



Global Protection Cluster

2025

GLOBAL PROTECTION FORUM REPORT

What's Next? Protection in Prioritised Humanitarian Action



Introduction

The 2025 Global Protection Forum took place from **November 10 to 14, 2025**. Organized by the Global Protection Cluster (GPC), in collaboration with a broad network of partners, the forum serves as a platform for dialogue, learning, and collaboration on critical protection issues.

Through six virtual events, the forum created a platform for protection partners, field practitioners, donors, Member States, academics, and others to discuss protection priorities and emerging trends.

To ensure accessibility and inclusivity, simultaneous interpretation in **Arabic, French, and Spanish** enabled active participation from field colleagues and local actors worldwide.

Participation and Reach

The forum recorded strong participation, with an average of **250 participants per session** and a cumulative attendance of 1,600 across 113 countries, reflecting the broad reach and engagement of the forum. The opening session of the Forum brought together nearly 500 participants.

Registrations surpassed 5,700 globally, with Sub-Saharan Africa being the most represented region, accounting for 47% of all registrations, followed by Europe (22%) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (11.6%). Several countries stood out with significant engagement, including Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Switzerland, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Colombia, Mali, Nigeria and Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPT)

The forum drew a diverse range of participants, reflecting the multi-stakeholder nature of global protection efforts, with:

- 35.7% from international NGOs

- 28.3% from international organisations or UN agencies
- 22.4% from local NGOs
- 4.5% from government
- 1.5% Red Cross and Red Crescent
- And the remaining were independent/consultants (3.4%), academia (1.2%), the private sector (0.2%) and other (2.3%).

This broad representation underscores the collaborative nature of the forum, bringing together voices from various sectors to discuss the future of protection.

Special Focus: What's Next? Protection in Prioritised Humanitarian Action

The theme of this year's Global Protection Forum, *What's Next? Protection in Prioritised Humanitarian Action*, sought to address the evolving challenges and opportunities faced by Protection Clusters, practitioners and affected communities in 2025. Against a backdrop of funding cuts and increasingly 'hyper-prioritised' humanitarian responses, and as humanitarian crises are marked by rising violence against civilian populations, including women and children, and growing disregard for international law and humanitarian principles, this theme underscored the critical need to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action.

The Forum helped analyse current trends in protection risks and examine the main threats faced by communities, with particular attention to some of the most challenging crises. It further considered how protection and the voices of affected populations and local actors is included and prioritized in these responses, and what is required to strengthen this.

Programme

- **Session 1:** Threats, Risks and Needs: A Global Overview of Protection Trends and Protection of Civilians' Efforts in 2025
- **Session 2:** Advancing Protection in Prioritized Humanitarian Action
- **Session 3:** Protection and Technology: For Better and Worse. How Advancements in Technology are changing the Protection Space
- **Session 4:** Food Security and Protection Sectors: Working Together to Reduce the Protection Risks that drive Needs
- **Session 5:** Voices in Action: Affected Populations at the Forefront of Decision-Making
- **Session 6:** Justice as Protection: Reaffirming Rights-Based Commitments to Humanitarian Action and Beyond

***Disclaimer:** The following notes are a summary of the discussion. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the GPC or other panel members, but we warmly welcome the spectrum of opinions across the Protection Community.*

In this report summary, we have aimed to capture the breadth of input, and the spirit of the discussion. While comments are not attributed to any specific panellist in these notes, the words and ideas come from the participants. You are encouraged to watch the recordings of each session, to directly learn from these experts. You will find information on each of the panellists at the end of every session summary.

10 NOV 2025
14:00 to 15:30 CEST

Threats, Risks and Needs: A Global Overview of Protection Trends and Protection of Civilians' Efforts in 2025

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Session 1: Threats, Risks and Needs: A Global Overview of Protection, Trends and Protection of Civilians' Efforts in 2025

Monday, 10 November – Recording [here](#)

In 2025, civilians continue to face unprecedented protection challenges driven by armed conflict, climate-related crises, political instability, and shrinking humanitarian space. Despite growing recognition of protection as a central pillar of humanitarian action, violations of international humanitarian and human rights law remain widespread and accountability elusive. The opening session of the Forum set the tone for the entire week. The session included a global overview of protection trends and highlighted the persistence and evolution of threats and resulting protection risks across crises. Through a panel discussion with experts, the session explored the challenges to upholding international law and protecting civilians amid complex and protracted conflicts, while identifying opportunities for collective action and accountability.

Overview of protection trends in 2025

In a year marked by severe funding cuts, the [Humanitarian Reset](#) and highly constrained humanitarian responses; protection risks – including violence against civilians, gender-based violence, forced recruitment, movement restrictions, and widespread disregard for international law – continue to drive most crises. The [2025 Global Protection Update](#) illustrates how an estimated 395 million people, mostly women and children, are exposed to serious protection risks. This global protection crisis challenges operational responses and political accountability.

Reaffirming strong commitments to protection

As part of its opening remarks, Sweden emphasized its strong commitment to protection as a core pillar of humanitarian action, highlighting how reducing risks of violence, threats, and abuse is central to *Sida*'s new Humanitarian Strategy and longstanding engagement. Through strategic partnerships, support to system-wide processes, and co-leading the Protection Donor Group (PDG) with Switzerland, Sweden continues to advocate for protection to remain at the heart of the Humanitarian Reset. Against the backdrop of rising needs and shrinking resources, Sweden stressed that protection is lifesaving, cost-effective, and essential to dignity, and prevents future humanitarian needs. It underscored the critical role of humanitarian coordinators and senior leadership, including the ERC and IASC Principles, in prioritizing protection and upholding humanitarian principles. Recent *Sida* discussions reaffirmed the importance of compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), protection analysis, and humanitarian diplomacy. Looking ahead, Sweden aims to further strengthen its support to humanitarian partners to ensure protection for crisis-affected people.

OCHA emphasized that protection lies at the heart of humanitarian action and must remain central amid the change and uncertainty in the sector. Drawing on the Humanitarian Reset's four "Ds," OCHA highlighted "Defend" and "Deliver" as key to prioritizing protection: steadfastly upholding humanitarian principles, IHL, and human rights, coupled with coordinated, principled action focused on the protection of women and girls. Protection actors were called to frame their work with courage and boldness. The ERC has made clear, protection must be central to the humanitarian response and cannot be sidelined. OCHA framed the current situation as both a crisis of compliance and a crisis of humanity, citing widespread violations of international law, selective application of legal norms, and increasing fatalities among humanitarian workers. OCHA also noted emerging challenges from new technologies, including cyber operations, AI, and autonomous systems. Urging Member States to use diplomacy, political pressure, responsible arms transfer, and accountability measures; OCHA called for practical, visible action to reduce harm to civilians.

Challenges in upholding international law and protecting civilians in 2025

Norway opened the panel by emphasizing that protection of civilians is a cornerstone of its humanitarian strategy, built on two pillars: respecting and promoting international law, including countering perceived or actual double standards in its implementation; and supporting operational protection responses and advocacy. Norway highlighted its support for a Humanitarian Reset guided by the Centrality of Protection, lean coordination, and localization. It is time to come together, pool resources, and mobilize collective political will to safeguard human dignity and reduce civilian harm. Norway encouraged strong participation in the upcoming Safe Schools Conference in Nairobi to reinforce commitments to protecting children and education.

Key challenges for the compliance with the Geneva Conventions and the protection of civilians, particularly in urban settings

Respect for IHL is in crisis, with widespread violations, such as indiscriminate attacks, destruction of essential infrastructure, and denial of humanitarian access, becoming increasingly normalized. This is not an abstract issue; millions of people are experiencing untold suffering. The purpose of the Geneva Conventions, and IHL, is to protect victims of armed conflict. The rules must be respected to ensure this protective role. Panellists highlighted several challenges that they have witnessed in 2025. One key concern is the evident disrespect for IHL, as well as the complacency in the face of these violations. Blatant disregard for IHL is now met with silence, denial, or a form of tacit acceptance. Such normalization cannot be accepted. Observable double standards in what is perceived as a violation further weaken confidence in the law. Another major challenge is linked to permissive interpretations of IHL, including the reclassification of civilian objects as military objects or claims that cyber operations are unregulated, undermining the law's protective purpose.

Concerns were raised by several panellists at the trend of States withdrawing from key treaties such as the Rome Statute, the Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and other arms control framework, signalling dangerous backsliding and a broader erosion of humanitarian norms. When States withdraw from these commitments or fail to implement them, the protection of civilians – as a whole – is undermined. Such action risk reversing decades of collective progress made by States and civil society. While past efforts were dedicated to building a more protective legal framework; today, the challenge lies in holding it together.

Urban warfare continues to inflict predictable and preventable civilian harm. Yet military practices have not evolved to adequately protect civilians. The widespread use of heavy, wide area use weapons in urban settings leads to civilian deaths and injuries, and the destruction of essential infrastructure. Damage to water systems, hospitals, energy grids, schools, and housing reverberates across all aspects of life. Survivors face lifelong physical, psychological, and socioeconomic challenges. Contamination by explosive ordnance prevents safe returns and restricts access to farmland and livelihoods. All of this creates long term barriers to recovery.

Without decisive action from States, today's brutality risks becoming the baseline for conflicts tomorrow. Humanitarian actors must stand up for IHL's protective framework and insist on its capacity to make a tangible difference for people affected by armed conflict. Some hope can be found in the actions of certain States and civil society actors that continue to use established international legal mechanisms and turn to domestic courts to uphold the law.

The disproportionate impact of conflicts on children and women

There is a historic deterioration in the protection of children affected by war, 2024 marked the worst year on record. One in five children, around 520 million, now live near conflict. Nearly 42,000 grave violations were verified, a 30% increase compared to the previous year. Over the past decade, the number of children living in conflict areas has increased by 60%, while the number of children exposed to grave violations has increased by 370%.

