Ukraine 2024 © UNHCR/Iryna Tymchyshyn
North Saltivka, one of the most heavily war-impacted
neighbourhoods in Kharkiv

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit

Chapter 4: Protection in Armed Conflict

Global Protection Cluster

Chapter 4: Protection in Armed Conflict

Overview

This Chapter contains:

- Overview of protection in armed conflict, including international law and key principles.
- Explaining the differences between humanitarian protection and protection of civilian approaches
- Role of the Protection Cluster in Protection of Civilians (PoC).
- Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination and its impact on protection outcomes.

In armed conflict, humanitarian actors, including Protection Clusters, often operate alongside state and non-state armed actors, as well as peacekeeping or political missions, which are key stakeholders in the Protection of Civilians (PoC). While PoC encompasses distinct protection actions, it can complement the approaches of humanitarian protection actors, leveraging differing mandates, capacities, and actions to safeguard civilians.

Armed conflict is a significant driver of forced displacement and creates and heightens protection risks for affected people. The Protection Cluster plays a pivotal role in addressing these risks through advocacy, coordination, and community-centred approaches. This guidance outlines key principles, legal frameworks, and the operational role of the Protection Cluster in ensuring a robust, principled, and effective response to protection risks in armed conflict.

Skip ahead to:

4.1 Core Concepts and Principles

Armed conflict exacerbates vulnerabilities, exposing civilians to violence, forced displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and violations of fundamental rights. Civilians, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups, often bear the brunt of such conflicts. Violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law (IHRL) include indiscriminate attacks, forced recruitment, gender-based violence (GBV), and restrictions on humanitarian access. Sieges, blockades, and security restrictions often prevent civilians and humanitarian actors from accessing essential resources and services.

Protection in Armed Conflict

States and armed groups bear the primary responsibility to protect civilians in situations of armed conflict. International humanitarian law (IHL) covers two key areas:

1) The protection of those who are not, or no longer, taking part in fighting.

2) Restrictions on the means of warfare and the methods of warfare.

To strengthen the protection of civilians in conflict, IHL outlines the following principles in the treatment of civilians during conflict.

- **Distinction:** the obligation to distinguish between civilians and combatants.

- **Precaution:** the obligation to take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects against the effects of attacks.

- **Proportion:** the obligation not to cause damage that is excessive in relation to the direct military advantage anticipated.

Despite the clear requirements, outlined in international law, that civilian populations must not be attacked, and all efforts are made to protect those who are not – or no longer – directly participating in hostilities, the reality is that many conflicting parties disregard their responsibilities.

Protection of Civilians (PoC) and humanitarian protection are approaches that have been developed because of the impact of armed conflict on civilian populations. Both aim to increase the protection of civilians in armed conflict using differing mandates, capacities and approaches.

Read more:
• UNHCR Protection in Armed Conflict Toolkit
• OCHA Aide Memoire on Protection of Civilians
• GPC and OCHA Access that Protects: An Agenda for Change
• IASC Frequently Asked Questions on International Humanitarian, Human Rights and Refugee Law in the Context of Armed Conflict

4.2 Distinction Between Humanitarian Protection and Protection of Civilian Approach

The Protection of Civilians (PoC) often refers to a distinct form of protection action, different from, but potentially complementary to the approaches used by humanitarian protection actors. This provides opportunities for engagement and collaboration between PoC and humanitarian protection actors. Humanitarian actors must remember that the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are fundamental in all contexts, and this also applies to engagement with UN Missions.

The United Nations Security Council Protection of Civilian Approach

The UN first gave the UN Mission in Sierra Leone the explicit mandate to protect civilians and since this time it has been an explicit cornerstone of UN peacekeeping operations. International and regional peacekeeping operations have been tasked by the Security Council not only to contribute to the protection of civilians but also with specific roles in respect of displaced populations.

The Protection of Civilians handbook outlines three tiers of action to be carried out by peacekeeping operations.

1. **Protection through dialogue and engagement**: this involves engaging with parties to the conflict and affected communities to prevent violence, de-escalate tensions and promote peaceful resolutions.

2. **Provision of physical protection:** this focuses on physically protection civilians under threat of violence, often involving the show or use of force by uniformed component to prevent, deter, pre-empt, and respond to threats.

3. **Establishment of a protective environment:** This involved creating a secure environment for civilians by maintaining law and order, supporting the rule of law, and strengthening human rights, including through patrols, police measures, and training of security forces.

