evidence for advocacy for the rights and protection of women and girls by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk review of existing studies to develop an advocacy brief on the criticality of educating Afghan girls. • Desk review on existing research to develop an advocacy brief on the criticality of engaging women in the Afghan economy. • Develop an advocacy brief on the livelihood opportunities for women and their participation in decision making processes. • Engage the DFA on access to critical health services, including sexual and reproductive health, safe houses for survivors and stopping harmful practices such as using prisons for GBV survivors as a safe space. • Advocacy on access to formal education for females. • Conduct a mapping of informal education, including Islamic teaching approaches, that promote the empowerment of women and girls. • Engage donors to invest in alternative models such as online learning and other community-based education approaches. • Mobilize and coordinate with NNGOs and Female-led NNGOs as champions to reach more women especially in rural areas. • Develop an advocacy brief on the agri-based livelihood opportunities for women and their participation in decision making processes. • Access to women through local solutions 	<p>UNICEF (CP AOR)</p> <p>UNDP</p> <p>UN Women</p> <p>GiHA WG</p> <p>WFP</p> <p>FAO</p>		<p>Desk review and advocacy brief on education for Afghan girls.</p> <p>Desk review and advocacy brief on engaging women in the Afghan economy</p> <p># of advocacy initiatives undertaken on access to education for females</p> <p># of advocacy papers shared for agri-based livelihood and women's participation</p>	
1.6 Conduct a conflict/protection risk assessment on CBP approaches targeting the most vulnerable.	<p>IOM</p> <p>UNHCR</p> <p>DIWG</p> <p>FAO</p>		<p>Assessment report</p> <p># of support initiatives provided</p>	
1.7 Based on the findings and recommendations from the conflict/protection risk assessment on CBP	IOM		CBP action plan developed	

1.12 Develop a plan to establish safe spaces, recreational activities, re-open shelters, and strengthen social networks for women and girls.	UNFPA (GBV AoR) UNHCR UNICEF (CP AOR)		Plan developed	
1.13 Continue engagement with the international community (including member states, embassies, etc.) to strengthen advocacy efforts with the authorities to overcome barriers for Afghan women to access employment.	HC HCT members OCHA FAO		# of joint engagements conducted	
1.14 Develop a protection advocacy strategy for the HCT.	HC HCT members Protection Cluster UNHCR OCHA		HCT Protection Advocacy strategy developed	

Specific Objective 2: The engagement to address unlawful bureaucratic impediments and human rights violations, is enhanced

2.1 Clusters with support from the Protection Cluster and thematic WGs to undertake protection mainstreaming assessments, including SEA risk assessment, for their respective activities and develop sector-specific plan to fill gaps and mitigate barriers faced by most at risk groups e.g. IDP and returnees, female headed households, women within male headed households, persons with disabilities and ethnic and religious minorities facing barriers to access services.	IOM UNHCR OCHA PSEA Network (UNFPA, IMC and RCO) UNICEF (CP AoR) FAO		# of clusters with completed protection mainstreaming assessments and action plans # of subnational areas classified based on SEA risk levels.	
2.2 Engage authorities on access to justice for women and girls to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put in place clear legal structures for the handling of cases of women and girls. Enhance the capacity of government agencies, and advocate for judicial reforms including legal aid clinics. In parallel, develop and implement a plan for supporting access to female lawyers and formal justice mechanisms for women and girls. 	UNDP UNHCR UNAMA HR UNICEF FAO		# of engagement meetings held with authorities on access to justice Plan for supporting access to female lawyers	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake research on customary informal or customary law mechanisms and build capacities of legal aid teams. • Put in place clear legal structures for the handling of cases of access to land for women and girls. 			<p>and formal justice mechanisms developed.</p> <p>Research on customary / informal law mechanisms developed</p>	
<p>2.3 Engage the ministry responsible for civil registration to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce fees for Tazkiras for women, children, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities. • Simplify the process of applying for the Electronic-Tazkira and increase the number of registration sites, where possible at district level. • Organize outreach on civil registration to rural areas targeting the most vulnerable. • Provide dedicated support to returnees and IDP to access civil documentation including provision of information. • Map existing reliable data/baseline on the current civil documentation capacity is, percentage of citizens with documents, current plans by the DfA for improving the system. • Conduct an assessment/overview on the capacity of the relevant DFA authorities responsible for civil documentation at national and regional level. • Guided by the assessment findings, develop a capacity strengthening plan to the relevant authorities. • Enhance the capacity of the authorities' line ministries and departments at provincial level on humanitarian protection, including humanitarian principles and other related topics. 	<p>UNHCR UNICEF</p>		<p># of meetings held with DFA on civil registration.</p> <p># of guidance notes issued on civil documentation developed and disseminated.</p> <p># assessment reports developed</p>	
<p>2.4 Provide periodic updates on the human rights situation in Afghanistan to guide advocacy at all levels</p>	<p>UNAMA</p>		<p># of updates on the human rights situation provided.</p>	

