



PROTECTION LEADERSHIP

The Role of UNHCR in Humanitarian Crises

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FOREWORD



Filippo Grandi
High Commissioner
for Refugees

Dear colleagues,

Humanitarian crises around the world are ever expanding. The number of emergencies declared by UNHCR in 2023 was the highest in a decade. They are also increasingly complex, as conflict, climate change, weak governance, food insecurity and other factors cause or increase forced displacement and statelessness.

In such a context, protection leadership is needed more than ever, and UNHCR has a critical role to play. As an organization with a mandate for protection and solutions, effective leadership means that we seek to uphold the rights of forcibly displaced and stateless people in all our activities. It also means that we play a key role, engaging humanitarian, development, peace and human rights actors so that we collectively advance the enjoyment of rights for displaced, stateless and affected populations.

For UNHCR, this is critical -- whether in the refugee responses which we lead or in our contribution alongside partners to other complex humanitarian emergencies, including conflict-induced internal displacement, or natural disasters. While much of this note is most relevant to humanitarian crises, protection leadership may also be equally relevant in non-emergency situations, such as where there are early warning signs of potential conflict, displacement or large-scale human rights violations.

UNHCR's protection leadership will continue to evolve in the face of immense contemporary challenges. With support from the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, the Division of International Protection (DIP) as well as the entire organization, I remain committed to working with you to address the protection challenges that lie ahead.

Background

With forcible displacement at historic highs and an ever-expanding number of complex emergencies, international responses today are overstretched. While States have the primary responsibility to ensure the protection of all persons residing on their territory, frequently their capacities are overwhelmed, with emergencies often characterized by the partial or complete breakdown of State authority. Conflict today has also changed, often involving multiple non-State groups, with varying degrees of ability and willingness to protect civilians and respect international humanitarian law (IHL). Humanitarian space is shrinking, posing risks for humanitarian actors and civilians, meanwhile restrictions on freedom of movement affect access to territory and asylum. In these contexts, it is especially critical for protection to be at the center, whether in UNHCR-led refugee responses or inter-agency responses to complex humanitarian emergencies or natural disasters through arrangements agreed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

UNHCR, as the entity mandated to intercede on behalf of refugees and stateless persons, and as the agency historically first called upon by the General Assembly to protect and assist internally displaced persons (IDPs), has intimate knowledge of forced displacement – its root causes, the protection risks that arise from it, and the requirements for sustainable protection and solutions. UNHCR's operational capacity to save and secure lives, to protect rights and pursue solutions has also been built into its organizational culture through decades of responding rapidly and robustly to humanitarian crises with forced displacement. As an organization whose mandate is to protect, effective leadership means that we seek to advance the enjoyment of rights by forcibly displaced and stateless people in all our activities and that we play a catalytic and supportive role, engaging humanitarian, development, peace and human rights actors in this collective endeavor, as envisioned in the Global Compact on Refugees.

This document updates a previous internal note for UNHCR representatives on *Protection Leadership in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies* and builds on UNHCR's best practices, including community-based approaches, expertise in service delivery for the forcibly displaced, and dialogue and proximity with displaced populations for a deeper understanding of the protection risks and needs. It complements UNHCR's *Policy on Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement*, UNHCR's Updated Guidance on the *Refugee Coordination Model* and UNHCR's *Toolkit on Humanitarian Protection in Armed Conflict (Second Edition)*, acknowledging UNHCR's engagement in complex humanitarian crises, and in particular with IDPs, as a natural complement to its mandate for refugees and stateless persons, leveraging UNHCR's work in both countries of origin and countries of asylum. Finally, it also takes into account recommendations from the IASC regarding the dire need for robust leadership and accountability to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian responses, drawing lessons from UNHCR's role as IASC Co-Champions on the Centrality of Protection.



