

Prioritisation of Protection Response Activities at the Country-Level

Ensuring a Risk Focused Response

April 2025

In 2025, there has been a significant and sudden decrease in humanitarian financing due to aid cuts. The current situation has a widespread and deep impact on the capacity of organisations to deliver planned protection programming, including specialised services, and for Protection Clusters to deliver against the HNRP 2025 and cluster response strategies. Cluster coordination teams are required to support reprioritisation efforts that balance highlighting acute protection risks, alongside supporting partners operational response capacities.¹

This document² aims to:

- Advocate for a risk-focused approach to the HNRP re-prioritisation efforts, led by UN OCHA.
- Encourage cluster coordination teams to lead a protection strategy revision process.
- Promote proactive approaches to any future rounds of interagency prioritisation efforts, including pooled fund allocations.

This prioritisation guidance is part of a series of reference documents that have been made available to Protection Cluster coordinators and partners: see [Positioning Protection in Humanitarian Action 2025](#).

Anticipated Funding Gaps across Humanitarian Response Plans

In 2024, Protection Clusters received \$1.7 billion in humanitarian financing with which 25 million people were reached. This is 49% of the overall \$3.5 billion funding requirements. The projected funding gap for 2025 is even more severe, with an average 67% gap expected across major crises. Key countries at risk of deep funding cuts (53–84%) include Ethiopia, DRC, Syria, Sudan, Myanmar, and oPt.

The financial impact of aid cuts is uneven across countries, sectors and activities. This creates operational challenges that are specific to each country. The significant decrease in financing will widen the gap in the ability of clusters to achieve the objectives laid out in the HNRP.

The principle of risk-focused reprioritisation

Protection Cluster coordination teams are required to support all efforts in response reprioritisation. These efforts ensure that interagency resources are directed towards those at highest risk, and that cluster response strategies are practical and operational within the existing resources. Protection Cluster risk analysis and risk identification exercises – such as the risk severity assessment, protection analysis update, interagency protection monitoring and partner analysis – should guide prioritisation.

¹ On 5 March 2025, the GPC issued guidance to field clusters to support and follow the UN OCHA led prioritisation process, with specific recommendations on engagement with partners and protection messaging.

² This document is complementary to all existing GPC guidance on the Humanitarian Cycle Programme, Protection Analysis and Information Management.

Prioritisation in Humanitarian Action

In February/March 2025, UN OCHA began leading a process of prioritisation to narrow the focus of the HNRP and attempt to direct resources towards high-risk, high-need areas such as severity level 4 and 5 locations. Protection Clusters globally contributed to this effort.

Prioritisation is a continuous exercise within any humanitarian operation and is a pillar of the collective process of humanitarian planning. Humanitarian actors identify the needs of affected populations and develop plans and mobilize resources to respond to the most pressing needs and risks on the ground.

Clusters engage in different levels of prioritisation including:

- Protection Cluster coordination teams work regularly with partners and use the information within the 4-5W to identify response needs and gaps.
- Protection Clusters ensure information collection and risk analysis that enables effective targeting of humanitarian action (including centrality of protection).
- Protection Clusters prioritise operational interventions that have a high impact for the affected population, including those that reduce exposure to risk and enhance dignity.

The importance of country-level prioritisation

Protection Cluster priorities are based on the country level risk analysis, the country context and specific capacities of partners. The diversity of our partner base and response modalities means there is no one size fits all global solution to prioritisation. Each response has different historical expertise, operational approaches, access and policy/legal frameworks.

It is essential that prioritization of activities is done at the country level, where the Protection Cluster has a comprehensive understanding of its partners and available resources. It is likely that clusters will have to support multiple rounds of prioritisation discussions as clusters adapt to the operational realities of the impact of the funding crisis.

Continuous Prioritisation in 2025

The GPC anticipates that 2025 will be a year of continuous reprioritisation, as the humanitarian system adjusts to the severe reduction in financing and as partners adapt, scale down, or close specific programmes. Cluster coordinators should be prepared for a narrowing scope of donor allocations, including pooled funds, and shifting operational capacities.

To support this process, the following sections outline three ways Protection Clusters can consider approaching it.

