Venezuela, 2023 © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo
Rosmary Yaure, and her son Leon, who recently returned
home to San Cristobal after years of displacement.

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit

Chapter 5: Centrality of Protection

Global Protection Cluster

Chapter 5: Centrality of Protection

Overview

This chapter contains:

- An explanation of the Centrality of Protection, and the Protection Cluster's responsibilities in supporting its implementation.
- An explanation of the difference between protection mainstreaming, protection integration and the centrality of protection.
- IASC processes in terms of engagement and support to implement the Centrality of Protection.
- HCT Benchmarks for the implementation of the IASC Policy on Protection.
- Discusses how to utilise a protection risk assessment matrix

In October 2016, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted its Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action. The policy defines the centrality of protection in humanitarian action, as well as the process for its implementation at country level. In doing so, it seeks to reinforce complementary roles, mandates and expertise of all relevant actors. Specifically, the policy emphasizes an IASC commitment to prioritize protection and contribute to collective protection outcomes.

Skip ahead to:

5.1 Core Concepts and Principles

In a Statement issued in December 2013, the Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) affirmed that all humanitarian actors have a responsibility to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action. The IASC has committed to a systemwide and comprehensive response to conflict and disasters. This response is driven by the needs and perspectives of affected persons, with protection at its core.

The IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action outlines measures on how humanitarian actors can collectively take this forward. HC/RCs and members of HCTs are expected to work together as senior leaders to address the most critical protection concerns in-country.

One of the recommended tools to operationalise Centrality of Protection is a HCT Protection Strategy. This strategy can facilitate HCT members to operationalise Centrality of Protection by clearly articulating the main priorities and responsibilities of HCT members. As the HC and HCT members often have access to influential stakeholders they are also well placed to engage in public and private advocacy on the critical protection issues. Advocacy efforts by the HC and HCT to reduce protection risks can be outlined as part of the HCT Protection Strategy or be part of HCT advocacy strategies.

The HC/RCs and HCTs are responsible for ensuring that protection is prioritised in operations, mainstreamed across the clusters, and that decisions regarding the humanitarian response are informed by strong

protection analysis. While it is not the role of the HCT to directly undertake these activities, it is responsible for ensuring that they happen.

Protection Outcomes
A response or activity is considered to have a protection outcome when the risk to affected persons is reduced. The reduction of risks, meanwhile, occurs when threats and vulnerability are minimized and, at the same time, the capacity of affected persons is enhanced. Protection outcomes are the result of changes in behaviour, attitudes, policies, knowledge and practices on the part of relevant stakeholders. *IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016*

Centrality of Protection means protection leadership, coordination and engagement for more strategic and aligned responses as part of system-wide responsibility, to achieve 'protection outcomes.' It is required for the most critical protection risks and when it is not likely that a single agency or type of activity can comprehensively reduce the risk. Complementarity with other actors, including development and peace actors, and working with a variety of sectors and disciplines - sometimes at different levels of a response – is essential to reduce risks.
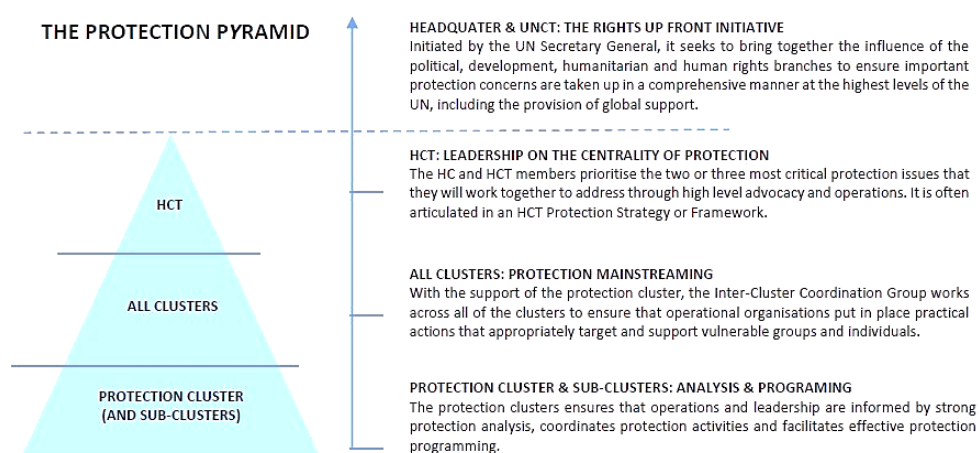
Mainstreaming protection is an element of the 'Centrality of Protection' and is a practical, efficient, and effective means to maximize the protective impact of humanitarian programming. Through the incorporation of protection principles into the response, humanitarian actors can ensure that their activities target the most vulnerable, enhance safety, dignity, and promote and protect the rights of the beneficiaries without contributing to or perpetuating discrimination, abuse, violence, neglect and exploitation.

