

Terms of Reference for the Integrated Protection Cluster

Ukraine, 2026

1. Background and context

Ukraine continues to face a severe humanitarian crisis, which, at its core, remains a protection crisis. Ongoing hostilities, attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, displacement, and disruption of essential services continue to expose affected populations to significant protection risks, including family separation, explosive ordnance contamination, barriers to accessing rights and services, damaged housing and infrastructure, and heightened exposure to violence, exploitation, and abuse. As reflected in the [2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan \(HNRP\)](#), humanitarian needs remain particularly severe for populations remaining close to the front line, newly displaced and evacuated people, vulnerable internally displaced people, and other severely vulnerable groups.

The Protection Cluster in Ukraine was established in 2014-2015 as part of the inter-agency humanitarian coordination architecture to support a coordinated, predictable, and accountable response to protection risks arising from the armed conflict. Following the escalation of the war after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, the Protection Cluster further adapted and expanded its coordination structures and response modalities to address significantly increased humanitarian and protection needs across the country.

Under the 2026 HNRP, the Protection Cluster, including Child Protection (CP) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) workstreams, contributes to both Strategic Objectives of the humanitarian response and operationalizes its activities through the four Strategic Priorities adopted by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) under the Humanitarian Reset framework.

In 2026, the Protection Cluster operates under an **integrated coordination model in line with global guidance issued by the Inter-agency Standing Committee**. Under this approach, Protection, Child Protection, and Gender-Based Violence coordination capacities are brought together within an **integrated Protection Cluster structure** under the leadership of UNHCR as Cluster Lead Agency, while dedicated technical expertise and platforms continue across all areas of protection. This integrated approach builds on existing practice in Ukraine, including joint protection analysis, integrated strategic planning, strengthened information management alignment, and coordinated national and sub-national response structures.

These Terms of Reference define the **mandate, structure, governance arrangements, and core functions of the integrated Protection Cluster in Ukraine in 2026**. They establish the framework for coordinated, principled, and accountable protection response coordination across all its areas of specialization, in line with humanitarian principles, the Centrality of Protection, and the strategic direction of the 2026 HNRP.

2. Purpose, Objectives, and Scope

The Protection Cluster provides **a coordinated platform for humanitarian actors to collectively address protection risks arising from the war in Ukraine and to support a principled, accountable, and protection-centred humanitarian response**. The Protection Cluster, including Child Protection (CP) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) workstreams and technical working groups operating under its umbrella, contributes to **safeguarding the rights, safety, and dignity of conflict-affected populations and ensuring that the most vulnerable people can exercise their rights, access effective remedies, and access inclusive, quality, and timely protection services**.

The work of the Protection Cluster is guided by international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international refugee law, as well as humanitarian principles and the **Centrality of Protection**. Protection actors uphold do-no-harm approaches, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), child safeguarding, GBV risk mitigation, and gender-, age-, and disability-inclusive programming across all interventions.

The work of the Protection Cluster contributes to the **two Strategic Objectives guiding the humanitarian response in Ukraine in 2026**:

- **Strategic Objective 1 (SO1):** Provide principled and timely life-saving emergency assistance to the most vulnerable internally displaced and non-displaced war-affected people, ensuring their safety and dignity, with a focus on multisectoral high-severity levels of needs and flexibility to respond to emergencies.
- **Strategic Objective 2 (SO2):** Enable access to prioritized essential services for the most vulnerable internally displaced and non-displaced war-affected people, with a focus on multisectoral high-severity levels of need to ensure their protection, safety and dignity.

As part of efforts to advance the Humanitarian Reset in Ukraine, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) adopted an issue-based approach to sharpen the focus of the response on key humanitarian needs. While the two Strategic Objectives provide the overarching vision of the response, the following four Strategic Priorities operationalize this vision:

- Strategic Priority 1: Supporting the most vulnerable who remain close to the front line.
- Strategic Priority 2: Responding to vulnerable newly displaced people and people evacuated from their places of origin to safer hosting areas, including through transit centres and collective sites.
- Strategic Priority 3: Providing emergency response after strikes.
- Strategic Priority 4: Supporting the centrality of protection for vulnerable displaced people and severely vulnerable groups at risk of not being covered by social protection networks.