2.5 The durable solutions working group will develop approaches that enhance employable skills and sustainable shelter.	UNHCR UNDP		# approaches on enhancing employable skills and sustainable shelter developed	
2.6 Develop, document and share/replicate innovative and contextualized approaches to provide psychosocial support, medical treatment for women and girl survivors of violence.	UN Women UNFPA (GBV AoR) UNMAS (MA AoR) UNICEF (CP AOR)		# approaches contextualized and documented	
2.7 Conduct a survey on appropriate community feedback and complaints mechanisms including appropriate feedback mechanisms with accountability benchmarks by agencies.	AAP Working Group PSEA Network (UNFPA, IMC, and RCO) DIWG		CFM assessment report	
2.8 Conduct an assessment on varying needs of persons with disabilities and propose appropriate assistance to mitigate protection risks.	DIWG (UNHCR, HI, KOO) Protection Cluster WFP UNMAS (MA AoR) FAO		Assessment report	
2.9 Conduct a cross-sectoral assessment to identify the protection needs of adolescents and youth and recommendations to address them.	AYWG (UNFPA)		Assessment report	
Specific Objective 3: Durable solutions for forcibly displaced and returning Afghan people are found and operationalized				
3.1 Protection is integrated in the durable solutions plan and roll out of activities through enhanced coordination and collaboration.	DSWG UNHCR		# of R/DSWG members trained on protection mainstreaming Indicators for protection	

			mainstreaming in durable solutions developed	
			% of protection mainstreaming activities in the plan that are implemented.	
3.2 Lead on advocacy with neighboring and non-neighboring countries to improve protection space for sensitive profiles and a plan for safe, dignified, and sustainable returns to Afghanistan.	HC		# of advocacy actions undertaken Plan developed	
3.3 Develop a land management/land reform plan focusing on the most at-risk groups.	UNHabitat HLP AoR		Land management plan developed	
3.4 Provide guidance, based on available human rights monitoring data, on duty of care for protection of humanitarian aid workers especially female staff and other victims of human rights violations.	OCHA UNAMA (human rights monitoring data)		Guidance note on duty of care provided	
3.5 Design, implement and coordinate durable solutions pilot projects, utilizing area-based approaches and incorporating protection principles, in selected areas for replication.	DSWG		# durable solutions pilot projects	
Enabling Actions				
4.1 Ensure integration of core mine action activities (i.e. surveys, clearance operations, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE), Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and victim assistance) across humanitarian projects and funding initiatives.	UNMAS MA AoR UNICEF (CP AOR)			
4.2 Ensure a sufficient budget is reserved (10%) for protection mainstreaming activities in the HNRP and pooled funding (i.e. CERF, AHF).	OCHA			
4.3 Donors to translate their commitments on protection into concrete action by adequately funding protection programming as well as supporting integrated and mainstreaming approaches.	Donors			

4.4 Donors to increase their engagement with authorities, especially on sensitive issues like interference in protection programming, particularly GBV and employment of women.	Donors			
4.5 Conduct capacity building of national and sub-national actors on inclusion (of women, girls, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities) and the centrality of protection to enhance understanding of protection.	UNHCR Protection Cluster UN WOMEN GiHA WG UNFPA DIWG		# of people training on inclusion	
4.6 Conduct capacity building training for national and sub-national actors on meaningful engagement of adolescents and youth in protection efforts in alignment with the IASC Youth Guidelines	AYWG (UNFPA)		# of people trained on meaningful youth engagement in alignment with the IASC Youth Guidelines	
4.7 Develop a fundraising plan and sustain engagement with donors to increase funding for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Durable solutions especially targeting women, youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities. • Preparedness to scale responses up during emergencies, displacement, and in return areas. 	HCT		A fundraising plan is developed	
4.8 Develop an accountability mechanism for a principled humanitarian response with a focus on inclusion of women in the workforce	OCHA AAP WG		Accountability mechanism developed	
4.8 Design and implement a comprehensive PSEA information campaign to raise awareness among affected populations about their rights, reporting mechanisms, and available support services for SEA survivors. Additionally, the campaign will ensure that all staff, partners, and clusters are educated on PSEA core principles and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to effectively prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.	PSEA Network (UNFPA, IMC, and RCO)		Informational materials on PSEA developed and distributed to affected populations. Conduct community meetings and focus group	

			<p>discussions to disseminate PSEA information and encourage community participation.</p> <p>Awareness materials on PSEA core principles and SOPs developed for staff, partners, and clusters.</p>	
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Annex 3 – Implementation Support Group (ISG) - Terms of Reference

In August 2024, the Afghanistan HCT endorsed the Afghanistan Humanitarian Country Team Centrality of Protection Strategy (August 2024-July 2027). The Implementation Support Group (ISG) was created with the aim to ensure a strong visibility of Centrality of Protection and the Strategy on the agenda of the HCT and maintain a momentum among HCT members in support to common protection objectives.

Composition and Facilitation

- Agencies or organisations with lead responsibilities under the action plan of the HCT CoP strategy action plan.
- Any agency or organisations with activities directly supporting the implementation of the CoP Strategy, upon recommendation of any member.

Participants in the ISG meetings and consultations should be in charge of coordinating/monitoring the implementation of activities under their agencies/organisations' leadership in the CoP strategy.

The ISG is facilitated by UNHCR and OCHA. Facilitators will:

- Prepare agenda for meetings, based on input from members.
- Draft report of meetings, recording main issues discussed and action points.
- In agreement with ISG members, coordinate interventions under the protection standing item or under other protection related items on the agenda of HCT monthly meetings.

Responsibilities

- Monitor the implementation of the HCT CoP strategy and its activity plan and provide quarterly progress report to the HCT.
- Prepare recommendations / messages to be raised under Protection standing item [TBC] on HCT agenda, in particular with regard to:
 - o Protection advocacy priorities
 - o Other actions required to ensure implementation of CoP strategy.
- Advise HCT and HC/RC on centrality of protection in humanitarian response in Afghanistan and implementation of the CoP Strategy
- Conduct evaluation of strategy on annual basis

Meetings

- The ISG will meet at a minimum on a quarterly basis and on an ad-hoc basis when needed.