In some cases, peacekeeping missions are authorised to use force to protect civilians. Examples of the types of tasks that U.N Missions have been asked to carry out include building institutions of good governance, engaging in human rights monitoring, supporting civilian police, or carrying out direct physical protection – such as patrolling around IDP camps. Peacekeeping operations with a PoC mandate are required to develop a PoC strategy that is adapted to their specific mandate and context.

Humanitarian protection actors can collaborate with U.N. missions to promote the protection of civilians in armed conflict. In some countries, the position of Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG), the Deputy of the UN Mission in that country operation, is also the Humanitarian Coordinator.

Ensuring Distinction

Despite the common use of protection language, humanitarian protection and protection of civilian's activities are carried out by different actors and have a different focus of action.

Comparison between DPO definition of PoC and IASC definition of protection	
UN Department of Peace Operations	**Interagency Standing Committee**
The UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) defines "Protection of Civilians" (POC) as '*integrated and coordinated activities by all mission components to prevent, deter, or respond to threats of physical violence against civilians, within the mission's capabilities and areas of deployment, using all necessary means, up to and including deadly force, without prejudice to the host state's primary responsibility.*'	Humanitarian protection is defined as '*all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Refugee Law (IRL)).*'

In situations of armed conflict, humanitarian actors, including Protection Clusters and their members, are often operating in the same space as weapons bearers. This includes states and non-state armed actors. Peacekeeping forces are also considered weapons bearers. Humanitarian action within the context of a peacekeeping mission can also present challenges for humanitarian workers. For humanitarian actors, they may wish to ensure a visibility distinct identity to retaining access to conflict-affected populations. Association with peacekeeping actors might blur the lines between humanitarian and military action, placing strains on humanitarian space and potentially putting civilians and aid workers at greater risk.

Humanitarian actors can engage constructively with peacekeeping missions to address these issues. Given their significant capacities, such as uniformed military and police personnel, good offices and integrated

human rights components, UN missions have an important role to play in protection. Proactive engagement by the Protection Cluster should be pursued to ensure the best possible coordination of efforts and impact. Such engagement can take many forms and engaging with a UN mission is not synonymous with humanitarian actors endorsing its policies or decisions. It is not a question of 'if' but 'how.'

The following principles should guide Protection Clusters and their members in their relationship with UN missions.

- Adherence to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence.

- Respect for the diversity of mandates, approaches, expectations and modus operandi among actors contributing to protection outcomes.

- Participation and dialogue to share information in a transparent, effective and timely manner, respecting the principles of confidentiality and protection of victims, witnesses, and sources of information, to coordinate action and address outstanding challenges.

- Promotion of consensus decision-making and speaking in unison, or at least in a coordinated manner, as the Protection Cluster.

- Commitment to ensure that protection activities undertaken are planned, implemented and reviewed in accordance with applicable international laws, norms and standards.

The GPC developed a diagnostic tool to assist Protection Clusters to assess their engagement with UN missions.

This Diagnostic Tool and Guidance is intended to facilitate discussion and decision making among field Protection Cluster members, by providing a series of guiding questions that should be considered when examining the context in which the cluster operates and the nature of the UN mission, and what implications these might have for its interaction with the UN mission.

4.3 Humanitarian -Civilian Military Coordination

Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) is the interaction between civilian and military actors in humanitarian emergencies.

The UN CMCoord is the UN framework that has been developed to enhance the understanding of humanitarian action and is intended to be a guide for how political and military actors support that action. The UN-CMCoord framework establishes the necessary humanitarian civil-military coordination structures – including identifying the UN-CMCoord Officers and Focal points. In many cases the UN-CMCoord Officer will support humanitarian actors and advocate for humanitarian security.

In humanitarian emergencies, UN OCHA leads the establishment and management of interaction with military actors. The actions that UN OCHA take to facilitate this can vary significantly from context to context, based on the humanitarian needs and level of cooperation with military actors.

