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Dorotea, 35, waters her potato field near Maratane displacement settlement in Nampula Province, where she lives since her home was destroyed by Cyclone Gombé.

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit

Chapter 6: Climate, Disaster, and Sudden Onset Emergencies



Global Protection Cluster

Chapter 6: Climate, Disaster, and Sudden Onset Emergencies

Overview

This Chapter contains:

- Introduction to key terminology and definitions in climate and disasters.
- Responding to sudden onset emergencies.
- Actions that can be taken by a Cluster Coordinator after a sudden onset shock.
- The role of the Protection Cluster in climate and disaster preparedness and response.
- Links to global guidance and tools for effective response.

Climate change and disasters significantly exacerbate vulnerabilities, leading to displacement, increased risks, and challenges in accessing essential services. This chapter outlines actionable strategies for Protection Clusters to integrate protection principles into preparedness, response, and recovery efforts, leveraging tools like the GPC Preparedness Guidance and other global resources.

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6.1 Core Concepts and Principles

Introduction to Climate & Disasters

Several key terms are often used when discussing climate change and disasters. It is important to establish a working definition of them to ensure clarity and a shared understanding. In this document definitions used by the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) are used and highlighted below.

Climate Change: A change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere, and which is in addition to climate variability observed over comparable time periods ([UNFCCC Article 1](#)).

There is growing evidence that the climate is changing at a more rapid pace than has been earlier been predicted and that the frequency and severity of climate-related hazards and events are rising. A compilation of climate change-related facts put together by the World Meteorological Organisation can be found [here](#).

Hazard: A process, phenomenon or human activity that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, social and economic disruption, or environmental degradation. Hazards may be natural, induced by human activity and choices or as is often the case, by a combination of factors. Examples of combined hazards include environmental degradation and climate change. Hazards may be single, consecutive, or combined and characterized by factors such as location, intensity or magnitude, frequency, and probability.

Disaster: A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability, and capacity, leading to human, material, economic and environmental losses, and impacts. The effect of a disaster can be immediate and localized but is often widespread and could last for a long period of time. The effect may test or exceed the capacity of a community or society to cope using its own resources and a need for external assistance.

NOTE: It is important to note that **the term “natural” disaster should be avoided**. Natural hazards become disasters due to other, human related, dynamics, actions (or inactions) that affect vulnerability.

Humanitarian actors work in hazard driven disasters or conflict driven disasters, and often a combination of both.

Hazard-driven disasters: Hazards include earthquakes (geophysical), hurricanes (meteorological), floods (hydrological), droughts (climatological), or epidemics (biological). It's the vulnerability of human populations and infrastructure to the impact of natural hazards and the disruption that follows that results in a disaster or crisis. In many humanitarian crises, IDPs and refugees can end up living in cramped and unsanitary conditions, leading to disease epidemics, such as cholera. These are sometimes referred to as secondary humanitarian crises, and examples of these include Haiti in 2010 and Yemen in 2017.

Conflict-driven disasters: Where an emergency is within and/or due to armed conflict, there are specific international laws, norms and standards that will dictate how humanitarian agencies should act. Conflicts can involve different types of armed actors such as state, non-state and mandated peacekeeping forces, and are often unpredictable, with periods of relative calm followed by acute surges of violence, sometimes referred to as a 'spike'. Innovation in conflict zones presents its own unique challenges and requirements due to instability and logistical difficulties and the need to abide by humanitarian principles and standards. It is vital to ensure that any innovation activities are conflict-sensitive and adhere to the principle of 'do no harm'. (*Humanitarian Innovation Fund/Elhra online [here](#)*)

Increased Exposure to Protection Risks during Disasters

Challenges caused by climate change and disasters are often multi-faceted and complex and resulting protection risks also interconnected and multi-layered. Events often exacerbate and compound existing vulnerabilities at individual, community, and institutional level.