**A. Risk-Focused
Approach to
Reprioritisation**

**B. Updating Protection
Cluster Response
Strategies**

**C. Proactive Approaches
to Future Prioritisation
Efforts**

A. RISK FOCUSED APPROACH TO REPRIORITISATION

There are several ways in which Protection Clusters can approach prioritisation of the overall response strategy (particularly HNRP and other interagency response frameworks). These can be used in combination with each other:

- ✓ Activity prioritisation approach
- ✓ Geographical prioritisation approach
- ✓ Within programme approach
- ✓ People-centred / Leave no one behind approach

Activity & Geographical Approaches to Prioritisation

Activity level and geographical level approaches to prioritisation commonly use the HNRP as the reference point for prioritisation, where the overall framework is set by UN OCHA and the Humanitarian Country Team i.e. boundary setting.

Guiding questions for activity and geographical prioritisation exercises:

	Please consider the following questions for prioritisation per HNRP activity	Y/N
Guiding questions for activity-based prioritisation	Is the activity addressing heightened or existing protection risks effectively?	
	Are we targeting the most heightened protection risks / people at risk, rather than all vulnerable populations?	
	Does the activity have a clear protection impact/outcome?	
	Does the activity contribute to address/mitigate most severe protection risks in your context?	
	Does your operation have response capacity to implement the HNRP activity (e.g. partners with programmes and resources confirmed)?	
	Can this activity be regarded as less urgent or of secondary importance (e.g. trainings/monitoring)?	
Guiding questions for geographical prioritisation	Please consider the following questions for prioritisation in areas of severity 4/5	Y/N
	Do your partners have access?	
	Do your partners have suitable capacity in this area?	
	Is the response modality more expensive?	
	Are there any excluded populations or populations at high risk that are not within these geographical areas?	
	Does the interagency severity 4/5 correspond with protection severity 4/5?	
	Do you need to adjust the response modality to target these locations?	

Integrated programming across humanitarian sectors

Integrated programming across humanitarian sectors is a strategic approach to prioritizing protection activities by designing interventions that deliberately combine protection and other sectoral objectives to achieve mutually reinforcing outcomes. Unlike protection mainstreaming, which ensures all sectoral actions are safe and inclusive, protection integration goes further by embedding specific protection activities – such as case management, legal assistance, or psychosocial support – within broader sectoral programs like health, education, or shelter. This approach enables a more strategic prioritisation of protection, ensuring that life-saving and rights-based protection services are delivered in synergy with other forms of assistance. It fosters collaboration across sectors to jointly identify protection risks and responses, improving the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of humanitarian interventions.

Within Programme Approach & How the Cluster can support

Some partners might prefer a ‘within programme’ prioritisation approach. Not all partners will be able to quickly adjust resources to target gaps in severity 4/5 locations, and they will take time to adapt to the new funding context. In this case, partners should adopt an in-programming prioritisation – where they target those most at risk/in need within their programme response area.

The GPC recognises that partners will be in continuous processes of reviewing and revising programming capacity. Clusters can enable partner programming prioritisation through:

- ✓ Updating operational guidance to partners in improving *within* programme prioritisation.
- ✓ Sharing information on areas with high severity protection risk.
- ✓ Supporting local level/subnational analysis exercises.
- ✓ Highlighting any specific community at risk of exclusion or who require specific programme interventions (e.g. people at risk of trafficking, minority communities, persons with disabilities and locally relevant at-risk groups of persons).
- ✓ Keeping the service mapping and referral pathway up to date. It is likely that remaining partners will face an increase demand in their services.

People-Centred / Leave No One Behind Approach

This approach enables protection partners to retain the flexibility required to provide life-saving protection assistance and services to people at highest risk where they are, not only in areas with 4 and 5 severities. This can be achieved by reducing overall targets of activities based on agreed criteria such as:

- ✓ Degree to which an activity contributes to achieving priority protection objectives
- ✓ Prioritised areas / objectives of the HRP

This approach maintains a wider geographical distribution of targets in all areas with severities 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Interagency Reprioritisation exercise February/March 2025

There was no uniform approach to UN OCHA led prioritisation efforts during the February/March 2025 exercise, with country specific adaptations and variations. Cluster coordination teams used various approaches ranging from prioritisation based on HNRP strategic objectives to project and activity level re-costing exercises. Cluster coordinators and other partners are welcome to reach out to the GPC Ops Cell Field Support team for lessons learned and examples of approaches in other country contexts for any future HRNP based re-prioritisation efforts.