The Protection Cluster **contributes across all four Strategic Priorities under the 2026 HNRP, recognizing that protection risks and protection needs cut across all dimensions of the humanitarian response**. The scope of the Protection Cluster in Ukraine covers protection activities, including housing, land and property (HLP), child protection, gender-based violence prevention and response, as elaborated in the [protection response framework](#). In 2025, the coordination of mine action activities was transitioned to the Government-led coordination structure, while the residual humanitarian mine action activities can be reported under relevant corresponding protection activities. As a result of the CCCM Cluster phaseout in 2025, Protection Cluster in Ukraine also coordinates the multi-sectoral responses in transit centers and collective sites.

3. Core Functions

In line with the IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level, the Protection Cluster fulfils the following core functions in support of a coordinated, principled and effective humanitarian protection response in Ukraine. These functions are implemented across all areas of protection, including Child Protection (CP) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

(i) Support Service Delivery: supports coherent, timely, and non-duplicative protection response through coordination of operational partners, identification of gaps and priorities, and promotion of common standards and approaches across protection programming.

- facilitates coordination of protection activities across national and sub-national levels, including in frontline areas, displacement routes, transit centers, collective sites and hosting communities;
- supports development and maintenance of referral pathways, strengthened case management systems, standard operating procedures, technical guidance, and minimum standards across all areas of protection;
- promotes integrated and multi-sectoral approaches, including linkages with health, education, shelter/NFI, WASH, and food security and livelihoods actors;
- supports quality and principled protection programming across static, mobile, remote, and community-based modalities; and
- supports localization and meaningful engagement and participation of national and local actors, including women-led organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), organizations of older persons (OPAs), LGBTQI+ organizations, and IDP Councils.

(ii) Inform Strategic Decision-Making: leads and coordinates evidence-based protection analysis to inform humanitarian planning, prioritization and operational decision-making.

- coordinates protection monitoring and analysis to identify protection risks, trends, legal and policy developments, service gaps and operational priorities;
- ensures protection analysis systematically considers gender, age, disability and other diversity factors, including differentiated impacts of displacement, policies, programmes and public systems;
- consolidates and disseminates protection analysis through inter-agency coordination mechanisms and information products;
- supports integration of protection considerations into humanitarian decision-making and response planning;
- monitors evolving legal, operational and policy developments affecting protection risks and access to services; and
- provides strategic recommendations to the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), Humanitarian Operational Coordination Groups (HOCGs), Area-Based Coordination (ABCs) and operational partners.

(iii) Planning and Strategy Development: supports coordinated protection planning and strategic prioritization in line with the HNRP and inter-agency humanitarian planning frameworks.

- develops and reviews Protection Cluster strategies, priorities, response frameworks and workplans through consultative processes with partners;
- ensures alignment of protection response with the HNRP Strategic Objectives and Strategic Priorities;
- supports coordinated response monitoring, reporting and prioritization across all areas of protection;
- contributes to pooled fund prioritization and technical review processes, including the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF); and
- promotes complementarity between humanitarian response, national systems and longer-term protection and social service reforms, and supports gradual, context- and risk-informed transition based on the capacity of relevant systems to provide safe, accessible and quality services, with particular attention to preventing protection gaps

(iv) Advocacy: The Protection Cluster leads collective and evidence-based advocacy on protection risks and humanitarian protection priorities.

- promotes the Centrality of Protection across the humanitarian response;
- undertakes advocacy on protection risks, age-, gender- and diversity approaches and inclusion, and access to services for vulnerable populations;
- supports integration of protection mainstreaming, including child protection mainstreaming and GBV risk mitigation across sectors;
- engages with authorities, humanitarian partners, donors and other stakeholders on priority protection concerns; and
- supports coordinated messaging and advocacy grounded in protection monitoring and analysis.