The negative effects of conflict/insecurity and disasters are also often interlinked and may exacerbate each other. In areas affected by armed groups, including organized criminal groups, disaster events may provide opportunities to further exploit situations and extend control or influence. In such scenarios, the capacity of national defence and security forces to combat armed groups may be further limited by the strain on resources and mobility caused by flooding or other disaster impacts. In some situations, loss of livelihoods caused by hazards such as drought may drive recruitment into armed groups and exacerbate tensions and conflict over resources within and between communities. Disasters may also lead to some people being more exposed to risks associated with human trafficking and gender-based violence. This exposure to risk is driven by displacement, access challenges and an overall increase in vulnerability.

- **Displacement:** Natural hazards and climate-related events can force communities to flee their homes, resulting in internal displacement or cross-border movements.
- **Increased vulnerabilities:** Displaced populations may face heightened risks, including exposure to exploitation or abuse, loss of livelihoods and family separation.

- **Access challenges:** Disasters can disrupt infrastructure, hindering access to essential services and protection mechanisms.

Key Protection Considerations

EARTHQUAKES

- No notice (or early warning of a matter of seconds or minutes), repeated aftershock over extended periods.
- Within seconds, high number of deaths and injured persons, particularly in urban areas related primarily to collapsing buildings.
- Protection from secondary impacts and physical security: high risk of other secondary and cascading hazards including tsunami following under-sea earthquakes, landslides, subsidence, urban floods and fires, chemical or industrial hazards damaging already weakened buildings and infrastructure.
- Rescuing trapped or stranded individuals to save as many lives as possible is the primary protection concern in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. For example, during the immediate response to the Pakistan earthquake, rescue workers attempted to free people trapped under debris or in isolated areas, with rescue efforts measured in hours and days. Thousands also suffered from severe injuries, including paralysis and lost limbs
- Working with actors less/not familiar with protection risks such as Search and Rescue teams, national and foreign military.
- Increased protection risk when an earthquake strikes dense, urban areas constructed without respecting construction norms.
- Limited access to displaced people who fled to locations which are difficult to reach for assessments and assistance.
- A limited access to health services for the injured.
- Shelter and NFI needs due to widespread destruction.
- Psychological distress and high probability of social insecurity leading to prolonged mental trauma in the community.
- Lack or loss of identification documents which can lead to issues and potential conflict regarding land and property ownership. Land and property issues have also been raised as a concern by people displaced by earthquakes.
- Family separation.
- The potential to intensify pre-existing vulnerabilities and the situation of women and girls with an increase of gender-based violence and child protection risks, particularly in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake.

Adapted from the Practical Guidance for UNHCR Staff on IDP Protection in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change

Key Protection Considerations

STORMS (HURRICANE, CYCLONE, TYPHONE) AND FLOODS

- As a result of floods, hard to reach areas or trapped populations with increased protection risks and particular concerns about the protection of vulnerable groups in hard-to-reach areas.
- In flooded areas, specific concerns arise about the health risks from stagnant water, cramped living conditions, and a lack of sanitation facilities in affected communities, some of which remained flooded for more than five months.
- Lack or loss of identification documents which can lead to issues and potential conflict regarding land and property ownership. Land and property issues have also been raised as a concern by people displaced by the cyclone and floods.
- Floods can dislodge landmines or other explosive devices, significantly increasing the risk of accidental detonation in previously cleared or unsuspecting areas.
- Family separation and need for reunification.
- Psychological distress and high probability of social insecurity leading to prolonged mental trauma in the community.
- Gender-based violence, due to cramped evacuation shelters, child recruitment, and other negative coping strategies stemming from food insecurity such as child labour, force/child marriage among others.
- Forced evacuation, relocation or return without consultation and due consideration of the wishes of affected population.
- Lack of protection mainstreaming of main relief activities being implemented by authorities and the international community.