Protection in Action

UNHCR has a supervisory responsibility with regard to international refugee protection, which is an integral and inherent function under its Statute. This responsibility is complemented by its operational role, including through its field presence, to protect and assist forcibly displaced and stateless persons in all our activities. This means protection of asylum seekers and refugees must be central from initial influx to durable solutions, and guide our dialogue and coordination with refugee-hosting Governments. This includes formulating comprehensive protection and solutions strategies in consultation with affected populations and in cooperation with protection partners and authorities. It is founded upon evidence-based analysis of protection risks and aims to facilitate access to or deliver protection services to individuals affected by violations, advocate with duty bearers to prevent and stop the recurrence of rights violations and progressively include refugees in national protection systems and services.

Since its establishment, UNHCR has led and coordinated responses to refugee situations, in line with its mandate. The Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), introduced in 2013 and which has undergone a significant revision in 2024, provides the blueprint to support government response coordination and implementation, including the shared duty to protect and assist refugees within an integrated protection and solutions vision. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is also a milestone for refugee protection and global solidarity, highlighting UNHCR's supportive and catalytic role in galvanizing States and other stakeholders to mobilize support for more predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing. With this, protection leadership extends from humanitarian action to sustainable solutions, and the broader array of stakeholders committed to the GCR within and outside the UN System, as well as local and national actors.

In the context of inter-agency responses to complex humanitarian emergencies, the IASC has affirmed that all humanitarian actors have a responsibility to place protection at the center of humanitarian action.¹ In such situations, the IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action requires Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) – Humanitarian Coordinators and heads of the member organizations of the HCT – to work together to understand and seek to prevent, mitigate or end the protection risks, including violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, that people affected by conflict or disaster face. The policy explains that protection encompasses efforts pursued by all

Basis for UNHCR's Engagement

The coordination of international protection, assistance and solutions for refugees is inherent to UNHCR's mandate, in emergency and non-emergency situations. UNHCR's Refugee Coordination Model provides a framework for leading, coordinating and delivering refugee operations.

In complex humanitarian emergencies or natural disasters where the populations include IDPs and other affected groups, UNHCR's engagement involves global and country leadership, advocacy and coordination responsibilities, particularly those set out in arrangements agreed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, as well as our operational involvement in line with relevant General Assembly resolutions.

As outlined in the IDP Policy (2019), when cluster or cluster-like arrangements are established under the IASC in line with the Humanitarian Reform (2005) and the Transformative Agenda (2011),¹ UNHCR will assume leadership and coordination functions aligned with our global responsibilities, supported by dedicated cluster coordination capacities underpinned by a robust operational response and supported by information management capacities.

Where a UNHCR-led refugee response is also underway in complex humanitarian emergencies, it is especially important to ensure streamlined, complementary and reinforcing leadership and coordination between the IASC coordination and UNHCR's refugee coordination (*Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice (April 2014)*).

¹ [IASC Principals Statement: the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (2013); [IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (2016).

humanitarian actors in all sectors and requires HCTs to ensure this approach is at the center of their collective humanitarian response.

UNHCR is fully committed to the centrality of protection in two respects. First, as a protection-mandated agency, UNHCR leads by example by ensuring that protection is the objective of all its activities. Second, UNHCR demonstrates its protection leadership by playing a catalytic, advisory and supportive role through its engagement with humanitarian, development, peace and human rights actors, to collectively contribute to protection outcomes for displaced, stateless and crisis-affected populations.

Underlying this is UNHCR's commitment to decisive and predictable engagement in situations of internal displacement, pursuant to its IDP Policy² as well as its cluster leadership role in IASC coordination settings.³ Under these policies and arrangements, UNHCR is committed to play a protection leadership role, leveraging fully the synergies between our engagement with refugees, internally displaced people, returnees, stateless people and others affected by humanitarian crises, while taking into account our different responsibilities vis-à-vis different categories of forcibly displaced people, and relevant inter-agency arrangements. As such, UNHCR not only actively participates in all aspects of the humanitarian program cycle, but as protection lead agency, has a role in ensuring that protection informs, drives and is central to the overall humanitarian response, leading and galvanizing partners in an analysis of protection risks for the entire crisis-affected population and an effective operational response to those risks.