(v) Capacity Strengthening: The Protection Cluster supports strengthening technical capacity and quality programming across protection actors and relevant stakeholders.

- supports joint identification of capacity constraints and institutional bottlenecks, considering not only knowledge and skills but also systems, tools, processes, continuity and institutional knowledge;
- provides targeted technical guidance, trainings and peer-learning opportunities on protection standards and approaches;
- supports partner capacity on safeguarding, accountability to affected people, GBV risk mitigation, child protection mainstreaming, data protection, safe referrals and other key technical areas;
- promotes quality and principled protection programming across all areas of specialization;
- supports capacity strengthening of national and local actors, including relevant government counterparts and community-based organizations.

(vi) Accountability to Affected People: The Protection Cluster promotes accountability to affected people across the humanitarian response.

- promotes integration of accountability to affected people across all Protection Cluster functions and activities.
- promotes community-based and people-centred approaches in humanitarian programming;
- supports safe, accessible and inclusive feedback and complaints mechanisms, including linkages with established PSEA reporting and referral procedures so that SEA concerns can be received safely and referred promptly and confidentially;
- promotes meaningful participation of affected populations, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, in humanitarian response;
- supports, where safe and appropriate, age-appropriate and safeguarding-compliant mechanisms for children to express their views and priorities and to inform protection analysis, response planning, monitoring and evaluation;
- supports approaches that uphold dignity, inclusion, confidentiality and informed consent.

4. Guiding Principles

- **Humanitarian principles:** The principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence apply to all Protection Cluster activities and partner programming.
- **Centrality of Protection:** The Protection Cluster supports the Humanitarian Country Team in Centrality of Protection, ensuring that protection of all persons affected and at risk due to the war in Ukraine informs humanitarian strategic decision-making and response.
- **Do no harm and meaningful access:** Humanitarian response, including protection response, shall be guided by conflict-sensitive and do-no-harm approaches aimed at minimizing unintended harm and promoting the safety, dignity and rights of affected populations, and ensuring all people at risk have access to assistance and services tailored to their age-, gender- and other diversity factors.
- **Inclusion of gender, age, disability and other diversity factors:** The Protection Cluster promotes inclusive and accessible humanitarian response that takes into account the specific risks, priorities and capacities of affected populations in all their diversity, including children and women at risk, older persons and persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in Ukraine.
- **Survivor-centered approach:** Protection Cluster promotes survivor-centred approaches grounded in safety, confidentiality, respect, and non-discrimination.
- **Best interests of the child:** Protection Cluster promotes the best interest of the child, child participation, child safeguarding, and child-sensitive approaches.
- **Principles of Partnership:** The Protection Cluster operates in accordance with the Principles of Partnership, promoting equality, transparency, complementarity, mutual accountability and results-oriented collaboration among partners.
- **Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA):** Protection Cluster members are expected to uphold organizational commitments on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and integrate PSEA considerations across protection programming and coordination processes.

5. Structure and Governance

The Protection Cluster in Ukraine operates as a **single integrated coordination platform**. Child Protection and GBV continue as dedicated technical workstreams within the integrated platform, preserving specialized technical leadership, dedicated specialized forums, and capacity-building functions for partners.