Adapted from the Practical Guidance for UNHCR Staff on IDP Protection in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change

6.2 Sudden Onset Crises and Humanitarian Preparedness

Protection partners operate in a wide range of emergencies with different speeds and severities. [Elhra](#) describes the different speeds and severities.

Speed

Emergencies begin, and develop, at different speeds, but there are three main types:

- **Rapid onset:** These are emergencies that happen extremely quickly, often with devastating impact. They may have little or no warning, like an earthquake, some warning like a typhoon or hurricane, or may be anticipated, such as an expected conflict or cyclical flooding.
- **Slow onset:** Slow-onset emergencies are those where the signals of the impending emergency can be seen a considerable time before it becomes an acute humanitarian crisis. The classic slow-onset emergencies are droughts, which are often climate related and cyclical.
- **Protracted:** This type of emergency lasts for years, and in some cases decades. They are most often a result of ongoing conflict situations and often relate to refugee or IDP camp settings.

Severity

When a disaster occurs each humanitarian agency categorises the scale of the emergency and what this means for how they respond. The main reference point for emergency categorisation is the one used by the UN system. The UN has three categories of emergency:

- **Level 1** is a localised emergency.
- **Level 2** is an emergency that is at a larger scale but can still be dealt with within the capacity of the agencies, government and other actors who are present in-country.
- **Level 3** is the largest type of emergency and requires an international response, with the need for capacity and resources to be 'surged' into the country to help with the response.

Challenges in Sudden Onset Emergencies

Sudden-onset crises provide limited time to develop and implement a response plan. They often affect first responders and other aid workers, who might be displaced or have affected families and communities. Types of sudden-onset crises can include natural disasters and escalation in conflict. Many country contexts can experience multiple crises at the same time.



Even with planning, responding in a sudden onset emergency can be challenging, as communities are severely affected, access and communications are disrupted, and humanitarian workers might be asked to hibernate.

It also brings a change to the way we work:

- Some clusters might move to blanket targeting of affected communities.
- Clusters need to work with new partners, who have different mandates, skills and access.
- The role of the government and other authorities can change.
- Frequency of partner engagement increases (e.g. a cluster meeting can become weekly) and clusters increase monitoring and reporting. In some cases, reporting will be daily.
- Partners can struggle to access communities and individuals they were previously working with (e.g. someone receiving case management or legal assistance is now displaced and out of communication range).
- Coordination with OCHA and inter-cluster (including IM capacities) on beneficiary reach, response capacity and protection observations increase.
- Specialised interventions are disrupted, and service mapping and referrals have to be updated.

Ensuring Response Preparedness

In most emergencies, external support can take days and in some cases weeks to arrive. Therefore, it is vital that there is a plan in place, based on the available in-country capacity, to deal with the initial phase of an emergency. It is important to develop a common understanding of risks and to develop a system to monitor those risks to ensure early action is taken when required. Contingency plans for specific risks can be used as the basis for initial planning reflected in a Flash Appeal to meet the differentiated needs of an affected population in the first 3-4 weeks of a humanitarian emergency.

Response Preparedness	
Risks Analysis and Monitoring	Develop a clear and common understanding of the risks which may trigger a crisis significant enough to require a coordinated humanitarian response.
Minimum Preparedness Actions	Identify a set of activities that can be implemented to establish a minimum level of emergency preparedness. • Clarify coordination and management arrangements. • Prepare for joint needs assessments. • Ensure tools are ready for response monitoring. • Discuss information management with partners. • Map operational capacity and presence. • Reflect on community led early warning and response mechanisms. Review response modalities and consider if they are flexible in crises (e.g. do you have partners with rapid or mobile response capacity?)
Advanced Preparedness Actions and Contingency Planning	Develop a contingency plan that addresses what could happen and what might be needed; actions to take and resources required and gaps to be bridged. It lays the ground for a Flash Appeal.