The longer a conflict lasts, the more likely children are to be exposed to grave violations, and violence against children is increasingly used as a tactic of war. In addition, the international accountability system, including the UN Children and Armed Conflict mechanism, is under significant strain. At the same time, weapons continue to be exported to parties listed for violations. In terms of operational responses, child protection funding has been drastically reduced. In many contexts, case management, psychosocial support, and monitoring activities have been suspended abruptly. As a result, there are fewer actors on the ground to document violations, fewer safe spaces for children, and less accountability for those who violate the rules of war. Children are not only disproportionately affected by conflict; they are also being failed by a system that was meant to protect them.

Women have been particularly affected by the conflict, as illustrated by panellists speaking about the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT), as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In [Gaza](#), women and girls face extremely high fatality rates and mass amputations. One panellist described a "reproductive genocide", where maternity wards, hospitals, and fertility clinics are targeted and essential reproductive and infant-care supplies, such as incubators and baby formula, are blocked. In the [West Bank](#), women and girls face risks of child marriage, school dropout, and displacement. While families try to protect their daughters by sending them outside these areas, girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, including rape at checkpoints. Bedouin women and girls are particularly affected, with many belonging to the 46 communities displaced over the past two years. Across the territory, sexual violence emerges as a pervasive issue, documented in detention centres, at checkpoints, during home raids, and in interactions with settlers. These violations have profound social and economic consequences for women and girls, including loss of education and livelihoods, compounded by social stigma and the absence of accountability.

In the [DRC](#), sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. For a Congolese woman, even routine activities such as going to the market or collecting firewood can lead to a risk of aggression, kidnapping or exposure to violence. Since the beginning of the year, the GBV community has documented 900,000 violations in just two provinces of the DRC. Despite being limited in terms of means and logistical capacity, local women-led organizations continue to provide medical, psychosocial, and legal support, remaining close to communities to ensure assistance in extremely volatile contexts.

The failure of the protection system and a crisis of accountability

The protection system is failing to meet its fundamental commitments, with Gaza, the West Bank, and Haiti illustrating this. The patterns of violations in Gaza, including atrocities, war crimes, and "genocidal actions" are well documented. Communities in the West Bank are experiencing the severe consequences of a system characterized by violence discrimination, oppression, and deprivation by the State. Settler violence is increasingly becoming an integral part of this coercive environment. Similarly, the situation in Haiti constitutes a profound failure of the international community.

Populations are facing extreme gang violence, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and widespread deprivation of access to health, food, and water.

These situations reflect a broader lack of accountability within the international community and a deepening crisis of multilateralism. The challenge is not solely a lack of financial resources, but also a retreat from upholding humanitarian principles and a shift away from a normative approach. In this context, the Humanitarian Reset is a huge opportunity to work differently and to recalibrate approaches. The quality of analysis undertaken, the engagement with local partners, human rights defenders, youth, and grassroots communities, and particularly women, is key to leveraging and mobilizing existing resources and keeping the centrality of protection.

Opportunities in upholding international law and protecting civilians in 2025

Translating the EWIPA declaration into action

It is difficult to be optimistic in light of everything that has been described, yet some progress has been made with the adoption of the Political Declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA). The outcomes of the first international conference in Oslo in 2024 already provided indications that States are moving forward. The challenge now is to move from commitments on paper to concrete and measurable protection outcomes for civilians.

Several important opportunities have emerged. The first is the adoption of national EWIPA policies and corresponding changes in military doctrine. States that have already endorsed the Political Declaration now have a clear pathway to translate these commitments into national practice, including integrating civilian harm mitigation into rules of engagement, reviewing weapon selection policies, and institutionalizing post-strike assessments. These are practical steps that can significantly reduce harm on the ground, saving lives, as well as protecting critical infrastructure.

A second opportunity lies in strengthening civilian harm tracking and evidence. Data plays a critical role in measuring impact and supporting accountability. If protection outcomes are to be measured effectively, systematic data collection is needed on civilian casualties, infrastructure damage, explosive ordnance contamination, and the long-term impacts on essential services.

The Declaration also opens space for constructive dialogue with armed forces. Militaries are increasingly recognizing the humanitarian, political, and operational costs of high levels of civilian harm. This recognition creates a strategic entry point for technical exchanges, capacity-building initiatives, and joint efforts to develop and implement harm-mitigation practices.

Community-led protection efforts in the DRC and oPT

Community-led initiatives in the DRC have demonstrated significant impact in protection and resilience. Examples shared include local paralegals, mediators, and women's groups trained in community mediation. These actors are able to document violations, refer survivors to appropriate services, and gather evidence for courts. Safe spaces for women and girls represent another key initiative, playing a fundamental role in strengthening community resilience. Participants engage in group therapy, vocational training, and rights awareness activities. These spaces are managed and appropriated by the community, fostering a sense of ownership and sustainability. Community dialogue groups, including those for men, provide additional opportunities for engagement. These groups are supported by awareness-raising plans and activities focused on peaceful conflict resolution, further reinforcing social cohesion and community-led protection.

In the oPT, many local organizations have been leading extensive efforts to document violations and use this for international advocacy purposes. However, it is difficult to discuss these efforts without acknowledging the sanctions imposed on such organizations and the persistent lack of accountability. Some organizations working with the International Criminal Court to pursue accountability and convictions for war crimes and crimes against humanity have faced direct targeting and restrictions.

One panellist highlighted how her organisation has been documenting violations and sharing this data to support reports issued by the Commission of Inquiry. These testimonies and documentation have also been shared with the UN Special Rapporteur on the oPT and other relevant special rapporteurs.

Many women have taken their own initiatives to address these issues. One notable women-led initiative focuses on recovering the withheld bodies of Palestinians. These women have spearheaded advocacy work to return these bodies and obtain information about Palestinians being held in Israeli custody. Despite these efforts, the lack of accountability has fostered impunity and enabled ongoing violence, undermining any local initiative aimed at providing protection for Palestinians.

The CAAC agenda: political will, sustained engagement and negotiation with parties to conflict

Every day, children, families, and local communities demonstrate extraordinary courage and resilience. Evidence shows that when children are safeguarded, provided with psychosocial support, and able to return to school even during conflict, outcomes improve. Change is possible where there is political will and sustained engagement. The UN Children and Armed Conflict Framework demonstrates that negotiation with parties to conflict can lead to measurable improvements. In countries where action plans are in place, there has been a documented decrease in violations against children. Similarly, the Safe Schools Declaration provides an example of leadership across regions. Over 120 States have endorsed the Declaration, and many have integrated it into military training and national policy. In countries that have implemented or endorsed the Declaration, attacks on schools have decreased, demonstrating the effectiveness of these protective measures.

Complementarity of human rights and humanitarian action

It is important to leverage human rights mechanisms. Accountability tools, such as mechanisms to engage the responsibility of companies and States, must be used to support respect for international law. National and local actors should be central to these efforts. We should also continue building synergies and embracing the complementarity of mandates across the humanitarian and human rights sectors. Systematic collection, sharing, and escalation of information are critical to ensure these mechanisms function as effective vehicles for the respect of IHL/IHRL.

The Global IHL Initiative: A momentum for political commitment

The Global IHL Initiative was launched last year by the ICRC together with six States to galvanize political commitment to uphold IHL. To date, 91 States have joined the initiative. The first phase of consultations engaged approximately 130 States through a series of meetings. A progress report was released a few weeks ago, highlighting key messages and priorities:

- Upholding IHL is essential to reduce suffering and to achieve lasting peace in armed conflict.
- IHL application must centre on protecting those affected by war.
- Respect for IHL must be treated as a core political and legal obligation.
- Effective national systems to implement and enforce IHL, including to investigate, prosecute, and punish serious violations, are vital to prevent further violations and ensure accountability.

The progress report also presents concrete proposals for States to strengthen compliance with IHL. These include updated military training, stronger national accountability mechanisms, identification of risk factors that increase the likelihood of violations, and measures to address these risks proactively. A global high-level meeting is scheduled for next year to consolidate recommendations and convert the initiative's momentum into actionable commitments.

Concluding remarks

States are the primary duty-bearers under IHL. Their leadership is critical in fostering a culture of compliance and accountability. Commitments must extend beyond words, manifesting in operational behaviour, investigations into violations, support for humanitarian access, and political action,

beginning with implementation at home. States also have a duty to call on allies to cease violations when they occur. Supporting independent humanitarian action, including ensuring safe access and protection for humanitarian personnel, is a fundamental expression of commitment to IHL.