Integrated protection programming refers to the collaborative efforts between different sectors, organizations and actors with the shared objective to protect people from violations of their rights, including violence, coercion, deprivation, and discrimination, through sector specific work. It can support the system-wide commitment to the centrality of protection as different actors work together as part of a multi-sector humanitarian response. The approach includes activities such as joint assessments and analysis, coordinated response strategies, shared advocacy initiatives, and collective resource mobilization.

Despite some challenges of programming for protection outcomes, there are examples of integrated protection programmes by other sectors/clusters and good practices by humanitarian organisations that promote the use of protection risk analysis as the basis for their multi-sector interventions, often in parallel to needs assessment.

The Protection Pyramid

The Protection Pyramid is a useful visual guide to understand the accountability framework for Centrality of Protection. It outlines the roles and responsibilities at a global and country level.

THE PROTECTION PYRAMID

HEADQUATER & UNCT: THE RIGHTS UP FRONT INITIATIVE
Initiated by the UN Secretary General, it seeks to bring together the influence of the political, development, humanitarian and human rights branches to ensure important protection concerns are taken up in a comprehensive manner at the highest levels of the UN, including the provision of global support.

HCT

HCT: LEADERSHIP ON THE CENTRALITY OF PROTECTION
The HC and HCT members prioritise the two or three most critical protection issues that they will work together to address through high level advocacy and operations. It is often articulated in an HCT Protection Strategy or Framework.

ALL CLUSTERS

ALL CLUSTERS: PROTECTION MAINSTREAMING
With the support of the protection cluster, the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group works across all of the clusters to ensure that operational organisations put in place practical actions that appropriately target and support vulnerable groups and individuals.

PROTECTION CLUSTER (AND SUB-CLUSTERS)

PROTECTION CLUSTER & SUB-CLUSTERS: ANALYSIS & PROGRAMING
The protection clusters ensures that operations and leadership are informed by strong protection analysis, coordinates protection activities and facilitates effective protection programming.

5.2 Role of the Protection Cluster

The Protection Cluster is often asked to take a leading support role in the development and implementation of Centrality of Protection. Some key actions that the HC/RC and HCT should request from the Protection Cluster, the ICCG, and other clusters/sectors, include:

- Ensure that protection response activities are prioritized and funded.
- Ensure that the voices of affected people are heard and guide protection analysis, programming and HCT decisions.
- Ensure that the Protection Cluster compiles comprehensive protection analysis that details the main protection risks, related threats and vulnerabilities to inform decisions and programming.
- Task the ICCG to ensure that protection mainstreaming is implemented across clusters and that clear protection objectives are included in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) that each sector must respond to.

Minimum Responsibilities of a Protection Cluster

The Protection Cluster has specific responsibilities within the Centrality of Protection approach, that must be carried out in all contexts.