While relevant particularly in situations of humanitarian crisis, depending on its operational presence and involvement, UNHCR may also play this role in non-emergencies, such as where clusters have not been activated or de-activated, situations of transition to longer-term development, or where there are early warning signs of potential conflict, displacement or large-scale human rights violations.

In summary, **centrality of protection in humanitarian action** means the collective effort to reduce protection risks. The reduction of risks is also referred to as a 'protection outcome.' Centrality of protection goes beyond the principle of protection mainstreaming; it requires HCT members to engage in protection integration (joint programs), specialized protection programming and advocacy.

Where a UNHCR-led refugee response is also underway in complex humanitarian emergencies or natural disasters, it will be especially important to ensure streamlined, complementary and reinforcing leadership and coordination between the IASC coordination and UNHCR's refugee coordination. Together with the UNHCR-OCHA Joint Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice,⁴ the RCM sets out a framework and principles for responding to refugee and mixed situations.

² See Policy on UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement (2019) and the accompanying Guidance Package.

³ UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster and co-leads the Global Shelter Cluster with IFRC and the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster with IOM. For country-level conflict-induced crises, UNHCR is expected to lead the protection, shelter and CCCM clusters. In natural disasters, UNHCR is committed to leadership of the protection cluster in consultation with OHCHR and UNICEF.

⁴ [Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice](#) (2014) and re-confirmed in 2018.

Key Principles and Approaches

Because UNHCR's mandate is non-political and humanitarian, the organization is guided by the fundamental principles of **humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence** in its response to all humanitarian crises, whether caused by conflict, violence or natural disasters. UNHCR also adheres to other internationally recognized principles such as the principle of **non-discrimination**. These principles and other key standards which guide UNHCR's action are defined in the ICRC Professional Standards for Protection Work.⁵

In its protection leadership role, UNHCR promotes **protection mainstreaming and integration** throughout the response, working with all partners and authorities to design and deliver an inter-agency response where all interventions in different sectors contribute to: 1) avoiding harmful effects on affected populations; 2) promoting people's meaningful access to assistance and services; 3) ensuring the views and priorities of communities and individuals are reflected in the response through consultation and meaningful participation; and, 4) facilitating feedback from people on aid interventions.

Equally important is UNHCR's commitment to and promotion of **community-based approaches** to ensure that asylum-seekers, refugees, returnees, stateless, internally displaced communities as well as the communities hosting them participate meaningfully in all program phases and across sectors. UNHCR additionally implements community-based protection which is a continuous process of engaging communities in the identification and analysis of protection risks faced by the community and addressing those risk while building on their own agency and capacities to jointly achieve protection outcomes.

Community-based approaches also help ensure **Accountability towards Affected People (AAP)** by engaging forcibly displaced and stateless persons and affected populations directly in decisions and activities that affect their lives and seeking to restore and reinforce their leading role as a driving force for change. UNHCR is committed to institutionalizing a culture of AAP beyond consultation with communities to an actual means of measuring the effectiveness and overall protection outcomes of multi-sectoral interventions. For UNHCR, AAP is outlined in Core Actions 2 to 5 of the Age, Gender and Diversity Policy (2018).⁶ Besides promoting participatory approaches to programming, these Core Actions cover other key elements including Communication and Transparency, to ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless persons receive information in a timely manner, in their most preferred and accessible way, in order to mitigate protection risks and promote access to available services. Additionally, the Core Actions highlight the importance of building effective **Feedback and Response Mechanisms** to ensure the appropriate management of forcibly displaced and stateless persons concerns and complaints – including those linked to fraud and sexual exploitation and abuse – and to adapt its programs, based on feedback received from people.

In accordance with the AGD Policy, **age, gender, and diversity considerations guide all aspects of our work**, informed by several imperatives, such as promoting inclusion of

⁵ See [Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried Out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence](#)

⁶ [UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Policy](#) (2018)

all individuals in their diversity, non-discrimination, gender equality and the empowering of women and girls. As we hold ourselves accountable to the people with and for whom we work, an AGD analysis and the views of women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds needs to inform our interventions, advocacy, and programs, following the principle of “leaving no-one behind.” For UNHCR, gender equality refers to the equal enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities of all persons and means that the interests, needs, capacities and priorities of all are respected, regardless of their gender.