Moderator and Speakers

- Josep Herreros, Global Protection Cluster Coordinator
- Anna Rahm, Deputy Humanitarian Director / Head of Unit, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
- Ramesh Rajasingham, Representative in Geneva, OCHA
- Pierre Apraxine, Head of Protection of the Civilian Population Unit, ICRC
- Abdoul Aziz Thiouye, Deputy Director Global Operations Division, OHCHR
- Alma Taslidzan, Disarmament and Protection of Civilians Advocacy Manager, Humanity and Inclusion
- Gunvor Knag Fylkesnes, Director of Advocacy, Save the Children Norway
- Kifaya Khraim, International Advocacy Officer at the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (Palestine)
- Sandrine Lusumba, Executive Director, SOFEPADI (Democratic Republic of Congo)
- Cathrine Andersen, Special Representative for the Protection of Civilians, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (moderator)

Resources

- GPC, Global Protection Update, November 2025. Available [here](#)
- Fifth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration. Available [here](#)
- Save the Children, Stop the War on Children: Security for whom? (2025). Available [here](#)
- UNODA, Second International Conference on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA). Available [here](#)
- Humanity and Inclusion, Implementing the Humanitarian Commitments of the EWIPA Political Declaration. Available [here](#)
- HI, How Can Healthcare Access be Strengthened in Settings where Explosive Weapons are being Used? Available [here](#)
- HI, Saving Lives in Conflicts: Risk Education and Conflict Preparedness to Protect Civilians in EWIPA Settings. Available [here](#)
- Humanity and Inclusion, Lives at the Intersections. Available [here](#)
- ICRC, Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment on International Humanitarian Law: Progress Report, Available [here](#)

11 NOV 2025
14:00 to 15:30 CEST

Advancing Protection in Prioritized Humanitarian Action

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Session 2: Advancing Protection in Prioritized Humanitarian Action

Tuesday, 11 November – Recording [here](#)

As we gather for this Forum, we are hearing terrible and horrific stories of people who survived the capture of El Fasher. These stories are unbearable. We see once more, while food assistance, shelter and medical care is important, protection from violence is the first and foremost need of people affected by conflict. Protection from violence is lifesaving. This is why we discuss Centrality of Protection and strategies to prevent violations of IHL and IHRL, and why the Humanitarian Reset places protection at its core. The [Aide Memoire for the IASC Protection Policy \(2024\)](#) is our most valuable tool. It requires Humanitarian Country Teams to work together to understand protection risks faced by people in conflict and disaster and seek to mitigate and prevent them. It offers practical guidance on how to implement this policy. It reminds donors of the instruments they have at hand, from protection advocacy to funding. When protection is well done, it shrinks needs and paves the way for peace and reconciliation.

This session considered protection in a world where we are forced to hyper-prioritise humanitarian action because of the devastating funding cuts that have hit the work of so many. This session reflected on the reality of the impact of these cuts, and the efforts made to ensure protection remains central within a situation of dramatic funding shortfalls. Collectively we have received \$11.2bn USD in humanitarian funding. This is less than half than the same time last year. We are coping with less than half the resources we had before, when we know that crises continue to grow. Thousands of people have lost their jobs, hundreds of offices have been closed, and most importantly millions of people who rely on us for that last line of assistance can no longer rely on this, because we simply do not have the money that is needed to deliver. Within this environment, we have had to have excruciating discussions on who we target and what can we provide to them. Focusing on lifesaving assistance also means providing the best and most dignified assistance, and that means that protection must be central to every effort we make globally.

A coordination view of the hyper-prioritisation process

One panellist shared reflection from their role as a Cluster Coordinator in Ukraine; sharing how they navigated prioritization and reflecting on risks and opportunities for the protection response. Looking back at the year, it has been defined by prioritization efforts. These efforts have not been easy. They involved early 2025 prioritization efforts, a cluster “fit for purpose review” and the 2026 Ukraine HNRP planning exercise, which was approached through an innovative issue-based approach. The panellist shared two risks of the protection response faced in the prioritization exercises. The first risk was that protection would be excluded due to a misunderstanding of the protection operational approach. The protection community was challenged to provide further clarity and articulate the value they have for

the people who suffer violence. This forced protection actors to work with counterparts and allies – including partners, authorities, and other clusters – to come up with simplified and basic explanations on the impact of protection. Protection actors had to “give up” some of the more technical jargon to be clear. The second risk was that the Ukraine issue-based approach would overshadow cluster work or be hard to work with, but the reality was that the Protection Cluster was given a lot of flexibility, and the issue-based approach provided an opportunity for the cluster to embed Centrality of Protection within each issue. The Ukraine response also applied a people-based approach to targeting, and the cluster was able to successfully engage to ensure the inclusion of people living in severity 3 locations within the prioritised response. This involved protection actors being innovative and clear on why a protection response was needed for these people. Each risk became an opportunity for protection actors to more clearly explain their value.

From the DR Congo (DRC), a HCT member shared how they used Centrality of Protection as a tool to frame prioritisation efforts. In DRC, Centrality of Protection has been a long-standing collective priority, and there is a clear understanding of the role the conflict plays in driving other needs, such as food insecurity. When the response had to hyper-prioritise, one of the first steps was to think how it would build on the Centrality of Protection strategy that was in place, and how to work better with local actors on this. The hyper-prioritisation also came at a time of significant context changes in DRC, including in terms of territorial control, access, displacement settings and forced return movements. These changes had to be responded to in the context of collapsed resources. The DRC response was almost 70% reliant on a major humanitarian donor that withdrew from the response. The commitment the DRC response has to the protection response is visible in the funding that remains. While the hyper-prioritised HNRP is funded at 30% (on FTS), protection is funded at 60%. There is also very strong protection field presence, particularly in the GBV response (with over 400 GBV partners), who work to ensure a strong recognition of the gender and protection dimensions of the crisis.

The Localization Working Group in Colombia was created following the flagship initiative, and the engagement of local actors was important in interagency strategic discussions. Colombia used to have two coordination structures: one humanitarian (cluster) and one focused on mixed migration. These two structures have now become local coordination teams, contributing to a less complex/simplified coordination architecture. They are co-led by national NGOs. There is recognition that local organisation knowledge and experience enable a more relevant and effective response. Local organisations are the entry point for populations affected by crises (Venezuelan migration at the border, floods, and conflict). At the sub-national level, there are 16 coordination spaces in Colombia. These spaces were traditionally led by UN agencies and international NGOs, rather than local NGOs. Since the flagship initiative these spaces are led by a national NGO. Adequate funding and support are essential for national NGOs to be able to assume coordination roles. Coordination and information management positions are very important; local organisations need resources to support these roles.

From the perspective of Mozambique, a UN Representative reflected on the demand for further integration of humanitarian responses and questioned whether this is the correct approach. He advocated for the importance of specialised services to provide an integrated response. In Mozambique, it was important to adopt joint operational principles and priorities for the wider humanitarian response rooted in Centrality of Protection. There were four points of reflection, and each of which provoked debate: 1) Severity of needs – whether to focus on areas with the highest concentration of need or on areas with fewer people but higher individual risks; 2) Gaps analysis – the important of developing a common understanding of existing gaps, where to scale up, and what to scale up; 3) Efficiency and impact – reflecting on which services are most critical to provide because they deliver the highest impact; 4) Durability and sustainability – recognising the critical importance of strengthening local and community-based systems. Additional challenges included donor-driven priority earmarking, which does not always align with cluster prioritisation. Clusters are rarely involved in these earmarking decisions and are therefore required to coordinate a response based on different decision-making processes. A further challenge is maintaining donor engagement over time. In

Mozambique, where the response has been ongoing for more than eight years, sustaining attention and interest remains difficult.

How are partners adapting to the re-prioritisation?

Participants took the opportunity to discuss their experiences of internal prioritisation processes, triggered by the collapse in funding, which took place in tandem to coordination system level prioritisation. One INGO CD based in Myanmar reflected on how this has been very challenging. The financial cuts impacted funding for direct response implementation and for coordination positions that are supported by this INGO. In Myanmar, the cluster took the responsibility of cluster level prioritisation, allowing partners to focus on their programmes. There was a massive earthquake at the end of March, that demanded an urgent and large-scale response to support the affected communities. As an organisation, and as a cluster member, this meant reprioritising yet again. While additional funding was made available, it did take time for this to come through. INGOs can sometimes cover this gap but it is harder for local partners. As an example, this INGO, had to pause an initiative to support national NGO to take a co-coordination lead role at a subnational cluster. The effort to balance organisational prioritisation with system-wide prioritisation demands required strong communication and information sharing. In the end, everyone was caught in the same whirlwind, impacting all actors and all sectors, although the timing was different between organisations and agencies. This demanded an openness and sharing with counterparts to collectively assess the impact of the funding situation.

Returning to DRC nine months after aid cuts partners have adapted where they can and have worked to safeguard what they could of the specialised responses. The GBV response was very heavily impacted, from the women led community response to the sudden cut in the provision of post rape exposure kits. DRC has over 80,000 reported cases of conflict related sexual violence a year, and the sudden loss of access to a response is devastating. This triggered UNFPA stepping in as the provider of last response, and other donors to address this gap. In DRC, there was a need to reflect on how to preserve the skills that had developed over 20 years. Coordination was very important, using the Call-to-Action roadmap. It became important to focus resource mobilisation efforts on very specific actions, and to adapt to the diverse donor base. Rather than less coordination, more coordination became necessary. It was necessary to rebuild referral pathways between clusters, as some partners no longer existed or had lost funding. It also became important to consider adaptable programme models, such as cash-based programming and the use of one-stop centres. Ongoing training remains essential, as capacity-building is a continuous effort to ensure that services are adapted to evolving needs.

From Syria, a local organisation working to mitigate the risk of trafficking, noted that protection risks go up as humanitarian resources reduce. People face increased exposure to violence and exploitation, and harmful coping mechanisms. From their perspective, certain forms of exploitation, such as trafficking, are becoming less visible due to a decline in funding. Continuing to protect communities in this challenging context therefore requires adapting in different ways. This includes strengthening integrated protection across sectors by linking referrals to other responses, such as livelihoods and cash support in order to connect people to immediate and longer-term assistance. It also involves centring community protection actors and volunteers in identifying risks early, whether related to violence, unsafe movement or recruitment, and connecting individuals to services as early as possible, with service mapping provided by the Protection Cluster playing an important role. In addition, local partners work closely with the cluster system and government led efforts to implement projects while ensuring that issues such as trafficking are not overlooked. The localisation agenda is an important opportunity, but it must go beyond participation. Local actors are closest to affected communities and best placed to prevent situations escalating., and multi-year funding is critical to supporting local partners.