- Provide up to date data and analysis of protection risks.
- Support the prioritisation of the protection risks, including by providing the Protection Analysis Update (PAU).
- Ensure protection mainstreaming is regularly discussed at the inter-cluster.
- Provide protection mainstreaming guidance and support training for clusters and partners.
- Ensured that the protection analysis/narrative informs the humanitarian response planning, sector/cluster response strategies and funding strategies for mechanisms such as Country-Based Pooled Funds and CERF.

Protection Clusters and HCT Protection Strategies

The specific role of the Protection Cluster in the development and implementation of the HCT Protection Strategy varies country by country. In some cases, Protection Clusters have been tasked by the HCT to lead the process, whereas in others the cluster plays a support role. It is expected that a Protection Cluster:

- Advocates for Centrality of Protection in their country operation and promotes the use of a targeted HCT Protection Strategy.
- Shares updated information and analysis on the main protection risks, related threats vulnerabilities and capacities.
- Supports the implementation of a HCT Protection Strategy, including any specific Protection Cluster actions.
- Shares good practices from other operations.

Drawing on GPC Support

Centrality of Protection is a collective responsibility, and country clusters can draw on global level support to advocate for the development and implementation of collective protection approaches.

- The GPC has a collection of HCT Protection strategies that can be shared for inspiration.
- The GPC can present the *Benchmarks for HCT Collective Implementation of the IASC Policy on Protection* to the HCT.
- The GPC has a collection of lessons learned and tools for interagency collaboration on protection risks analysis, monitoring and response, that can be adapted or shared for inspiration

- The GPC can promote advocacy efforts on protection related issues.
- The GPC can link the national cluster with the Centrality of Protection community of practice – particularly where there are any concerns or need for immediate action.

5.3 IASC Processes and Procedures

Engagement and Support to Implement the Centrality of Protection (CoP)

As a follow-up to the 2022 Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy, the IASC Centrality of Protection Action Plan (2023-2025) was endorsed by the principals and sets out key actions for strengthening systemwide centrality of protection.

1. Delivering collectively on agreed and prioritized protection outcomes.

2. Strengthening accountability of and support to humanitarian leadership (HCs and HCTs) to give priority to protection as an objective and an outcome central to humanitarian action.

3. Strengthening protection analysis - with inputs and priorities from affected people - to inform collective priorities, common response plans and concrete actions, including protection advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy efforts.

4. Working with parties to the conflict, peace and development actors, local/national actors and affected people, including through knowledge exchange, to achieve protection outcomes.

A set of benchmarks were developed to assist HCTs to operationalise their Centrality of Protection responsibilities. The HCT Benchmarks are designed to help HCTs to identify and reduce protection risks. The benchmarks focus on 1) Analysis of protection risks and prioritization; 2) Response planning and implementation to achieve protection outcomes; 3) Monitoring, learning and evaluation of the protection action plan.

5.4 HCT Benchmarks for Implementation of CoP

The HCT Benchmark document does not prescribe which actors and entities support the HCT with the development and implementation of HCT Protection Strategies. This will be agreed in the operations considering available capacities and resources. However, while the Protection Cluster does not lead on the implementation of Centrality of Protection, it is a key partner in establishing the framework of risk prioritization and supporting the protection response planning and response monitoring. The Protection Cluster is an important interlocutor for the HCT in identifying roadblocks to, and opportunities in, the successful country level implementation of a Centrality of Protection response.

The following are some of the actions carried out by the Protection Cluster that supports the collective implementation of the HCT Benchmarks:

Benchmark 1. Analysis and Prioritization.	The Protection Cluster contributes to the collective protection risk analysis and supports the risk prioritization exercise to ensure it is evidence-based and in accordance with the priorities of the affected population.
Protection Cluster Actions	• **The Protection Cluster identifies and monitors protection risks on a regular basis.** The trends and findings related to these protection risks are presented at the HCT and reported in: • Protection Analysis Updates

- Global Protection Updates
- Protection Risks Severity
- People exposed to protection risks
- The protection monitoring and analysis identifies the most critical protection risks and measures the severity of risks and informs on IHL/HR violations, including the JIAF 2.0 Outcome Indicator on IHL/HR violations.
- This risk identification can facilitate a HCT prioritization exercise.
- The risk identification and severity also inform the HNRP – to ensure coherence of protection analysis.