The principles of UN-CMCoord must follow the same humanitarian principles as other humanitarian operations. It must:
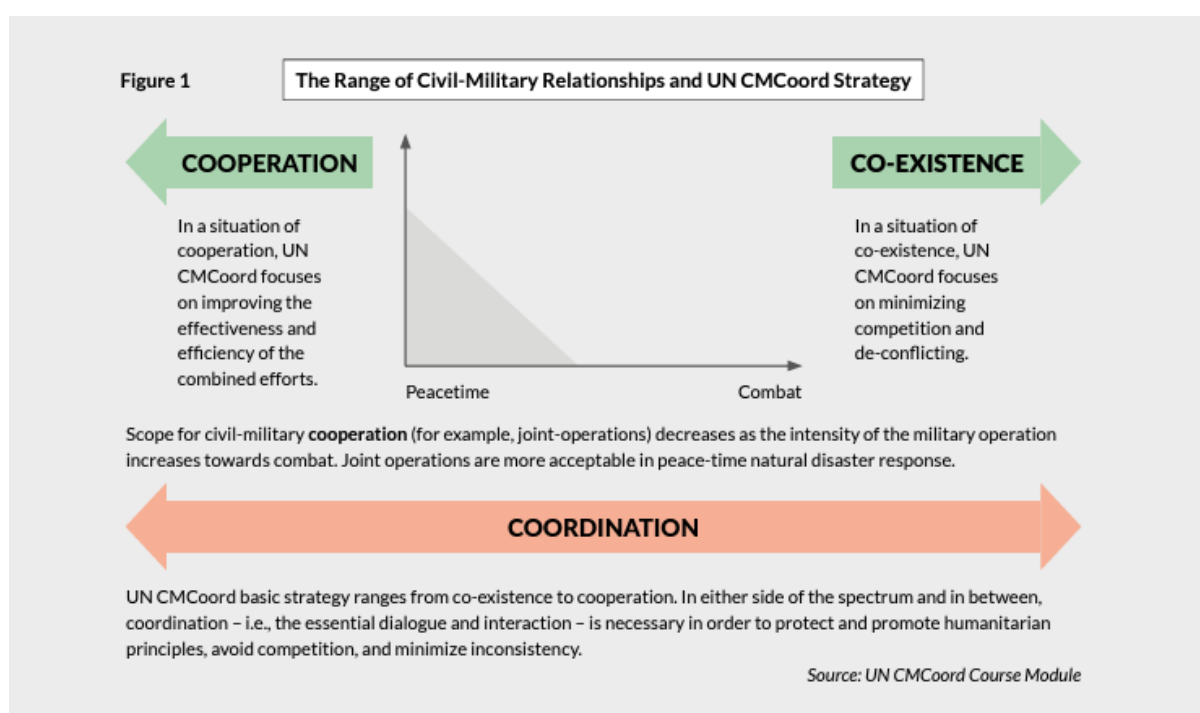
- Preserve humanitarian space.

- Cooperation (or perceptions of cooperation) with the military must not jeopardize core humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality or put affected populations or humanitarian workers at risk.

- Form and maintain appropriate relations between humanitarian and military or armed actors.

- Make appropriate and timely use of foreign or national military assets to support humanitarian operations.
- Ensure that relief efforts are consistent, whether they are delivered by civilian or military actors.

There is no single approach to humanitarian civil-military coordination, and the engagement with military actors is shaped by the broader situation of Protection of Civilians and the role of specific military actors in the crisis.

Civilian-Military Coordination for Protection Outcomes

There can be uncertainty when humanitarian space is shared with military actors or when there is a different understanding of the role of military actors in specific crises. Given the state is the primary duty bearer, it is important for humanitarian actors to engage with military actors to promote and secure protection outcomes.

Figure 1 — The Range of Civil-Military Relationships and UN CMCoord Strategy

COOPERATION

In a situation of cooperation, UN CMCoord focuses on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the combined efforts.

Peacetime — Combat

CO-EXISTENCE

In a situation of co-existence, UN CMCoord focuses on minimizing competition and de-conflicting.

Scope for civil-military **cooperation** (for example, joint-operations) decreases as the intensity of the military operation increases towards combat. Joint operations are more acceptable in peace-time natural disaster response.

COORDINATION

UN CMCoord basic strategy ranges from co-existence to cooperation. In either side of the spectrum and in between, coordination – i.e., the essential dialogue and interaction – is necessary in order to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, and minimize inconsistency.

Source: UN CMCoord Course Module

In October 2022, the GPC conducted a roundtable to discuss some of the challenges and opportunities that arise from a stronger engagement with military actors. This roundtable highlighted some protection outcomes that can be obtained through better humanitarian civilian-military coordination:

- Parties to conflict release child soldiers and issue explicit prohibitions, reinforced by disciplinary measures, to prevent child recruitment by their forces.
- Military actors facilitate safe access to alternative sources of cooking fuel to reduce exposure to the threat of sexual violence.
- Community level protection committees influence security forces to change their conduct in and around civilian areas through on-going liaison and negotiation.
- Military actors support and facilitate the voluntary movements of affected persons.