Looking ahead – what have we learned and what are the opportunities

Reflecting on the lessons learned, one panellist shared several key insights. First, it is important to remain nimble and avoid being overly technical in order to ensure that protection responses are linked to overall strategic planning and multi-sector responses. In Ukraine, the thematic approach has allowed protection actors to describe their work around specific scenarios. It has also been important to reflect on protection interventions that others might consider “softer,” such as advocacy, capacity building, and the provision of information on services and rights. These interventions are particularly challenged in a resource-scarce environment, so it is essential to explain their importance clearly and demonstrate how they contribute to efficient and impactful responses. Quality responses cannot be sacrificed, even when resources are limited. Second, it is crucial to engage with transition processes much earlier, as relevance is always tied to understanding what services are already available and how protection can complement them. Finally, building on the strengths of the protection response is key; feeding into the Ukraine issue-based approach and capitalising on strong accountability-to-affected-populations mechanisms, such as IDP councils and specialised areas. Ongoing discussions about the key risks and who they affect remain critical to ensuring effective programming.

The role of local NGOs in protection response must be recognized as strategic partners in the design and implementation of the response, through to accountability and reporting, rather than just as implementers. In Colombia, the proximity of local NGOs to affected populations allows for a deep understanding of the context, identification of risks and needs, and design of protection strategies to local realities. Local NGOs build trust with communities. This legitimacy should enable them to play a strategic role. We need flexible, long-term resources, provided directly to local NGOs, through direct funding mechanisms that are less bureaucratic. There must be recognition of community-based protection and self-managed protection initiatives. Strengthening the role of local NGOs also involves participating in international forums and being given space alongside humanitarian actors.

From the perspective of an INGO Country Director, the Humanitarian Reset is still very much ongoing. Two key lessons stand out. First, it is crucial that the HCT and coordination team jointly ensure that protection remains a priority. In Myanmar, this confirmation came early, providing a solid foundation to keep protection at the centre of discussions. Second, regarding the merger of the Protection Cluster and AoRs, receiving guidance at the global level has been helpful, allowing national-level actors to determine how to implement the merger while ensuring that the response continues without disruption. Recommendations include that HCT leadership explicitly recognise protection as both a specialised response and an overarching goal. The Protection Cluster should also reflect on how revised coordination systems can ensure that local partners’ requests for empowerment and representation are heard. In Myanmar, discussions are ongoing on subnational coordination models, including area-based approaches. Protection Clusters are encouraged to consider how protection issues are addressed within any revised coordination structure.

A panellist reflected on the context of growing needs alongside a deteriorating financial situation and cautioned against an over-focus on material assistance. This overemphasis risks overlooking non-material support, such as protection and community mechanisms. Issues such as mental health or housing, land, and property can end up at the very bottom of priorities, even though their clear link to violence and conflict is well understood. Protection actors are often effective at engaging those already committed to protection, but they can struggle to convince others of its importance. Protection is relevant from day one to the end of a response, but it is essential to bring everyone on board to ensure that protection remains fundamental across the humanitarian-development continuum. While adapting to the local context is necessary, it cannot be used as an excuse to maintain “business as usual,” and our relationships with local actors must also evolve beyond standard practice.

Concluding remarks

A clear message throughout is that making protection central is not a one-off effort, but a commitment that must be constantly reaffirmed in every humanitarian response. Many aspects of protection work

cannot be measured in the same way as items that can be loaded onto a truck. Protection is for everyone and encompasses a wide range of activities. It is a committed feature of the Humanitarian Reset, including the role of local actors as decision-makers driving responses. In this time of hyper-prioritisation, when humanitarian actors are operating with only half of the overall funding, it is essential to come together for difficult conversations on how best to use these resources. Protection is central to these discussions, and protection actors have a responsibility to communicate the value of this work clearly and simply. The Protection Cluster has continued to advocate for the importance of protection, even when some organisations internally felt in disarray. Donors have been urged to ensure flexibility in their support, to prioritise responses driven by the needs of people on the ground, and to avoid earmarking practices that could constrain organisations from acting in the best interests of people in crisis.

Moderator and Speakers

- Dominik Stillhart, Ambassador, Head of Humanitarian Aid, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
- Xavier Creach, UNHCR Representative, Mozambique
- Noemi Dalmonte, UNFPA Deputy Representative, Democratic Republic of Congo
- Kasia Kot-Majewska, Protection Cluster Coordinator, Ukraine
- Elise Ponson, NRC Country Director, Myanmar
- Pedro Niño Sequera, Executive Director, Fundacion Apoyar, Colombia
- Mossaab Steif, Senior Protection Officer, IYD, Syria
- Dr. Daniel Machuor Arok, Communities in Need Aid (CINA), South Sudan
- Gemma Connell, Chief Strategic Prioritization & Practices Branch, OCHA Geneva (moderator)

12 NOV 2025
14:00 to 15:30 CEST

Protection and Technology: For Better and Worse. How Advancements in Technology are Changing the Protection Space

Session 3: Protection and Technology: For Better and Worse. How Advancements in Technology are Changing the Protection Space

Wednesday 12 November – Recording [here](#)

Digital technologies are an integral part of contemporary life, including the daily lives of people affected by armed conflict, other situations of violence, or humanitarian settings such as displacement. New and digital technologies are reshaping the conduct of warfare and how protection actors respond to humanitarian emergencies. Digital technologies offer the *potential* for dynamic and inclusive responses, the scaling of community engagement, and the enabling of people's resilience by improving their access to services. At the same time, these changes in society and in the protection operational landscape comes with new or amplified protection risks.

This thematic session is the first Global Protection Cluster session to focus on the range of uses of new and digital technologies, and the role these technologies play in shaping the protection environment and response. Panellists outlined the importance of speaking about digital risks and accounting for changes in operational realities. Armed conflict and situations of violence are increasingly digitised, and people are increasingly dependent on being connected. Many of the tools humanitarian actors rely on are digital tools. With digital technologies, humanitarians also risk becoming vectors for harm. The ICRC notes specific global trends in digital risks, including the spread of harmful information (hate speech/disinformation); connectivity disruption (intentional and non-intentional), such as internet blackouts; cyberoperations and cyber activities; risks enabled by AI agents integrated into military and police operations; and other technological developments, such as the use of drones. These trends create new situations of violence and generate areas that require a protection response. There are also new actors to influence, such as cyber actors and technology companies.

Impact of technology and protection in practice

The experience of Sudan

Panellists shared experiences of the use of technology in their areas of operational focus. One panellist discussed how digital tools are important to local responders to share information, coordinate and importantly bring money into Sudan through mobile money transfers. Mutual aid groups, student initiatives, women organisations, community kitchens and Emergency Room Responders share information on the situation and organise interventions such as evacuations using digital tools. Up to 90% of resources come from diaspora and others who use mobile banking to navigate the national cash crisis. Actors that usually work on the edge of the formal humanitarian system can use technology to lead responses to their communities.

In Sudan, parties to the conflict also use access to internet for control and the surveillance of civilian activities. 'Online' is a key front in information wars, with bot farms and international PR firms also

engaged in the conflict. Atrocity videos are used to intimidate local communities, while power and internet outages reinforce existing inequalities. Ungoverned internet space creates opportunities for the identification and exploitation of victims. As parties to the conflict compete to control internet space, information that could support community self-protection is driven underground into encrypted spaces, as people seek to avoid arrest and harassment. AI and content manipulation have been used to fuel ethnic divisions and spread misinformation, including false information about aid workers. As one panellist noted, “when the lights go out then atrocities happen” highlighting how internet shutdowns limit people’s ability to raise the alarm. Such disruptions also make it difficult for communities to imagine a pathway to justice if information cannot be safely recorded, such as “the cloud.”

Technology and the GBV response

GBV response actors have adopted digital tools to coordinate between practitioners and to share information on service availability and referral pathways. In Syria, digital tools enabled up to 100 partners to coordinate rapidly during rapidly changing contextual dynamics. Tools such as virtual women and girls’ safe spaces, including *Laaha*, have been adapted in many countries. Virtual models provide an important space where static centres may not be accessible. In locations like Gaza, where civilian infrastructure has been almost completely destroyed, GBV partners have moved to an entirely digital case management system. This shift allows case management providers to work from their phones instead of laptops, which is crucial as many providers are themselves displaced and on the move.

Panellists also discussed the use of AI in humanitarian responses. GBV actors are at the forefront of reflecting on AI-assisted chatbots to support MHPSS services, approaching these tools with caution. A 2025 report identified six challenges: (1) chatbots can go offline or lack capacity to answer questions about abuse; (2) platforms often lack confidentiality, privacy, and consent, as data is frequently used to “improve service”; (3) safety and “do no harm” concerns, including limited accountability safeguards; (4) lack of cultural adaptation; (5) limited survivor-centred and participatory design; and (6) the risk of social isolation if chatbots are used for companionship. It is important to ensure that AI-assisted chatbots are not adopted simply as a response to funding cuts, but rather guided by the principle of “do no harm.”

Digitisation and its impact in Ukraine

From the conduct of hostilities by parties to the conflict to the implementation of the humanitarian response, Ukraine is at the forefront of what is possible in a highly digitised environment. In Ukraine, rolling blackouts of up to 12 hours a day are common. People have access to coordinated and reliable information on when electricity will be available, allowing humanitarians to plan their work and individuals to organise their daily activities. Mobile apps alert people to potential airstrikes, enabling them to make informed decisions for their families and informing humanitarian actors about when and how to conduct operations. Ukraine also has digital identity systems that allow documentation to be restored quickly and provide a way for people to apply for assistance and compensation. Hundreds of thousands of children receive education online or through hybrid models, and the humanitarian response also uses digital safe spaces.