Benchmark 2. Response Planning & Implementation	The Protection Cluster provides direct assistance to affected populations, supports local actors and assists in the development of plans and strategies that aim to achieve interim and longer-term protection outcomes, including through risk identification, analysis and advocacy.
Protection Cluster Actions	**Identifying actions that can reduce protection risks** such as: providing assistance that reduces exposure to violence; influencing duty bearers' behaviour towards affected people; supporting communities' engagement with duty bearers to claim their rights. **Providing advice to the HCT on avenues for advocacy to respond to protection risks, IHL and IHRL violations** such as private/confidential engagement with regional and international human rights mechanisms; negotiations with duty-bearers; providing legal advice on improving national protection systems; advising on the engagement with UN missions, peace and security actors. **Carrying out global public advocacy and private diplomacy activities** - thematic campaigns (e.g. roundtable discussions, events, reports etc.); Member state engagement, lobby trips to capitals; engagement with Human Rights mechanisms. **Engage with and provide technical support to local and national partners**, including to women and youth-led organizations, to strengthen their leadership in protection action to mitigate protection risks
Benchmark 3. Monitoring the reduction of protection risks	The Protection Cluster monitors protection risk trends and the risks severity levels at sub-national level in cluster operations.
Protection Cluster Actions	*As noted under benchmark 1:* - The Protection Cluster monitors protection risks and risk severity levels based on information provided by the affected population and other actors. - The Protection Cluster coordinates and presents to the ICCGs and HCT regular updates on protection risks to support the integration of protection in programmes and response plans. - The Protection Cluster contributes to the development of indicators that are integrated in the HPC process to monitor actions to reduce protection risks.

5.5 Protection Analysis, Common Language and CoP

The Protection Cluster is often asked to support other actors (including other coordination and response mechanisms) to understand the presence of protection risks and assist them to define collaborative approaches or strategies to address these.

Different actors might use different languages to describe protection risks. For these reasons, it is important to use common frameworks to ensure that language, terminology, and concepts are easy for those that you are working with to understand. Over the years, the GPC has worked closely with other actors to provide resources and tools that allow protection actors to work closely and to share common frameworks to understand the protection context.

Working With Others	Available Frameworks/Guidance
IDPs / SDGs / Durable Solutions	Solutions Support Tool: Protection Risks, Obstacles and Entry Points for Protection Clusters
	PAF – JIAF – CCA Interoperability research and resources
Human Rights / IHL	Protection Risks Explanatory Note Annex 2: Human Rights Analysis Matrix
Health	Protection Analytical Framework for Protecting Health (IRC)
Legal Environment / Justice System	Legal Aid Analysis Framework (LAAF)
Access to information / Disinformation / Media	Information and Risks: A Protection Approach to Information Ecosystems
Food Security	PAF adaptation for Food Security actors
Intersectoral collaboration / Data	Protection Cluster Harmonized Information Needs Databank
Inclusion	Age and Disability Inclusion Matrix
Intersectoral collaboration	Protection Analysis Training Package (IRC)

5.6 Protection Risk Assessment

A PRA is an operational tool that helps to identify protection risks relevant to other clusters to support sector specific or integrated response and strategies to mitigate these risks. This exercise can assist organisations, agencies and clusters to reflect upon and ensure efforts to directly reduce or mitigate vulnerabilities and/or increase capacities of affected population that increase their exposure to protection risks.

This can guide identification of specific actions and inform to ensure that activities do not increase protection risks (Do No Harm), inclusive of GBV and PSEA, and that appropriate mitigating measures are adopted.