Working with other Actors

Clusters do not have to contingency plan alone. Emergency response planning and contingency planning is an inter-sector and inter-agency effort. While it is important for the Protection Cluster to reflect on risk analysis and monitoring and discuss preparedness actions with partners, contingency planning is inclusive of agencies and sectors. OCHA will lead [interagency contingency planning](#) for the response. If you are unsure if your response has an interagency preparedness plan, you can check with OCHA. You can find a template of an interagency contingency plan [here](#).

It is also important to familiarise yourself with the roles and responsibilities of different actors in hazard driven and conflict driven emergencies. You can read about the roles and responsibilities of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [here](#).

6.3 Immediate Actions to Take in a Sudden Onset Crisis

Sudden onset crises are a shock and often coordination teams and partners are affected. Below is a guide to actions cluster coordination teams can take in the first days of a sudden onset emergency.

Day 1:

- Contact the full cluster coordination team [and contact the GPC for support].
- Make sure partners know you are active and that they can contact you.

- Collect information from reliable sources, including humanitarian actors and partners.
- Develop an internal assessment of the emergency.
- Review 5Ws to map which partners are working in the crisis affected area.
- Create a communication group (e.g. Teams or WhatsApp) for relevant operational partners.
- Review emergency tools (e.g. response tracking tool/monitoring tool/stock and capacity tracking/service mapping).

Day 2:

- Reach out to partners to confirm their presence.
- Contact OCHA and IMWG focal points.
- Reach out to other engaged actors such as other clusters and working groups (e.g. CwC WG).
- Gather information on CLA and co-coordinating organizations response plans.

Day 3-4:

- Hold partner meeting and disseminate the minutes and action points.
- Launch relevant tracking tools.
- Circulate information to partners, including updates, tools, and other important information.
- Get updates on partner capacity and stocks.
- Update service mapping.
- Stocktake response priorities (e.g. are old priorities and programme methods still the most needed and relevant? Do you need to update any tools or guidance such as key messages?).

Day 5:

- Create a short protection analysis, this can be a short document (1-2 page) on key risks and context issues.
- Share updates with relevant actors (CLA, donors, ICCG) on planned actions and priority interventions that are being carried out by cluster partners.
- Raise issues on any specific access or operational constraints (including bureaucratic constraints) on operations.
- Begin preparations for a key stakeholder briefing. Reach out to the GPC to discuss a potential Member State/donor briefing at global level, if relevant.

The GPC is available to support each step throughout the phases of emergency response planning, including information management, analysis and advocacy.

6.4 Role of the Protection Cluster

Protection partners play a key role in responding to crises, including sudden onset crises. Sudden onset crises require greater flexibility and more immediate action from partners and coordination teams. Clusters can reflect on the step of preparedness, recovery and response.

Preparedness

Preparedness and contingency planning are the cornerstone of any ability to respond to hazards and disasters.

- **Risk and vulnerability mapping:** Utilise tools such as the GPC Protection Analytical Framework ([PAF](#)) to identify and map risks and related vulnerabilities, associated with climate change and disasters, ensuring disaggregated data collection for diverse groups.
- **Reflect on minimum and advanced preparedness activities** reflecting on partners' response capacity on a continuous basis and map partners with flexible and mobile response capacity (e.g. partners that can change response location and modalities in a crisis).
- **Review interagency response plans** and promote the inclusion of protection considerations (including focused efforts to support specific vulnerable and at-risk groups), early warning systems and community-based approaches to preparedness.

Protection Response

In a sudden onset disaster, a protection response focuses on ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of affected populations from the outset. The specific shape of the response will depend on the context, operational constraints, and the most urgent protection needs identified on the ground. Response modalities may vary (static services, mobile or remote approaches) depending on access and security conditions. Below is a list of suggested priority protection activities to consider in the initial phase of the response.