In Ukraine, humanitarians have also observed digital harm affecting children. Messaging apps and online games have become entry points for the conflict-related exploitation of children. Strangers online approach children, promising easy money for seemingly harmless tasks, such as taking photos of military locations or sending coordinates, which can escalate in severity. Children rarely engage in these activities for ideological reasons; the driving factors are usually financial, or they may be blackmailed or coerced by handlers who possess intimate or incriminating photos. This situation is not unique to Ukraine; it reflects a growing global trend. Children’s isolation in conflict, the pressures on families, and the significant mental health challenges faced by children leave them highly vulnerable. For adolescents at risk of conscription, life is uncertain and dominated by fear, making such quick

opportunities difficult to resist. Children are targeted precisely because of their vulnerability. In these cases, it is critical to recognise children as victims, not as perpetrators or terrorists.

The conflict-related use of children is a difficult topic to address, as it does not fit the traditional framework of recruitment. Authorities are implementing prevention measures, but it is important that these are child-friendly, that children are not stigmatised, and that they are not treated as threats to the State or charged under state security frameworks. Ukraine has signed on to the UN Security Council's Children in Armed Conflict Plan, which includes dedicated provisions covering the digital recruitment of children, and significant efforts are being made in this area. It is also important to remain aware that even if the war ends, the mechanisms and tools used to exploit children digitally may continue.

Reflecting on the growing role of AI in humanitarian action

Panellists discussed the emerging role of AI in humanitarian contexts, highlighting two key components: AI within affected communities' environments, and AI used within humanitarian responses. While there is no universally agreed definition of AI, it is most often described as a machine or program performing tasks that would typically require human intelligence. Generative AI carries risks of misinformation, disinformation, and deepfakes, with 99% of deepfakes being pornographic. Predictive analytics use pattern recognition to forecast future outcomes, which can support disaster preparedness, but raises concerns if the data contains bias or creates false confidence. Computer vision, where AI interprets images, can be used to analyse post-disaster landscapes, but the same technology can also facilitate surveillance. Agentic AI, which can take independent action toward goals, presents additional concerns, particularly regarding privacy.

Protection actors need to engage with AI and develop relevant skills. The sector is at a crisis point due to catastrophic funding constraints, creating a risk of a race toward AI deployment as a cost-cutting measure, with potentially serious unintended consequences. At the same time, there is an opportunity for protection actors to promote safer and more inclusive AI. By applying the full range of protection practices, actors can understand the relationship with AI, identify risks throughout the AI lifecycle, and anticipate unintended consequences and trade-offs. For example, if investment is made in AI educational tools but not in teachers, who will serve as the adult a child can turn to in a crisis? There are also concerns about AI and inclusivity. A panellist encouraged caution, noting that current baseline data already has inclusion limitations, meaning that data exclusion and biases can easily be further embedded in AI-driven analysis.

There are growing concerns about the potential use of fully autonomous drones. One panellist noted that while this remains primarily a legal and ethical debate, their practical use is currently very limited. Armed drones, as weapon systems, are subject to the normal rules of IHL, including proportionality, distinction, and precaution. Operationally and politically, drones and autonomous weapons make the use of force easier, as no human is physically present on the battlefield. They are commonly used to survey areas of active conflict. In theory, these tools could improve the protection of civilians by providing greater certainty about attacks and enabling more targeted responses. However, there are significant concerns regarding humanitarian access, as drones can be used to monitor civilian movement and access to humanitarian services. As drones become cheaper and more readily available, there is an urgent need for further regulation, including standards for quality and traceability, in line with other weapons.

Concluding reflections

Humanitarian actors adopting digital technologies may find themselves caught between fear and the risk of missing out. This conversation is particularly challenging at a time when resources are being cut, yet it is critical that we prepare ourselves. While there are significant opportunities in using AI, it is important to be clear-eyed about the risks. There is no such thing as completely safe AI, and it is

legitimate to refuse its use when appropriate. The design, deployment, and use of AI must be grounded in core humanitarian principles, supported by a clear accountability framework. Effective AI governance is needed, including guidance on what staff can and cannot use AI for, as well as the development of protocols and ethical standards. Protection actors must move beyond merely identifying digital risks and ensure that teams are ready to address them. Existing resources, such as Chapter 8 of the ICRC Professional Standards for Protection Work and the SAFE AI project (CDAC), provide valuable guidance for these efforts.

Moderator and Speakers

- Omina Shawkat, Andariya, Sudan
- Paul Asquith, Shabaka, Sudan
- Joelle Rizk, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
- Alice Priddy, Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre
- Verena Bruno, Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR), Syria
- Kaitlin Brush, UNICEF, Ukraine
- Suzy Madigan, Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC Network), Founder of The Machine Race
- Veronique Barbelet, Humanitarian Policy Group/ODI Global (moderator)

Resources

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13 NOV 2025

13:00 to 14:30 CEST



Food Security and Protection Sectors: Working Together to Reduce the Protection Risks that Drive Needs

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Session 4: Food Security and Protection Sectors: Working Together to Reduce the Protection Risks that Drive Needs

Thursday, 13 November – Recording [here](#)

The session explored the Centrality of Protection in practice, with a particular focus on embedding protection within food security responses at both organizational and inter-cluster levels.

Conflict, food insecurity and protection risks

The interlinkages between conflict, food insecurity, and protection are not new, but they are becoming increasingly visible and urgent. Protection risks are driving food insecurity, while food insecurity is generating new protection risks. Conflict and damage to infrastructure and agricultural land lead to food insecurity, as families are forced to flee violence and abandon their livelihoods, people cannot access their land safely, and armed groups may control food distribution. Women and girls may be exposed to exploitation to meet basic needs, and access to food assistance may be deliberately denied. When basic food needs are not met, people are further exposed to violations of their rights, including sexual exploitation and abuse, other forms of gender-based violence, forced displacement, forced conscription, and discrimination.

Centrality of Protection and the Humanitarian Reset

Placing protection at the heart of sectoral responses enables the identification and mitigation of protection risks that drive humanitarian needs. This approach means that we can have greater and more sustainable impact with more limited resources. In the context of the Reset, the humanitarian system is required to do ‘better with less’. The Centrality of Protection provides a framework for maximizing impact while safeguarding the safety, dignity, and rights of affected populations.

In this context, operationalizing the Centrality of Protection is more important than ever. It is not an abstract principle, it is about ensuring that everything we do, contributes to people’s safety, dignity and rights. In that sense, protection analysis is core and must inform decision-making across sectors.

The IASC Protection Policy is clear. Protection is the responsibility of all humanitarian actors. It requires leadership, commitment and collective action. For Humanitarian Country Teams, this means putting protection outcomes at the centre of strategies and response plans, using joint analysis and evidence to inform decisions, and holding ourselves accountable.

The Food Security sector plays a particularly important role. It is the largest in terms of partners, resources, and reach. Its programmes touch millions; often the most vulnerable, often in areas where protection risks are highest. This gives food security actors enormous potential to drive progress on

protection outcomes. Delivering on the Centrality of Protection is therefore a shared responsibility, not the task of one agency or one cluster.

Stronger political support and more robust accountability are required to sustain this approach. Humanitarian Country Teams and donors have a key role in incentivizing, supporting, and overseeing the consistent integration of protection in humanitarian action.

Contributions from the Food Security Sector

“Protection is not an add-on to food security work. It means providing assistance in a safe and dignified manner, reaching people effectively and where they are. This is directly linked to the quality of assistance and its impact on reducing food insecurity”.

The Lead Agencies of the Food Security Cluster reiterated their commitment to fulfilling their responsibilities under the IASC Protection Policy through:

- (1) understanding the protection risks that drive, or may be impacted by, food insecurity.
- (2) mainstreaming protection in every intervention.
- (3) proactively using interventions to address identified protection risks.
- (4) engaging in advocacy with duty bearers.

Several panellists shared concrete examples of food security and agricultural livelihoods interventions that reduce the protection risks that are driving food insecurity.

- Integrated Cross-Cutting Context Analysis and Risk Assessment (ICARA) tool, integrating analysis of conflict sensitivity, gender, protection, and environmental risks into operations.
- Evidence-based analysis in Gaza on the destruction of agricultural land and infrastructure; and in Mozambique on restrictions on access to land and how this impact food security.
- Collective advocacy by UN and NGOs with duty bearers on the right to food, including conflict-induced hunger, and reporting to the UN Security Council under Resolution 2417.
- Provision of mobile livestock shelters and alternative energy sources to help prevent displacement of herder communities in the West Bank.
- Conflict-sensitive interventions that address disputes over natural resources (e.g. mitigating tensions between pastoralists and farmers in Somalia; dialogue between communities and local authorities in Sudan to prevent seasonal violence over access to water and grazing land).
- Livelihood skills and community engagement in rural areas of northern Syria and DRC to reduce women and girls’ exposure to GBV, in partnership with protection actors.
- Integrated programming to reduce child labour in Burkina Faso through risk education, livelihood support, and school meal programmes.
- Supporting the development of national policies/legislation for equitable land rights, particularly for women and girls in Zimbabwe.
- Analysis of agricultural areas most impacted by military operations to identify farming households most exposed to risks related to ERW and forced displacement in Ukraine.
- Referral mechanism amongst partners built into the vulnerability targeting of food assistance programmes.
- Partnership with protection-mandated agencies to support the centrality of protection (referral pathways, data sharing and analysis, advocacy, policy engagement).

Panellists emphasized that more can be done, including scaling up these good examples of integration and be more consistent in mainstreaming protection across all activities and interventions. This requires strengthening operational partnerships with protection actors, expanding collaboration, and investing in learning between the two sectors. Greater donor support is also needed to enable this work.

Integrated and community-led interventions in Mali and Sudan

Communities in Mali face severe protection risks and limited access to basic needs, including food and land. From a local NGO perspective integrated programming is critical to addressing the interconnected challenges of protection and food security. Examples shared included: cash-for-work programmes with a protection component to reduce protection risks; orientation desks at distribution sites to identify and refer protection concerns, including GBV, child protection, and legal assistance needs; early warning system based on indicators such as protection risks, food shortages, recruitment and forced displacement; and joint advocacy to address food security, protection, and related risks.