Cluster Lead Agency and Lead Agency Roles:

UNHCR serves as the Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) for the integrated Protection Cluster and is accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator for the Cluster's overall performance. UNICEF serves as the Lead for the Child Protection workstream, and UNFPA serves as the Lead for the Gender-Based Violence workstream. Protection Cluster Integration does not alter the mandates, technical responsibilities, or Provider of Last Resort obligations of UNHCR, UNICEF, or UNFPA. **Each lead agency retains its respective mandate.**

Protection Cluster Coordination Team:

The integrated Protection Cluster Coordination Team is the primary operational platform for alignment across all areas of the protection response. It comprises of UNHCR Protection Cluster staff at national and sub-national levels; UNICEF Child Protection Leads at national and sub-national levels; UNFPA GBV Leads at national and sub-national levels; NGO Co-Coordinators at national and sub-national levels and Cluster Information Management Officers. The national Coordination Team meets at a minimum bi-weekly to ensure coherent coordination of all protection partners, consistent alignment of response coordination and advocacy, and to advance the implementation of the integrated model.

Protection Cluster Coordinator and Co-Coordinator:

The Protection Cluster Coordinator exercises overall leadership of the integrated Protection Cluster and is accountable to the Cluster Lead Agency and the Humanitarian Coordinator. The Co-Coordinator of the Protection Cluster in Ukraine brings additional capacity, expertise and resources dedicated to Cluster coordination and supports the fulfillment of cluster core functions, enhancing diversity, advocacy channels and localization and strengthening representativity by ensuring that NGO perspective is included in the coordination team and its decision-making, while representing the entirety of protection response. In Ukraine, the Co-Coordinator is a national NGO.

In close collaboration with the Protection Cluster Coordination Team, the Coordinator and Co-Coordinator jointly chair National Protection Cluster meetings, provide strategic direction, represent the Cluster in the HCT and ICCG, and maintain overall coherence of the protection response across all workstreams.

Strategic Advisory Group:

A single integrated Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) serves as the governance body of the Protection Cluster, providing strategic guidance and technical oversight. The SAG is established through an open call for expressions of interest, ensuring balanced representation across UN agencies (UNHCR as CLA, UNICEF, UNFPA, and OHCHR), international NGOs, and national NGOs, with specific attention to ensuring balanced representation across protection, child protection, and GBV areas of specializations. The SAG meets at a minimum quarterly to provide strategic direction to the Coordinator and Coordination Team, endorses the Cluster strategy, reviews major advocacy positions, guidance documents and resource mobilization approaches, oversees the implementation of protection response, and advises on matters requiring HCT or ICCG decision. See more on SAG membership in the Annex.

National Protection Cluster Meetings:

National Protection Cluster meetings serve as the principal coordination forum for all protection partners. Meetings are chaired by the Protection Cluster Coordinator and Co-Coordinator and are prepared jointly by the Coordination Team with full involvement of Child Protection and GBV Leads. Meetings are held monthly and include dedicated agenda space for Child Protection and GBV strategic issues.

Child Protection and GBV Workstreams:

Within the integrated Protection Cluster, Child Protection and GBV continue as dedicated technical workstreams. Each workstream maintains: specialized technical leadership from UNICEF (CP) and UNFPA (GBV); dedicated national and sub-national technical partner forums under Protection Cluster providing specialized guidance and capacity building; specialized information management systems (CPIMS+ for CP and GBV IMS for GBV) maintained as separate, data-protection-compliant platforms.

Sub-National Coordination:

Sub-national protection coordination operates as a unified structure under the integrated Protection Cluster, with close linkages to Humanitarian Operational Coordination Groups (HOCGs) and Area-Based Coordination (ABC) mechanisms established under the Humanitarian Reset. Sub-national coordination is co-chaired by local protection partners wherever operationally possible, advancing the localization agenda and ensuring responses are grounded in local realities. The integrated structure fosters a coherent one Protection Cluster approach at the sub-national level, with technical support and capacity building to partners across all areas of specialization, including child protection and GBV.

Technical Working Groups and Task Forces:

The Protection Cluster may establish technical working groups or time-bound task forces to address specific technical or operational priorities. Such bodies are established by the Cluster Coordinator in consultation with the Protection Cluster Coordination Team and the SAG, have clear terms of reference, defined timeframes and deliverables, and report to the National Protection Cluster. In 2027, technical working groups will be rationalized as part of the integration process to ensure that technical spaces are fit for purpose, not duplicative, and aligned with the integrated model.