1. Profiling and monitoring of immediate protection risks.
2. Identification of vulnerable individuals such as children, older persons, and persons with disabilities.
3. Awareness-raising, information sharing and referrals to available services.
4. Family tracing and reunification services.
5. Civil documentation and awareness raising activities regarding HLP rights.
6. Protection mechanisms such as mobile units to address individual protection needs.
7. Community-based protection mechanisms.
8. Case management services to GBV survivors including SEA.
9. Psychosocial support (PSS) programming and nonspecialized Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS).
10. Coordination with authorities and other sectors to integrate protection considerations across the response.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination

The Protection Cluster has a cross-cutting role in any crisis. In addition to the common inter-cluster responsibilities during a sudden-onset crisis, there are unique responsibilities that are held by the Protection Cluster.

- Support protection partner response capacity to ensure response modalities are fit for purpose, and update tools and guidance to ensure they are up to date and user friendly for the current shock.
- Provide protection analysis to inform the wider humanitarian approach, including Centrality of Protection.
- Support other clusters to update their protection mainstreaming approaches, so they are relevant to the new context.
- Advocate for individuals and groups that face specific risks and threats, and for individuals and groups at risk of exclusion and exploitation.
- Alert relevant humanitarian leadership and other bodies and experts on violations of rights.
- Promote of IHL and IHRL.

Durable Solutions and Disaster Preparedness

Actions that support a durable solution for people who are displaced are often actions that mitigate the impact of any future shock. Disaster Risk Reduction policies and frameworks can include protective policies and legislation that boost institutional capacity and coordination mechanisms, that also support pathways to solutions for people affected by displacement.

The Protection Cluster can conduct an assessment and review of legislative frameworks, partner capacity and coordination structures in terms whether they are likely to be able to respond to disaster events using this [GPC Toolkit on Preparedness for Protection in the context of Climate Change and Disasters](#).

This toolkit also enables clusters to identify capacity building measures for governments and local actors to address climate-induced displacement and integrate protection considerations into reconstruction and recovery programs.

The IFRC has developed a [Disaster Preparedness and Response Checklist](#) that provides a prioritized list of ten key questions that lawmakers, implementing officials, and those supporting them, such as National Societies, are recommended to consider so that their laws provide the best support for DPR.

6.5 Key Resources and Tools

Title	Type	Language	Year
GPC Guidance for Field Protection Clusters and AoRs on Preparedness for Protection in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters	Guidance Document	ENG, FRA, ESP	2022
GPC Toolkit – Accompanying Toolkit of the GPC Guidance Note on Preparedness (<i>Guidance Note above</i>)	Toolkit	ENG, FRA, ESP	2022
Practical Guidance on IDP Protection in Disasters and Climate Change Contexts (UNHCR)	Guidance Document	ENG	2021
IFRC, Checklist on Law and Disaster Preparedness and Response	Checklist / Guidance	ENG, FRA, ESP, العربية, Русский	2020
Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030	Framework	ENG, ESP, FRA, RUS, ZHO, ARA	2015
GPC Protection Analytical Framework (PAF)	Analytical Tool	ENG	2021
GPC Protection Mainstreaming Toolkit	Toolkit	ENG	2018
IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters	Guidelines	ENG	2011
GPC Inclusion Matrix - User Guidance for Age and Disability Inclusion Matrix	Inclusion Tool	ENG	N/A
NRC/UNDRR, Disaster Displacement: How to Reduce Risk, Address Impacts and Strengthen Resilience	Training Resource	ENG, ESP, FRA, POR	2021