B. UPDATING PROTECTION CLUSTER RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Most country clusters have multi-year Protection Cluster strategies that outline specific operational and policy objectives for the country operation. In many cases, these strategies bridge objectives from emergency response to early recovery and durable solutions.

Protection Clusters are encouraged to review their cluster response strategy to make sure that it is fit for purpose and reflects the operational and policy priorities within the current funding constraints.

Clusters must balance the need to highlight operational response gaps, alongside mobilising the existing response capacity to address protection risks.

The Protection Cluster strategy should clearly link to the protection risk analysis and risk identification efforts.

Monitoring of Response Gaps

- ✓ Do you have appropriate information flows to ensure you are alerted when partners close or reduce specific programming?
- ✓ Do you have a system to regularly review the 3-5W, particularly the who, what and where?
- ✓ Is there a transition process in place for closure/scale down of programming? [see: Sudden Programme Closure Guidance]

Updating the Strategic Approach

- ✓ Is your cluster strategy appropriate to address the new operational focus?
- ✓ Should you narrow your strategy?
- ✓ Who are your partners with remaining response capacity, and do they have any flexibility to adjust their approach?
- ✓ Do your partners need further assistance in prioritisation and targeting?
- ✓ Does your cluster have flexible response capacity for any new emergency or frontline response?
- ✓ How can the cluster build partners' skills base and targeting for Q3/4 2025 and 2026?
- ✓ What coordination and training needs will be required for any new operational focus?
- ✓ Do your SAG/Cluster ToR need to be revised?

It is recommended that cluster coordination teams identify a timeline for updating their cluster strategies or other relevant cluster documentation before the end of Q2 2025.

C. PROACTIVE APPROACHES TO FUTURE PRIORITISATION EFFORTS

Cluster coordination teams can anticipate that there will be multiple rounds of prioritisation discussions. It is understood that the early efforts were very reactive. The parameters of prioritisation led by UN OCHA and the HPC Steering Group were set at a global level, with some specific geographical adaptations.

Cluster coordination teams and partners are encouraged to look at more proactive prioritisation efforts. In addition to updating your cluster strategic plan, please consider the following:

Protection is a Lifesaving Response – Developing Context-Specific examples

Protection is a lifesaving response, and it is included under the [CERF Life-Saving Criteria](#). Cluster coordinators are often requested to provide further examples of specific lifesaving activities. In addition to these globally accepted life-saving activities, there are context and operation specific activities from your response that can be highlighted.

- ✓ Cluster coordination teams can work with partners to identify specific response activities that have significant operational impact in your area.
- ✓ You can develop your own locally relevant list of activities and interventions. For example, Mozambique Protection Cluster - [Protection in Emergencies is Critical and Lifesaving](#)

Anticipate Pooled Fund Prioritisation – including CERF

- ✓ Consider what funds are operational in your area and their different frameworks e.g. the activities covered under the CERF are narrower than activities under the HNRP.
- ✓ Reflect on the response scenarios you are anticipating in 2025. Can you identify specific response activities that will be critical in these scenarios e.g. flood, sudden camp closure, remote programming?
- ✓ How will your updated cluster strategy link to pooled fund prioritisation?

Key Messages and Advocacy

Clusters will be required to support ongoing advocacy efforts. To support this, clusters can consider the following:

- ✓ Regularly discuss operational gaps with partners. Use 3-5W to highlight emerging operational gaps – particular the who/what and where. Monitor the impact on other partners, particularly local partners.
- ✓ HNRP Review (e.g. GPC Analysis on Funding and Protection Risks).
- ✓ Review and adapt key messages on protection interventions. You can use the GPC Bank of Key Messages on Protection Interventions and Coordination as Lifesaving (for Protection Coordinators and partners).
- ✓ Support partner advocacy.

You may also develop your own country specific messages on protection and advocacy, for example: [South Sudan Protection Cluster – Key Messages on Protection](#)