Similarly, in Sudan, local actors consider that food assistance is inefficient if women and girls are not safe, as food security efforts are incomplete without a protection lens. Women and girls, who are primarily responsible for providing food for their families, face significant threats when accessing resources, with pregnant women facing heightened risks due to specific health conditions and mobility issues that often prevent them from reaching distribution points. To ensure that food assistance is delivered with dignity and respect, local actors have implemented several measures to mitigate risks, including consulting women and girls on safe distribution points, training staff on GBV, referral systems, PSEA, establishing safe spaces offering at least one meal a day, supporting community kitchens to limit exposure to risks, and training women-led families in small livelihood projects and home farming to promote self-reliance and empowerment. As a result, the following has been observed: fewer incidents of violence against women while accessing food assistance, increased involvement of women in community activities, increased trust between the community and the Emergency Rooms, and improved food security for the most vulnerable families. However, the lack of flexible funding remains a major barrier, as funding allocated for food assistance often restricts spending on protection activities.

Integrated programming and the role of donors

Several donors are promoting integrated programming, but uptake has been limited. This is often in context where 'protection is not allowed', meaning that the only way of doing protection is by embedding it into other sectors. Very often, the protection sector ends up compensating for other sectors' failure to incorporate protection risks into their targeting by covering basic needs, and thereby diverting resources away from the protection sector, or from addressing protection risks.

Donors expect all humanitarian interventions to be designed based on an analysis of risks and to adopt protection-sensitive targeting. Recommendations have been made to use strong protection mainstreaming indicators in programming that provides direct assistance and services. While protection mainstreaming is important, it is not sufficient in and by itself to address the risks that create the needs. Therefore, integrated programming and collective actions are essential. As part of the Protection Donor Group, donors have committed to contributing to the Centrality of Protection through advocacy, technical input, and support to coordination structures. They advocate with humanitarian leaders and partners to safeguard the capacities needed to implement the Centrality of Protection. Donors will continue to ensure that their commitment to the Centrality of Protection is clearly reflected in their key messages to partners, humanitarian leadership, including the ERC, and other donors across coordination forums. They also commit to continuing to use their political, financial, and soft power to support humanitarian leadership in efforts to protect affected populations from violence, coercion, and deliberate deprivation.

Concluding reflections

In a moment where needs are immense and funding is decreasing, applying the Centrality of Protection is a crucial way to multiply the impact of scarce aid resources, particularly in the targeting of food assistance. Addressing needs without addressing protection risks amounts to incomplete, and potentially even irresponsible, programming at this stage. Achieving this requires a shift in both

thinking and process, but it is feasible. While mainstreaming or “do no harm” approaches are necessary, they are insufficient on their own. More comprehensive integration of risk reduction methods is essential for partner programming. The positive examples presented by the Food Security sector, donor support, and the availability of tools and resources mean there is no longer any excuse for providing aid without reference to protection risk. We now have the tools and are beginning to build the will to address protection and assistance needs in tandem.

Moderator and Speakers

- Edward O'Dwyer, UNHCR Representative, Central African Republic
- Ross Smith, Director, Emergency Preparedness and Response, World Food Programme (WFP)
- Maxwell Sibhensana, Deputy Director, Office of Emergencies and Resilience, FAO
- Hind Al Taif, Khartoum Women's Emergency Response Room, Sudan
- Medoun Bathily, DGD Project Officer, Action Mopti, Mali
- Anne Sophie Laenholm, Regional Protection and Gender Expert, European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG-ECHO)
- Erin Weir, Director of Protection, InterAction (IASC Co-Champion)
- Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, IASC Community of Practice (moderator)

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13 NOV 2025
14:30 to 16:00 CEST

Voices in Action: Affected Populations at the Forefront of Decision-Making

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Session 5: Voices in Action: Affected Populations at the Forefront of Decision-Making

Thursday 13 November – Recording [here](#)

The IASC Principles commit to adopting mechanisms that feed into and support collective, coordinated people-centred approaches, enabling women, girls, boys, men, and the most marginalised and at-risk people to play an active role in decisions that impact their lives, wellbeing dignity and protection. This commitment was made in 2017 and represents a strong pledge both to participation itself, and to making that participation possible. Participation is now recognised as a right in humanitarian action. This right goes beyond the humanitarian response – and is reflected in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998). This session recognises that participation is a foundational aspect of protection.

Assessing how we engage with communities

While there has been progress in participation in humanitarian action, it is important to challenge our view of this progress. As one panellist noted, when humanitarian actors engage with communities based on their own untested assumptions and agenda, they risk missing the point and distorting what is truly important and how it can best be addressed. Listening and trust is the foundation of meaningful engagement. Communities are frustrated by what they describe as tokenistic or shallow agency engagement, such as agency-led questionnaires that restrict people to certain topics and predetermined answers. When we listen and establish trust, people openly and honestly share what is important in their lives – both positive and negative – and we gain an understanding of their context from their perspective, without agency or programme bias. They also share solutions, knowledge, ideas and innovations. A people-first exercise (such as P-FIM) is a) goal-free, and b) two-way. In the goal-free exercise, we ask simple, neutral question: *What are the most important things that have happened in your lives over the past number years?* We do not ask about needs, problems, or lead respondents in any way. We simply listen and record.

People-first exercises show that communities do much more than agencies are aware of, and agencies do much less than we think. Therefore, it makes sense to first listen to how people understand the context of their lives – what is working, what is not working and how agencies may best add value. Listening and trust are especially important if people are to feel free to share deeply personal or disturbing issues (e.g. related to abuse and protection). Protection actors should be able to apply basic skills: listen, show respect, demonstrate patience, avoid leading questions, ask probing questions, and accurately record statements. The starting point must be where people are, not where agencies want them to be. For example, if people believe Ebola is caused by God, then this must be the starting point in any intervention. Another consideration is that abuse does not happen in a vacuum. Analysis of P-FIM exercises across the Sahel shows that girls who are forced to leave school due to emergencies are often abused and forced into early marriage, and so humanitarians need to consider community roles

in creating or mitigating harm. Finally, we need to remember for communities that everything is interconnected, and we need to understand people are part of families and communities.

Maintaining participation in planning: women and girls in Afghanistan

There are many challenges to ensuring the participation of women and girls in humanitarian work in Afghanistan. Systemic restrictions, by De facto Authorities, on women's mobility, employment, and engagement in humanitarian space have severely reduced their visibility in formal humanitarian structures. Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, there have been multiple restrictions and decrees issued that have banned female humanitarians from working, and limited women and girls from accessing humanitarian assistance. Given the strict gender-segregation norms in Afghanistan, decrees restricting female humanitarian workers have significantly affected the ability of aid agencies to reach women. For instance, as most women cannot collect aid without a male family member accompanying them, there is a significant risk that this assistance might be taken by male relatives. Restrictions have prevented Afghan women and girls from participating in decision-making processes that affect their lives, deepening their marginalization.

Despite these systemic challenges, collective efforts have been made by the humanitarian community in Afghanistan to amplify women's voices throughout the response cycle. By learning directly from women and girls about their needs and preferences, partners have adjusted response methodologies to ensure accountable, inclusive and quality programming. A Community Listening Initiative was designed to provide feedback from communities on an ongoing basis. This includes feedback from women and girls and using trained community engagement focal points including staff from local NGOs, youth volunteers, midwives and female doctors. The work being done to engage with crisis-affected women has enabled them to participate in processes to assess the effectiveness of the assistance being provided and has provided humanitarian agencies with vital information to adapt their response to better meet their needs. Community feedback data ensures that women and girls have safer and more equitable access to assistance. As a result, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of women who report that they are able to safely access humanitarian services. Feedback from women is also shaping 2026 response planning process. These inter-agency initiatives demonstrate a clear process: from listening, to adapting, to achieving measurable change, ensuring that Afghan women and girls are not only consulted, but that their voices meaningfully drive humanitarian decision-making and accountability. In contexts like Afghanistan, the challenge is not whether participation is possible, it is how creatively and safely we make it possible. Women's voices may be constrained, but they are not silent. Our responsibility, as humanitarian actors, is to ensure those voices shape every plan, every service, and every solution.

Considering local organisations access to coordination systems

Many organisations and types of people are excluded from coordination mechanisms. As an example, older people and organisations that work with them cannot easily access coordination mechanisms. Barriers include limited awareness of the system, physical accessibility challenges such as transport and venues, use of technical language without interpretation, lack of assistive devices and responsible accommodation, and a digital divide. To address these challenges, some organisations step in to remove barriers. They provide key trainings and awareness-raising to empower older people to understand how humanitarian decisions are made and how they can influence them. In Ethiopia, regional and national organisations were supported to participate in coordination mechanisms, and to take part in data collection. It is also important that other humanitarian organisations are trained to incorporate older people across their systems, including in data collection. This dual approach ensures the voices and needs of older people are reflected in humanitarian programming, and that humanitarian programs actively incorporate older people. In Ethiopia, the issues facing older people are included in the Protection Analysis Updates, and the response collects gender- and age-disaggregated data for people over 60. Ethiopian humanitarian programming has supported

interventions that specifically target older people. The caregiving role of older people is now acknowledged in child protection programming, and their influence in social norms and political dialogue has been recognised. It is also important to build the confidence of older people to participate in the cluster system, which can be overwhelming for many.