GPC Roundtable: Enhancing Preparedness for Protection in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters, Global Protection Forum	Discussion Resource	ENG	2021
GPC Webinar: Bridging the Gap: How Protection Actors Can Support Preparedness Actions in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters	Webinar	ENG	2023
IASC, Interagency Contingency Planning Guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance	Guidelines	ENG	2007
Nigeria Protection Cluster: Emergency Communications for Floods – Messages for Communities	Example Messaging	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2024
Nigeria Protection Cluster: Protection Response to the Floods in Maiduguri – Update from the Protection Sector	Public Note/ Update	ENG	2024
Protection Mainstreaming in Flood Response (examples from Somalia, Yemen and Sudan)	Guidance	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2018-2022
OCHA Advocacy Note Emergency Flooding Response in West and Central Africa	Advocacy Note	ENG	2024
Mozambique: Cyclone Gombe Emergency Response Plan / Flash Appeal	Flash Appeal	ENG	2022
Mozambique Protection Cluster – Factsheet on Climate Related Displacement, April 2022	Factsheet	ENG	2022
Mozambique Protection Cluster, Protection Early Warning Messages for Communities – Climate Disasters	Messages	ENG, PT, NY, Xichangana, Cena, Macua	2024
Mozambique Protection Cluster, Key Messages for Communities – Conflict Disasters	Messages	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2024
Mozambique Protection Cluster, Cyclone Season 2023/24 Preparedness Plan	Plan	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2024
Afghanistan Protection Cluster, Earthquake Key Informant Interview	Survey	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2023
Mozambique Protection Cluster, Emergency Protection Unit ToRs	ToRs	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2023
Syria, NW: Rapid Protection Assessment Findings Syria Earthquake, February 2023	Report	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2023
Syria, NW: Rapid Protection Assessment Tool - Earthquake	Assessment Tool	ENG <i>Upon Request</i>	2023
GPC Protection Alert: Earthquake in Myanmar, April 2025	Protection Alert	ENG	2025
Myanmar Mine Action AoR - Earthquakes: KEY EORE Messages for General Dissemination	EORE Messaging	ENG, MYA	2025

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit – Overview of Chapters

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

Protection Field Coordination Toolkit – Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1: Humanitarian Coordination Overview

- Coordination models for internal displacement, refugee response and mixed situations
- Cluster Activation Criteria and Processes

Chapter 2: Humanitarian Programme Cycle

- Elements / Principles of the HPC and the Role of the Cluster
- Flash Appeals and Pooled Funds
- Integration cross-cutting issues and the Centrality of Protection into the HPC

Chapter 3: Internal Displacement

- Internal displacement and the needs of IDPs.
- Legal frameworks and displacement

Chapter 4: Protection in Armed Conflict

- International Law/Principles
- Humanitarian protection and Protection of Civilians (PoC).
- Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination

Chapter 5: Centrality of Protection

- The Protection Cluster's responsibilities in CoP
- The difference between mainstreaming, integration and the centrality of protection.
- IASC processes and HCT benchmarks

Chapter 6: Climate, Disaster, and Sudden Onset Emergencies

- Terminology and definitions in climate and disasters.
- Responding to sudden onset emergencies
- Actions that can be taken after a sudden onset shock (day 1-5)
- Climate and disaster preparedness and response.

Chapter 7: Durable Solutions

- Global frameworks guiding Durable Solutions
- Supporting durable solutions at strategic and operational levels.
- The GPC Durable Solutions Guidance for Protection Clusters

Chapter 8: Cluster Transition, Deactivation and Reform

- Criteria for cluster deactivation and transition
- Transition processes
- Humanitarian reform initiatives
- Area-based coordination

Chapter 9: Advocacy and Communication

- Developing advocacy strategies and action plans
- Preparing briefings to ICCG/HCT and engaging donors
- Leveraging human rights mechanisms
- Communication products and media engagement

Chapter 10: Data Responsibility and Safe Information Management

- Principles of data safeguarding, management and sharing
- Data responsibility in humanitarian action
- Safe and effective data handling

Chapter 11: Cross-Cutting Issues

- Age, Gender, Diversity and Disability Inclusion
- MHPSS
- AAP
- PSEA
- Protection Mainstreaming

Chapter 12: Understanding Protection Programmatic Approaches and Interventions

- Locally Led Responses
- Community Based Protection
- Case Management
- Service Mapping and Referrals
- Legal Aid, Law and Policy
- Cash and Protection
- Humanitarian Negotiations
- Anti-Trafficking
- Mobile and Rapid Protection Responses