At an operational level, a protection risk assessment exercise offers a practical means to apply the protection analysis provided by the Protection Cluster towards operational decision making. Linking protection risk analysis to operations allows humanitarian actors to meet their commitments, ranging from the fundamental of do harm to providing a pathway to operationalising the Centrality of Protection.

Protection Risk Assessments – A Flexible Tool for Reflection and Planning

When can a PRA be conducted?

A PRA can be used by any cluster (or partner) at any stage in the humanitarian programme cycle and to reflect on specific implementation actions. A PRA should be done as part of strategic planning processes (HRP and Cluster Response Strategy development), for use by the Cluster and Cluster members. In addition, a PRA can be done, for any specific activity that has protection concerns.

A PRA done as part of strategic planning processes aims to identify protection risks relevant to the Cluster response that is planned, and to put into place approaches to mitigate these risks. It should be shared with Cluster partners to support analysis for their activities planning and reflected in the Cluster HRP chapter and Cluster Response Strategy.

Who should it be done by?

The relevant Cluster coordination team should prepare a PRA matrix, in consultation and with inputs from Cluster members, in alignment with GPC protection analysis guidance.

What should it contain?

A PRA matrix is straightforward and should be operational. List each Cluster activity – either the Cluster activities in the HRP, or activities that will be undertaken for a specific response. For each activity, include:

- **Protection Risk:** What are the key protection risks beneficiaries or humanitarians may be exposed to through this activity's implementation?
- **Likelihood:** What is the likelihood of this risk occurring?
- **Impact**: What would be the level of impact on beneficiaries and/or humanitarian workers?
- **Mitigating Measure:** What are ways we could reduce the risk or weaken its impact?
- **Monitoring**: How can we monitor this risk?
- **Resources Required:** What resources, if any, would be required to mitigate and/or monitor the risk?
- **Acceptable Level of Risk:** Is this an acceptable level of risk? Do we go forward with the activity?

It is critical that the PRA is coherent with the Protection Cluster tools to identify and monitor protection risks, to not create duplicative process, streamline the IM mechanisms and contribute to the ongoing efforts on joined-up protection analysis. The GPC can support with guidance, examples and specific technical support.

5.7 Key Resources and Tools

Title	Type	Language	Year
IASC Statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action	Statement	ENG, FRA, ARA	2013
IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action	Policy Document	ENG, FRA, ARA, ESP	2016
Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy	Review	ENG, FRA, ESP, ARA, RUS	2022

IASC Centrality of Protection Action Plan 2023-2025	Action Plan	ENG	2024
IASC Report: The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action 2022	Annual Report	ENG	2023
GPC Provisional Guidance Note on HCT Protection Strategy	Guidance Document	ENG, ESP, FRA	2016
The Centrality of Protection: Practical Steps for Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams	Guidance Document	ENG	2016
The Centrality of Protection: Questions and Answers	FAQs	ENG	*Due to be updated 2025*
Benchmarks for HCT Collective Implementation of the IASC Policy	Guidance Document	ENG	2025
IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action - Aide Memoire	Aide Memoire	ENG	2025
Examples of HCT Protection Strategies	Strategy	ENG *Upon Request*	-
Protection Cluster Support to HCT Advocacy Efforts	Examples	ENG *Upon request*	2025
Protection Risks Explanatory Note	Guidance Document	ENG, ESP, FRA, ARA	2024
Protection Risks Assessment Matrix Example [CCCM]	Matrix	ENG	
Inter Cluster Protection Risk Assessment Tool [Ethiopia]	Guidance Document	ENG	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 • AAP • MHPSS • PSEA • Protection Mainstreaming
Chapter 12: Understanding Protection Programmatic Approaches and Interventions	• Locally Led Responses • Cash and Protection • Community Based Protection • Humanitarian Negotiations • Case Management • Anti-Trafficking • Service Mapping and Referrals • Mobile and Rapid Protection • Legal Aid, Law and Policy Responses