Read more on the key points and challenges in **Civil-Military Coordination for Protection Outcomes.**

4.4 Humanitarian Dilemmas in Situations of Armed Conflict

Humanitarian actors can engage with U.N. Missions to find constructive solutions to ensuring distinction, while leveraging differing mandates, capacities, and actions to safeguard civilians. It can be more challenging to engage with other armed actors, particularly where there is an immediate situation where civilian lives are at risk. Any engagement and operations must be based on IHL, and after a careful risk and benefit assessment which respects the do-no-harm principle.

Examples of dilemmas in civilian protection in armed conflict

Example 1: Ensuring the civilian character of sites:

A very common challenge facing humanitarian actors is how to ensure that areas where people displaced – including camps – remain civilian in nature and do not have armed groups either move in or attempt to control the site. In some situations, soldiers may look to move into an IDP site along with the rest of their family members. In other situations, armed groups have tried to exercise control over IDP sites.

Key questions for a Protection Cluster Coordinator to ask include:

- What information are IDPs and affected populations sharing with regards to the potential/actual presence of armed actors in a site?
- What mechanisms exist for reporting concerns and how can preventative action be taken?
- Which actors are responsible for maintaining the civilian and humanitarian character of a site?
- Which actors can play a supportive role in promoting/enforcing the civilian character of a site?

> **See:** UNHCR/ICRC Operational Guidance on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Sites and Settlements

Example 2: Securing safe movement of populations:

Humanitarian actors can be called upon to facilitate the relocation or evacuation of civilian populations pending a potential attack or offensive by a party to the conflict. This can create many dilemmas in how humanitarians influence the decision making of at-risk communities and potential risks in any onward area of movement. There are significant logistical and safety issues involved in the movement of any group of people, with exposure to protection risks often elevated during this period.

Key questions for a Protection Cluster Coordinator to ask include:

- Who is requesting the humanitarian evacuation?
- What is their motivation?
- How is the affected community involved?
- Have all parties to the conflict agreed to respect this arrangement?
- What are the risks? What are other options that may limit the risk?

> **See:** UNHCR Guidance Note on Humanitarian Evacuations
>
> **See**: NRC Explainer: Safe Zones

Cluster coordinators can request examples (including SoPs) from country operations where clusters/ protection partners supported safe movement of populations.

Example 3: Promoting the use of IHL:

It is important that all parties to the conflict understand and adhere to IHL. This can necessitate contact with armed groups that the international community has restricted engagement with. Certain groups, such as Al Shabab in Somalia and HTS in Syria, are listed terrorist organization and national laws criminalize engagement. In other contexts, there may be donor restrictions or limitations on engagement, as is the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan or the military Junta in Myanmar. The Humanitarian Country Team may also have principles of engagement that limit contact with a military regime or armed group.

Key questions for a Protection Cluster Coordinator to ask include:

- What are the formal/legal and informal considerations in engaging with armed groups, including those designated as terrorist organizations?
- How do these considerations shift between local, national and international partners?
- What are some of the risk management mechanisms and actions available?

Consistency with global positions and learning

It is often tempting in situations where civilians are at direct risk of attack to call for certain measures to be taken to promote the safety of civilians. This has been described as the six types of humanitarian arrangements that have been established or called for during conflicts.

These are **humanitarian notifications**, **evacuations**, **humanitarian corridors**, **suspensions of hostilities**, **protected zones** and **no-fly zones**.

Humanitarian actors call for each of these arrangements to try to provide some additional security to civilians and facilitate humanitarian responses. There are also legal implications of each of these arrangements, and the consequences of the arrangements can have severe impact on do-no harm approaches and conflict dynamics.

Cluster coordinators are strongly encouraged to familiarise themselves with these arrangements and their legal and protection grounding and reflect on the lessons learned in the delivery of these humanitarian arrangements.

> **See:** Chatham House Enhancing the security of civilians in conflict

Cluster coordinators can request advice from the GPC, and organisations that have legal and protection expertise.