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR is also committed to strengthening the meaningful **participation, representation, and leadership of local and national humanitarian actors**, including those led by displaced and stateless people, women, youth and groups at risk of exclusion. UNHCR recognizes that local and community actors are often the first responders, provide an invaluable understanding of local challenges and potential solutions, are able to mobilize local networks and offer greater access to affected populations, hence contributing to a more effective, efficient, and sustainable humanitarian response with an enhanced accountability to affected people.



Leadership

Effective protection leadership, whether in refugee responses which UNHCR leads or in UNHCR's contribution alongside partners to inter-agency coordinated responses to humanitarian crises, begins with the leading role of the country representative and extends to all staff.

Refugee Settings

Coordination of international protection, assistance and solutions to refugees is central to UNHCR's refugee mandate and derives from the High Commissioner's accountability for ensuring adherence of States to international instruments and standards for the protection of refugees and for strengthening State protection capacities and asylum systems. As the 'guardian' of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, UNHCR's protection leadership should include, at a minimum, the following:

- Advance **core principles and standards of international refugee law, including related** to the right to seek and enjoy asylum, notably on access to territory, prevention of refoulement, including by maintaining consistent and open dialogue and principled advocacy with the hosting State and by **engaging in judicial processes** as required.
- Establish strong and effective **collaboration and coordination with governmental counterparts** across the refugee response, including through the provision of structural and technical support in core protection functions, as well as capacity development in building solid asylum systems in line with the GCR.
- Where the Refugee Coordination Model is in place, the **Refugee Coordinator**, typically the UNHCR country representative, should lead advocacy on refugee protection matters and encourage sector co-ordination founded upon protection. This will involve robust leadership of the **Protection Sector**, as the overarching coordination structure. This is important to ensure coherence in strategic planning, response, and advocacy, including through the Refugee Response Plan.
- In line with the Global Compact on Refugees and multi-stakeholder comprehensive refugee response frameworks, pursue inclusion of forcibly displaced persons from the start, and also ensure that voices are heard, where necessary taking the lead in coordinating a response-wide **and collective feedback and response mechanism**, to also give expression to UNHCR's obligations on AAP, inclusive of capacity to digest, analyze and report on findings.
- **Mobilize resources** for both UNHCR and partners and **foster constructive relationships** with key members of the donor community and other stakeholders, notably development actors and International financial Institutions, to galvanize and broaden support for the refugee response through regular formal and informal contacts and communications, including through periodic structured or tailored briefings and facilitation of regular visits to and engagement with asylum seeking and refugee communities.

Leadership and coordination

Coordination aims to maximize complementarity and prevent overlap between diverse actions, and to work towards coherence and integration to achieve common goals.

Leadership, on the other hand, is a reflection of institutional behaviors, leadership styles employed by senior managers and Representatives as well as the overall leadership culture of the organization. Adopting a more horizontal and facilitative way of working alongside more directive forms of leadership can be critical in coordination settings.

Complex Humanitarian Emergency Settings

In leading and coordinating humanitarian action, the Humanitarian Coordinator, where appointed, is responsible for ensuring that protection and accountability are at the forefront of humanitarian response and preparedness.⁷

In taking up UNHCR's leadership on protection in inter-agency coordinated responses to humanitarian crises, such as those under IASC arrangements, or situations of early warning, transition or solutions, UNHCR has a catalytic, advisory and supportive role to ensure that protection informs collective decision-making, and is central to humanitarian action, from preparedness efforts to immediate, life-saving activities and to seeking solutions. To this end, UNHCR should continually utilize its expertise, knowledge and experience in protection to inform and drive decision-making by the RC/HC and UNCT/HCT. Specifically, this should include the following:

- **Lead by example** by ensuring that protection is the primary objective of all of UNHCR's activities, including through specialized protection programming, protection integration (joint programs), advocacy as well as protection mainstreaming.
- Recommend to the RC/HC and the UNCT/HCT **priority actions by the humanitarian system on centrality of protection** to address the most urgent and immediate protection risks/needs of the crisis-affected population in a manner that is responsive to differences in age, gender and diversity.
- Building on protection cluster or sector programming and analysis, support the RC/HC and the UNCT/HCT in the development of an **overarching strategy for protection**, which leverages the expertise and experience of other sector-leads and partners to advance on key overarching protection issues, maximize a protection impact and, ultimately, solutions.
- Offer to take a leadership, coordination or advisory role on **accountability to affected people (AAP), preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), diversity and inclusion and gender equality**.
- Along with promoting the centrality of protection, take the lead in efforts to **mainstream protection** across the humanitarian response, including by offering technical support to other clusters.

Disasters and Other Emergencies

Through its IDP Policy and Emergency Policy, UNHCR has committed to taking the lead on protection in disaster-induced internal displacement settings whenever it has sufficient in-country presence (including scaling up, where needed), a government request and inter-agency agreement. For disasters or complex emergencies without significant displacement, UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR will consult closely, and under the overall leadership of the HC/RC, agree which agency among the three will assume the role of cluster lead for protection.

If UNHCR is already leading clusters or cluster-like coordination structures in country (e.g., for a conflict-induced humanitarian crisis when a natural hazard occurs), that leadership must be maintained. If a conflict occurs in a disaster-induced crisis where UNHCR is not already the cluster lead, UNHCR should negotiate with relevant partners and the Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator (RC/HC) to assume cluster leadership for protection, shelter and CCCM. UNHCR should simultaneously ensure operational delivery in order to give credibility to its response and prioritize having human resource capacity on the ground from the "day after." ([Practical Guidance for UNHCR Staff on IDP Protection in the Context Of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change](#))

⁷ [Leadership in Humanitarian Action: Handbook for Humanitarian Coordinators](#) (2023). In mixed situations with IDPs and refugees, see the UNHCR-OCHA Joint Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice, describing how the HC can lead the humanitarian response in a way that is coherent with the UNHCR-led refugee response, and vice-versa, how the UNHCR country representative can coordinate the refugee response as an integral but distinct part of the comprehensive humanitarian response.

Statelessness

UNHCR has been entrusted by the General Assembly with responsibilities for stateless persons. Since 2006, the General Assembly resolutions have emphasized the four aspects of UNHCR's statelessness mandate: identification, prevention and reduction of statelessness and protection of stateless persons. These responsibilities include the promotion of accession to and full implementation of the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Key actions that UNHCR undertakes globally in exercising its statelessness mandate include:

- **Advancement of the implementation of international standards on the right to nationality and statelessness through advocacy with and technical assistance** to governments to reform laws and policies and implement procedures to prevent and reduce statelessness and to identify and protect stateless persons.
- **Legal assistance and counselling** to stateless persons and persons at risk of statelessness, in support of acquiring or confirming nationality, to prevent statelessness or to secure a legal status as a stateless person.
- **Strengthening partnerships and building coalitions** with States, UN agencies, regional organizations, civil society and stateless-led organizations at national, regional and global level to address statelessness. This includes support to development and implementation of national action plans and support to national coordination mechanisms on statelessness. UNHCR has led a ten year #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness since 2014. In October 2024, a new multi-stakeholder platform, the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, leveraging on the progress made under the #IBelong Campaign, will be launched. The Global Alliance will provide a platform for learning, knowledge sharing and collaboration, as well as building the political commitment needed to accelerate solutions to statelessness and uphold the rights of stateless people. It will connect global advocacy with regional and national actions to accelerate and drive positive change.
- **Leveraging the expertise and influence of other UN agencies and development actors** for inclusion of stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness in development plans and programs and in national systems.
- **Support and advocacy** for generation of quantitative and qualitative data to provide evidence to governments and others on the extent and impacts of statelessness.



Key Actions

Particularly in humanitarian crises, whether refugee-related or in response to conflict or disasters, there is a critical need for protection leadership to inform and drive decision-making in a collective response. The following are key actions for protection leadership in these situations.