6. Membership and Participation

Membership in the Protection Cluster is open to humanitarian actors: United Nations agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and other organizations with demonstrated operational or technical engagement in protection response in Ukraine.

The Protection Cluster operates on the basis of partnership, consultation and consensus among members wherever possible. Members are expected to:

- adhere to humanitarian principles and the Principles of Partnership;
- uphold the guiding principles of the Protection Cluster listed in point 4 and integration AAP and community-based approaches in their programming;
- uphold applicable organizational and inter-agency PSEA commitments, including codes of conduct and established safe reporting and referral procedures;
- implement humanitarian activities, in particular protection activities (including child protection and GBV activities);
- contribute actively and consistently to collective coordination, information-sharing and response prioritization processes, including reporting on protection activities under HNRP;
- participate regularly in Protection Cluster meetings at national and/or sub-national level and relevant coordination structures;
- contribute to joint assessments, monitoring, analysis and response planning and advocacy processes;
- apply agreed standards, technical guidance and referral pathways where applicable;

The Protection Cluster Coordination Team commits to facilitating inclusive, transparent and results-oriented coordination processes and to ensuring equitable access to information, technical support, and coordination mechanisms for all partners, including national and local organizations. Participation in the Protection Cluster does not affect the individual mandates, independence or operational decision-making responsibilities of member organizations.

In line with the transition of the Protection Cluster, relevant government institutions at national and sub-national level are increasingly encouraged to participate in the Protection Cluster meetings.

In addition, other stakeholders such as donors and academia can participate in the Protection Cluster meetings at national level and be added to the Protection Cluster mailing list for information sharing, communication and advocacy purposes.

7. Inter-Cluster Coordination and External Engagement

The Protection Cluster maintains strategic and operational linkages with other clusters and inter-agency coordination structures across the humanitarian response architecture to support protection-sensitive humanitarian action.

Representation in ICCG and other OCHA-led coordination forums is streamlined under the Protection Cluster and led by the Protection Cluster Coordinator and Co-Coordinator, ensuring consistent joint preparation and alignment ahead and after the meetings. In the absence of the Protection Cluster Coordinator, either the CP or GBV Leads can attend the ICCG as an alternate. Protection Cluster IM will lead on alignment ahead of Data

Coordination Group (DCG) meetings and other IM engagements. UHF allocations will be managed jointly by the Protection Cluster Coordination Team.

Particular coordination linkages are maintained with Health, Shelter/NFI, Education, WASH, Food Security, and Livelihoods actors, including on issues related to displacement, evacuations, transit centers, and collective sites.

Following the [transition of the CCCM Cluster](#), the Protection Cluster supports protection-centered approaches to transit centers and collective sites in coordination with the Shelter/NFI Cluster, relevant authorities, and humanitarian partners.

Recognizing that the Government of Ukraine bears primary responsibility for the protection of its population, the Protection Cluster engages with relevant government authorities and national institutions to further its transition and support complementarity between humanitarian response, protective state systems and relevant protection and social service frameworks, while maintaining humanitarian principles and operational independence. Such transition should be gradual, context- and risk-informed, and guided by the capacity of relevant systems to ensure continuity of safe, accessible and quality services and to prevent protection gaps.

The Protection Cluster further engages with donors, recovery and development actors, and other stakeholders, as appropriate, to support coordinated analysis, advocacy, and response planning on protection priorities.

8. Review and Duration

These Terms of Reference enter into force upon endorsement by the Protection Cluster Coordination Team and remain valid until revised or replaced.

The Terms of Reference may be reviewed periodically by the Protection Cluster Coordination Team, in consultation with the Protection Cluster SAG, to reflect changes in the humanitarian context, coordination architecture, operational priorities, or relevant inter-agency guidance.

9. Annexes

- Protection Cluster Strategic Advisory Group Terms of Reference (TOR), May 2026