4.5 Role of the Protection Cluster

The Protection Cluster coordinates protection activities and engagement in multi-sector response, ensuring adherence to humanitarian principles and legal obligations while promoting the safety, dignity, and rights of affected populations.

Protection Actions related to PoC

Protection partners are engaged in a diverse range of activities that promote and support the protection of civilians in armed conflict. These are most often grounded in very strong community-based and community-led approaches and delivered by community actors.

Examples of Humanitarian Approaches to Protection in Armed Conflict.

Community-based early warning and action

- Creation of early warning systems and localised safety networks.
- Protection by Presence.
- Community safety planning.

Advocacy for legal compliance and accountability

- Engagement with parties to the conflict to promote compliance with IHL and IHRL.
- Advocacy for the protection of critical civilian infrastructure, including health facilities/schools.
- Awareness-raising of violations and promotion of accountability through engagement with mechanisms such as the ICC and the Human Rights Council.
- Amplification of the voices of affected populations in global platforms to ensure their needs and rights are prioritised.
- Training for humanitarian actors and local authorities on protection principles and legal frameworks.

Humanitarian access negotiations

- Negotiation with armed groups and authorities to secure safe passage for civilians and aid.
- Development of SOPs for the protection of displaced populations and humanitarian corridors.

Specialised protection assistance

- Specialized protection services, including mobile service delivery and case management support.
- Capacity building of the technical capacity of partners to deliver effective protection responses.

Engagement of the Protection Cluster Coordination Team

The Protection Cluster has a role in creating an enabling environment for effective and principled Protection of Civilians. In addition to supporting the direct protection programming of partners, the Protection Cluster can:

Advocacy and Awareness

- Advocate with mandated actors and Member Sates on the importance of IHL compliance, specific protection risks and related violations and their impacts on people to inform policy and practices related to protection of civilians.
- Support the consistent prioritisation of protection by relevant mandated actors and supportive Member States in their engagement with parties to the conflict and via their humanitarian diplomacy efforts.
- Regularly update Member States, including via the UN Security Council Informal Expert Group, on key protection issues in countries considered by the Council as well as in other contexts of armed conflict.
- Engage with UN human rights mechanisms and Special Procedures – as well as any other relevant accountability mechanisms.

Strategy Engagement

- Work within the relevant coordination bodies and with communities to develop an appropriate set of actions that seek to reduce the risks of violence and strengthen protection of civilians, based on IHL and do no harm principles.

Engagement with Peacekeeping & UN-CMCoord

- Analyse and advocate for the establishment of appropriate UN peace operation mandates and renewals of such mandates. This includes potential adjustments in scope and resourcing that would allow UN peace operations to execute their mandate related to PoC more effectively.

- Engage military actors under UN-CMCoord guidelines to ensure safe humanitarian access while preserving the civilian nature of operations.

- Engage with Humanitarian Access Working Groups to ensure a protection lens is taken into consideration in the humanitarian negotiations with armed actors and local and national authorities.

Monitoring Systems

- Support appropriate protection monitoring, ensuring that analysis is linked to protection risks and violations relevant in situations of armed conflict.

- Where MARA and MRM mechanisms exist, partners should be strongly encouraged to participate in monitoring, documenting and reporting violations.

4.6 Key Resources and Tools

Title	Type	Language	Year
Guidance and Introduction Documents			
Introduction to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – ICRC on Kaya Learning Platform	E-Learning Course	ENG, ESP, FRE	2024
IASC Frequently Asked Questions on International Humanitarian, Human Rights and Refugee Law in the context of armed conflict	FAQs	ENG	2004
NRC Protection of Civilians and Access Explainers	Explanatory Note	ENG	2024
GPC/UNHCR Aide Memoire: Using IHL in Support of the Protection of Civilians	Aide Memoire	ENG *Upon Request*	2025
Chatham House: Enhancing the Security of Civilians in Conflict	Research Paper	ENG	2024
NRC Protection from Violence	Note / Website	ENG	2025
OHCHR, International Legal Protection of Human Rights in Armed Conflict	Guidance	ENG	2011
OCHA Aide Memoire on Protection of Civilians	Aide Memoire	ENG	2014
GPC Guidance on Engagement with UN Security Council Informal Expert Group	Guidance	ENG *Upon Request*	-
Civilian-Military Engagement			
IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Military or Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys	Guidelines	ENG	2013