Communities at the centre of impact and evaluation processes in eastern DRC

The conflict in eastern DRC is protracted and inter-ethnic, it is therefore essential that communities are at the centre of the response. One panellist shared an example of a community-based approach that places community members and their leadership at the heart of the programme design, delivery and monitoring. In this programme, community protection structures, including community protection committees and women's forums, are set up on a voluntary basis. They carry out protection analysis to understand specific risks affecting the community, existing threats and capacities. Based on this analysis, the community develops protection action plans. These community structures are supported through capacity-strengthening sessions on specific themes, such as protection risk analysis and advocacy, led by a local NGO. Around 60-70% of actions are led by communities themselves, while the remaining 30% relate to the support provided by the LNGO. What is new in this approach is that communities are placed at the centre of impact and evaluation analysis. Traditionally, monitoring and evaluation are conducted exclusively by international actors (INGOs/NGOs), with community members serving primarily as interviewees, which reinforces power imbalance and limits community participation in certain phases of the intervention (e.g. MEAL). In this project, communities have been supported in defining their own theory of change and evaluation indicators, placing them at the centre of the entire programme cycle.

Examples of change and documented results include the removal of checkpoints that disproportionately affected women, girls, and children; reduction in GBV, specifically forced marriages and early pregnancies; and increased knowledge and access to GBV services. Feedback on this community-based protection approach confirms a strong increase in community awareness and engagement in both prevention and response actions. Communities can raise alerts and carry out advocacy with local authorities to address protection threats at the community level. The programme shows that the community itself is the unit of change, capable of analysing its own problems and proposing concrete solutions. It has increased the visibility of certain groups, particularly women, by providing them with space and a stronger voice in protection processes. Community protection structures are valued by community members and show clear alignment between actions and the needs identified within the community.

The movement of Afro-Colombian women in Colombia

Displacement affecting Afro-Colombian women has long been an invisible issue in Colombia. Most displaced people are Afro-Colombian women, and the conflict has had a major impact on their lives and cultural practices. One panellist described the work of the Afro-Colombian movement that began at community level, with local women and grassroots groups, to better understand their situation, document human rights violations, and denounce these abuses. This led to a deeper understanding of the importance of coordination, building a political agenda, and creating a dialogue between the Colombian State and Afro-Colombian communities. Starting with 50 members, the movement has grown into an important political platform at the national level, now including more than 7,000 women with territorial representation across 33 municipalities in 16 departments of Colombia. It focused on documenting cases of violations and producing reports for courts, including the Constitutional Court. Contributions were also made to investigations as part of the transitional justice framework of the Peace Agreement (e.g. reports submitted to the Truth Commission). This work led to the official recognition by the Colombian State of the specific impact of the conflict on Afro-Colombian women and the development of an institutional response for the reparation of victims of the armed conflict. As a result of sustained advocacy, the State established assistance and protection programmes for this

population, in which the organization played a key role, guided by the principles of justice, reparation, and non-repetition. The work also had international impact, with reports and recommendations presented to CEDAW and other UN human rights mechanisms.

IDP participation in Ukraine

IDP councils represents a novel form of IDP participation that has been formalised in the Ukraine context and now exist at national and regional levels. the Ukrainian government adopted an IDP law with some unique features. For example, a person can be considered both a refugee and an IDP simultaneously, which was important for people who were refugees living in Ukraine and were then displaced. Displacement caused people to lose connection with their local councils, resulting in people living in municipalities where they felt they could not influence local decision-making. Ukrainian organisations drew on the experience from Colombia, learning from the experience of victims' councils. Adapting similar principles to these councils, IDP councils emerged as a solution to participation. While it is not possible to address justice and accountability, it was possible to focus on services and participation. Initially, IDP councils were concerned about whether people would participate, and whether IDPs would have incentives to engage in local democracy in different municipalities, but they found that people were highly motivated and inspired by this opportunity. The IDP councils include IDPs themselves, representatives of NGOs working with IDPs, and local government officials. Today, there are over 1,000 IDP councils, with more than 700 currently active. There are many examples of how IDP councils have found solutions to issues facing IDPs, from issues such as evacuations to employment. Many of these issues benefited both IDPs and local community members. During displacement, it is important that this line of communication with the IDP councils and municipalities remain open.

Concluding remarks

There is a persistent gap between the intention of participation and the reality of community experiences. Organisations design tools before listening, making processes feel extractive. It is important to ask who posed the questions and who holds the answers? Trust building is not a soft skill – it is a professional competency. Community engagement is not a parallel activity; it is programming. It must recognise communities' capacities as well as organisation limitations. Situations like Afghanistan show how participation can continue in extreme circumstances, and how trusted networks enable participation that shapes real programme adaptation. Voices may be constrained, but they are not silenced. Moving from participation to genuine leadership requires confidence building. Communities can inspire other processes, from accountability and justice to IDP solidarity initiatives. Participation becomes meaningful when communities lead rather than simply respond, and when the protection response creates space for this leadership. The response becomes more accountable and more impactful. This session reminds us of the fact that participation drives protection.

Moderator and Speakers

- Gerry McCarthy, People First Impact Method (PIFM)
- Armel Rusaje Rutebeza, Centre de Développement Integral de l'Enfant Rural (CEDIER), Democratic Republic of Congo
- Luz Marina Becerra, Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados (AFRODES), Colombia
- Valeryia Vershinina, Stabilization Support Services charity foundation (SSS CF), Ukraine
- Ahmadullah Fazly, Accountability to Affected People Officer, UNFPA Afghanistan
- Shambel Mekwanint, Vice President of the Addis Ababa Elderly and Pensioners Association, Ethiopia
- Christophe Beau, Liaison Officer on Internal Displacement, UNHCR (moderator)

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Justice as Protection: Reaffirming Rights-Based Commitments to Humanitarian Action and Beyond

Session 6: Justice as Protection: Reaffirming Rights-Based Commitments to Humanitarian Action and Beyond

Friday 14 November – Recording [here](#)

The sixth and final session of the GPC Protection Forum focused on the theme ‘Justice as Protection: Reaffirming Rights-Based Commitments to Humanitarian Action and Beyond.’ This session explored whether justice, a core of humanitarian work, is now considered peripheral to humanitarian action, and reflected on legal protection as a lifesaving and life sustaining response. This topic has renewed urgency, with concerns that the reaction to the reduction in humanitarian funding is pushing humanitarian actors to prioritise narrowly and away from longer term objectives. Panellists discussed justice as a lived outcome, with legal protection shaping dignity and belonging.

- ❖ Without documentation, people are excluded from assistance, health, education, compensation, and safe migration opportunities.
- ❖ Without trust and justice mechanisms, violence escalates and women and girls, and other marginalised groups can face more risks.
- ❖ Without housing land and property rights, families cannot return, cannot rebuild or cannot move forward.
- ❖ Without legal identities, people become invisible.

Understanding the importance of legal assistance for Palestinians

Sharing reflections from Gaza, a panellist highlighted the efficiency of legal aid and the lifesaving component in practice. In the context of hyper-prioritisation, the question arises: what is considered essential? In a place such as oPT, legal work is not optional. Excluding legal aid would have two catastrophic effects: first, it would deny people access to humanitarian assistance; second, it would actively engineer displacement, undermining any prospects for future recovery. In situations of mass displacement, there is a widespread loss of all forms of civil and HLP documentation. This challenge is compounded by the destruction of institutions due to aerial bombardment. Within this context, the Legal Task Force in Gaza plays an essential role in ensuring access to accurate information on documentation replacement, legal counselling and engagement with authorities responsible for issuing documentation – a process that is often extremely complex for people who have lost their documentation. Documentation is critical not only to access humanitarian assistance, but also to banking services, telecommunications systems (such as SIM cards), and it is required to organise debris removal from destroyed homes. SIM connectivity allows people to remain in contact with each other, access services, and prevents family separation. Legal actors in Gaza are racing to help people recover what has been lost. Protecting HLP and identity documents from day one is critical to a family’s ability to survive today and represents the only path toward a permanent solution tomorrow. Another core

objective is to mitigate forcible transfer, which is the single biggest driver of humanitarian need in the oPT. In the West Bank, demolition and eviction orders are continuously issued to Palestinians, directly violating their rights to shelter, education, healthcare and water. Legal action is therefore not only an emergency response; it is a means to addressing ongoing human rights violations.

If a narrowed definition of humanitarian action results in reduced funding for legal assistance in Gaza, it risks negative outcomes: first, restricting access to life-saving humanitarian assistance, and second, closing pathways to recovery for the most vulnerable groups. For Palestinians, legal aid is inseparable from the operating environment because the drivers of humanitarian need are fundamentally legal. Military occupation is a system of policies, procedures, and regulations that together create a coercive environment conducive to forcible transfer.

In a context such as Gaza, a key question arises: if legal frameworks are failing to prevent harm at the scale currently observed, do they still serve as tools of protection? In the West Bank, legal aid remains fundamentally useful, yet its effectiveness is constantly undermined by an extremely complex, multifaceted, ever-changing legal environment. One testament to the continued relevance of legal aid as a protection tool is the fact that the authorities being litigated against are forced to continually change the rules of the game through new policies and practices designed to render humanitarian strategies ineffective. This challenge is further compounded by the nature of Israel's judiciary, which represents the primary avenue for domestic legal recourse but is highly politicised and biased in favour of the state and settlers, who are often the perpetrators of human rights violations and resulting humanitarian harm. Despite these constraints, legal aid continues to demonstrate effectiveness. In Gaza, where institutions providing legal recourse have been destroyed and civil courts are no longer functioning, legal actors have turned to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and are still able to establish positive legal precedents that assist affected populations.

Legal assistance as a lifeline in protracted humanitarian crises such as Niger

Niger is experiencing a protracted crisis, compounded by climate change, conflict in neighbouring countries and broader regional instability. In 2025, 2.6 million people required humanitarian assistance. Recent funding cuts have severely disrupted essential services, including health, education, food security, and protection. Panellist from a local NGO shared that their legal assistance programme in Tillabéry and Diffa, relying on a network of 25 legal clinics providing free support to around 36,000 IDPs per year, was forced to close at the end of 2024, leaving tens of thousands without access to legal assistance.

In several regions of Niger, affected populations currently lack both the means and the mechanisms to claim their rights. Formal judicial structures are often absent, inaccessible, or non-functional, while customary justice mechanisms, although present, do not consistently ensure equitable outcomes, particularly for women and girls. Access to justice is therefore critical: it protects women from violence, children from exploitation, and displaced families from extortion. Legal assistance is not a luxury but a core protection intervention. For example, legal support enabled a girl without a birth certificate, previously denied access to education, to enrol in school, and legal mediation has successfully resolved community disputes, demonstrating the role of legal aid in safeguarding rights and strengthening social cohesion.

Addressing structural and political barriers to sustaining legal protection services in Iraq

In the case of Iraq, the major humanitarian drawdown, including the deactivation of clusters and the closure of OCHA, was followed by plans for the UN DPA to exit. During this transition period, specialised protection activities needed to be absorbed into durable solution frameworks, both within the UN system and, to a large extent, by the Government. One of the biggest questions for the UN Resident Coordinator was how do we ensure that justice, civil documentation, compensation and legal assistance do not disappear as the humanitarian architecture was dismantled? In Iraq, these services

are not ancillary; they represent core barriers, preventing people from rebuilding their lives after protracted displacement.

Iraq continues to host nearly one million IDPs, approximately 200,000 of whom remain in particularly vulnerable situations. Their challenges are not primarily related to food or shelter, but to the absence of legal identity, unresolved property claims, stalled compensation processes and a justice system that is often inaccessible, inefficient, or non-functional, especially in places like Sinjar. Sinjar crystallises these challenges. Nearly a decade ago, ISIS militants overran the city of Sinjar in northern Iraq, leaving profound legal, social, and protection consequences that continue to shape displacement and recovery today. ISIS militants killed approximately 5,000 members of the Yazidi community and abducted around 6,400 people, of whom 2,554 remain missing. These atrocities triggered one of the worst humanitarian crises in Iraq's recent history, forcing more than 100,000 Yazidis to flee abroad in search of safety, alongside the displacement of other groups living in the area, including Suni and Shia communities. Nearly a decade later, thousands of Yazidi families are still unable to return due to ongoing insecurity, lack of shelter, and the absence of functioning institutions. Courts are non-operational, civil documentation services are barely available, and an administrative vacuum persists. Without documentation, people cannot access compensation; without compensation, they cannot rebuild their lives; and without functioning institutions, safe and sustainable return remains impossible.

During the transition from the cluster system to a durable solution framework, legal protection was reframed as an essential service rather than a specialised humanitarian activity. UN agencies were therefore required to integrate civil documentation and legal assistance into national social protection and governance systems. The Durable Solutions Roadmap, led by the RC, placed protection and justice as its core, ensuring that these issues were reflected within government budgeting and planning processes. Justice and accountability concerns were explicitly incorporated into durable solution planning. Following the closure of UNITAD, which has been mandated to address the issue of accountability and justice for crimes committed against the Yazidi community by ISIS, the UN Resident Coordinator worked closely with the institution that assumed this role to ensure continuity in evidence preservation, survivor support, and the promotion of transitional justice. Ultimately the Government implemented the Yazidi Survivor Law, which is a critical anchor for protection and justice for the Yazidis, although its implementation remains uneven.

The UN is now working to integrate social protection priorities, especially the issue of justice administration, into the new UN Cooperation Framework, which will be in place for the next five years. Importantly, the UN is committed to ensure individuals who remain trapped within protracted displacement and protection systems remain visible. One of the risks associated with humanitarian drawdown is that unresolved cases and vulnerable populations may simply fall out of political and institutional focus.

How hyper-prioritisation might affect the support for legal protection

Displacement does not end when a humanitarian response transitions. It endures, entrenches vulnerabilities, and persists even as financial contexts and priorities shift. The experience in Iraq demonstrates that legal protection is not only a development issue after transition, but also fundamentally linked to government ownership, leadership and political will. The concept of "solutions from the start" connects many of these issues. Within the Humanitarian Reset, there is a renewed push for localisation. However, this shift cannot be limited to changing language; it must involve a genuine transfer of power. The ways humanitarian actors define roles and mandates frequently fail to reflect peoples lived realities, needs, aspirations, and narratives. Continued interest from donors on durable solutions is critical. Initiative such as the Solutions Fund and Solutions Hub are important and progressing, yet they are often not prioritised. Durable solutions require broader engagement, including from the private sector and other non-traditional actors, while still being grounded in a

strong humanitarian response. Issues that have hindered the integration of legal protection and rights-based approaches across humanitarian and development action include political, administrative and security constraints. At its core, these challenges are political.

One critical issue to address is data harmonisation, including the identification and targeting of the most vulnerable. Definitions of displacement and durable solutions often differ between government and humanitarian actors, complicating coordination. Legal protection is frequently perceived as a niche issue, even when it underpins the effectiveness of outcomes across all sectors.

In some contexts, legal protection actors face resistance, driven by concerns that justice and accountability work may politicise humanitarian action. Yet rights-based humanitarian work is grounded in impartiality. Coordination gaps between humanitarian actors and rule of law institutions further exacerbate risks, particularly during transition periods when humanitarian actors withdraw before justice systems and transitional mechanisms are fully operational. As a result, IDPs face a paradox: without legal assistance and documentation, they might be eligible to receive short-term aid but end up unable to exercise their rights in the long term. While governments are often described as being “in the driving seat,” it is ultimately displaced people themselves who should lead the way toward solutions. Treating legal assistance and civil documentation as lifesaving services is inseparable from creating the conditions for solutions. Although humanitarian budgets are under severe strain, excluding legal protection would be a strategic mistake, particularly contexts of new violence and renewed conflict, given the importance of legal protection as a prevention measure.

Reducing the internal barriers to engaging in legal protection

We often talk about the barriers, the external barriers to engaging legal protection, but there are also internal barriers within our own sector, including the perceptions we have that it might hamper access or that it will affect the perception of neutrality, as well as our own internal systems that may be standing in our own way. This includes issues of funding and issues of operating in siloes – which affect the sequence of action, and the types of funding instruments that are used and available to civil society and legal practitioners. It may not be realistic to ask all actors to break down their silos, but we can make use of our strengths. For example, donors may not be able to reform funding approaches, but they can make best use of their convening power and genuinely support effective planning between humanitarian, human rights, peace building and development actors. They can ensure that programming is based on a common understanding of the main protection risks, while building on each actor’s added value. It is important for humanitarian actors to have appropriate data and information on the main and most acute protection risks, as well as advice on how those can be mitigated or addressed, to facilitate planning beyond the humanitarian sphere.

Legal protection reduces the risk of violence and abuse and addresses the vulnerability to threats in the immediate and short term. It is a way of reducing protection risks and ensuring access to assistance and services through a more human rights-based approach. Legal protection is really core to both survival and recovery. With regards to the Reset, there is a risk that not only legal protection, but protection in general, is sidelined and deprioritised. We must continue to request, hold each other to account, and support interventions that ensure that protection is truly put at the centre of programming and that programmes also correspond to what affected people request. We need to change our measurement of success from how many people have been reached by assistance to how we have reduced human suffering, humanitarian needs, and acted as an entry point to services, longer-term solutions and the full enjoyment of human rights.

Concluding reflections

Accountability is a companion to justice, and it is up to us to both provide legal support and technical guidance to governments and authorities, while ensuring that international law continues to be the norm and sets the standards. A key lesson is that when there is humanitarian deactivation or transition, humanitarian protection needs do not diminish, and legal actors often need to continue their work for

as long as it takes. We need to work to ensure that justice and accountability are embedded in States' policies and laws, and that vulnerable communities do not fall off the radar.

Transitional justice is also an important feature of accountability, including reparations and reforms. Symbolic measures, such as public apologies or public statements to combat discrimination, are also important. We engage in domestic legal remedies not only because they provide respite, but because international law stipulates that all domestic legal remedies must be exhausted before pursuing international litigation. Local and international organisations may be hesitant to pursue international litigation due to fear of punitive measures that could hinder their operations, including being shut down or expelled. Accountability therefore requires a collective effort. We need diplomatic and financial protection for organisations pursuing international accountability, whether through indemnity funds, rapid legal defence mechanisms, or humanitarian exemptions for punitive closures.

We are facing a very critical moment in the management of the humanitarian sector. The risk of deprioritising protection, at the time we need to centre it even more, feels very real. It is even more important to double down and invest more resources in legal protection, because it is the foundation – the social and legal policy infrastructure – that will consolidate and sustain the gains of humanitarian action. This session has reminded us that we cannot have an effective humanitarian response or build bridges to longer term solutions if we do not put the rights of people first.

Moderator and Speakers

- Ghulam Isaczai, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, Resident Coordinator in Iraq
- Paula Gaviria Betancur, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons
- Nader Muaddi, Legal Task Force Coordinator Gaza, Occupied Palestinian Territory
- Abdou Bakar Razak Sayabou Laoual, Réseau des ONG de développement et Associations de Défense des Droits de l'Homme et de la Démocratie (RODADHD)
- Sara Brodd, Senior Policy Specialist Protection, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
- Inah Kaloga, Senior Director, Violence Prevention and Response, International Rescue Committee (moderator)

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International NGOs

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Save the Children

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IYD, Syria
Réseau des ONG de développement et Associations de Défense des Droits de l'Homme et de la Démocratie (RODADHD)
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Women's Emergency Response Room, Sudan
Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, Palestine

United Nations

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InterAction
Legal Task Force Coordinator Gaza
Protection Cluster Coordinator, Ukraine
Resident Coordinator, Iraq

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