IASC Guiding & Operating Principles on Civil-Military Relationship & Use of Military Assets	Guidance Document	ENG	2004
Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support UN Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies	Guidelines	ENG	2003
Recommended Practices for Effective Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination of Foreign Military Assets (FMA) in Natural and Man-Made Disasters	Guidance Document	ENG	2018
Oslo Guidelines: Guidelines on The Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief	Guidelines	ENG	2007
Civil-Military Coordination for Protection Outcomes: Report of a GPC Roundtable – with perspectives from the field	Report of Roundtable	ENG	2022
Events – Recording, Resources			
UN Protection of Civilians Week 2023 – Event Resources and Concept Notes	Event Resources	ENG	2023
UN Protection of Civilians Week 2024 – Event Resources and Concept Notes	Event Notes / Resources	ENG	2024
UN Protection of Civilians Week 2025 – Event Resources and Concept Notes	Event Notes / Resources	ENG	2025
From the Ground Up: Learning from Locally-led Efforts to Strengthen the Protection of Civilians – Global Protection Forum	Concept Note and Recordings	ENG, FRA, ESP, ARA	2022
Community Engagement with Armed Actors: Strengthening Protection, Prevention and Response – Global Protection Forum	Recording	ENG	2022
Engaging with Access Working Groups: Good Practices and Opportunities – Global Protection Forum	Recording	ENG	2022
Access Negotiations with Armed Groups for Protection – Global Protection Forum – Global Protection Forum	Recording	ENG	2022
Unpacking the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Case-Studies from the Field - GPC	Recording	ENG	2021
GPC Protection Conversation: Optimizing Armed Actor Engagement for Protection Outcomes	Recording	ENG	2024
Examples from the Field and Case Studies			
GPC PoC Advocacy Note ahead of SG PoC Report - May 2023	Report	ENG	2023
Protection Guidance on "Evacuations" in the West Mosul Context, March 2017 – Iraq PC	Guidance	ENG	2017
Sudan Protection Cluster PoC Advocacy Note	Example	ENG *Upon Request*	2025

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit – Overview of Chapters

Visit the main toolkit landing page or navigate directly to the chapters below to access more resources and information on the Protection Cluster's role in the following areas:

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit – Overview of Chapters	
Chapter 1: Humanitarian Coordination Overview	• Coordination models for internal displacement, refugee response and mixed situations • Cluster Activation Criteria and Processes
Chapter 2: Humanitarian Programme Cycle	• Elements / Principles of the HPC and the Role of the Cluster • Flash Appeals and Pooled Funds • Integration cross-cutting issues and the Centrality of Protection into the HPC
Chapter 3: Internal Displacement	• Internal displacement and the needs of IDPs. • Legal frameworks and displacement
Chapter 4: Protection in Armed Conflict	• International Law/Principles • Humanitarian protection and Protection of Civilians (PoC). • Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination
Chapter 5: Centrality of Protection	• The Protection Cluster's responsibilities in CoP • The difference between mainstreaming, integration and the centrality of protection. • IASC processes and HCT benchmarks
Chapter 6: Climate, Disaster, and Sudden Onset Emergencies	• Terminology and definitions in climate and disasters. • Responding to sudden onset emergencies • Actions that can be taken after a sudden onset shock (day 1-5) • Climate and disaster preparedness and response.
Chapter 7: Durable Solutions	• Global frameworks guiding Durable Solutions • Supporting durable solutions at strategic and operational levels. • The GPC Durable Solutions Guidance for Protection Clusters
Chapter 8: Cluster Transition, Deactivation and Reform	• Criteria for cluster deactivation and transition • Transition processes • Humanitarian reform initiatives • Area-based coordination
Chapter 9: Advocacy and Communication	• Developing advocacy strategies and action plans • Preparing briefings to ICCG/HCT and engaging donors • Leveraging human rights mechanisms • Communication products and media engagement
Chapter 10: Data Responsibility and Safe Information Management	• Principles of data safeguarding, management and sharing • Data responsibility in humanitarian action • Safe and effective data handling
Chapter 11: Cross-Cutting Issues	• Age, Gender, Diversity and Disability Inclusion • MHPSS • AAP • PSEA • Protection Mainstreaming
Chapter 12: Understanding Protection Programmatic Approaches and Interventions	• Locally Led Responses • Community Based Protection • Case Management • Service Mapping and Referrals • Legal Aid, Law and Policy • Cash and Protection • Humanitarian Negotiations • Anti-Trafficking • Mobile and Rapid Protection Responses