Analysis and Advice

Protection leadership demands in-depth, comprehensive and ongoing analysis that informs protection action, evidence-based advocacy, as well as humanitarian decision-making overall. Such analysis needs to go beyond UNHCR's population needs assessments and instead inform about the dynamics of the crisis and its impact on the threats, risks, vulnerabilities and capacities of forcibly displaced, stateless and, where relevant, crisis-affected populations or host communities. Key actions, therefore, include the following:

- Regularly produce **up-to-date protection analysis products** such as the standard UNHCR Protection Brief, applicable to both refugee and IDP situations, and the Protection Analytical Update, used in cluster settings. In contrast to operational updates, these products provide information on the protection situation to guide the policies and programming of all stakeholders, based on contextual knowledge and analysis of country-specific issues linked to human rights, drivers of conflict and compliance with relevant law and standards. UNHCR's Rights Mapping Tool (RiMAP) is another tool for in-depth policy analysis, particularly useful for development actors.
- **Regularly advise and update key stakeholders** on the protection situation through sharp and concise briefings, including through protection as a standing agenda item, together with strategic advice for collective action or advocacy. In IASC settings, this should involve the RC/HC and UNCT/HCT, helping fulfill the responsibility to ensure centrality of protection by engaging in intersectoral analysis of protection risks as the basis for identifying priority risks requiring collective action.
- In order to be comprehensive and effective, **protection analysis products** should be developed based on ongoing outreach and dialogue with humanitarian partners, and other relevant actors, not least **meaningful community-based engagement** to identify protection risks, needs and capacities, including community and crisis dynamics as well as the diverse perspectives of crisis-affected communities.
- **Practically invest** in UNHCR's ability, as well as its protection partners, to draw on their field presence and engagement with communities, as well as diverse sources of primary and secondary information, to obtain a deeper and up-to-date understanding of **protection trends and dynamics**. Such ongoing analysis should be the driver of protection action.
- Ensure a **monitoring mechanism** with support of information management, for the timely identification of key protection concerns that inform the overall humanitarian crisis and the priorities of the crisis-affected population.

Key Actions for Protection Leadership

1. Use UNHCR's protection expertise to **inform and drive decision-making** by the humanitarian community
2. Regularly provide sharp and concise **protection analysis** that draws on meaningful engagement with the crisis affected population
3. **Advocate publicly and privately** for better protection of crisis-affected populations including with governments, donors, parties to conflict and all duty bearers
4. **Respond** operationally in complementarity with other partners
5. **Coordinate** an inclusive and integrated approach to protection that meaningfully engages crisis-affected communities and harnesses the broad expertise of protection partners
6. **Remember** that affected people are often experts in their own protection

Advocacy

Leadership on protection frequently involves advocating publicly and privately for better protection of forcibly displaced, stateless and crisis-affected populations including with governments, donors, parties to conflict and all duty bearers. Key actions, therefore, include the following:

- Working with other protection actors, outline, and where applicable, champion, an **advocacy strategy**⁸, that identifies intended impact and/or anticipated change with regard to the protection risks/needs of the crisis-affected population and identify modalities, stakeholders and actors that can influence and support – or obstruct – the achievement of this protection objective.
- Organize **bilateral and multi-stakeholder policy dialogues** with a wide range of actors, including government and the diplomatic community, traditional and de-facto authorities and relevant non-state local actors such as civil society, human rights defenders, private sector as well as humanitarian, development, peace and human rights actors with influence on the response.
- Work to **align partners, starting with other protection actors** -- including those specialized in child protection, GBV, mine action and housing, land and property as well as OHCHR and human rights actors -- representing their views in the UNCT/HCT as part of an integrated approach to protection, while working with OCHA on access.
- As relevant, **engage with government**, including police and justice institutions; traditional and **de-facto authorities, and non-state local actors** including the private sector, academia, human rights defenders and other parts of civil society on key protection issues through policy dialogue, public and private advocacy, diplomacy, humanitarian negotiation and capacity-building.
- Stay abreast of **developments in global policy** in relation to protection while gaining an understanding and appreciation for system-wide initiatives, such as the Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights and the IASC Action Plan on Centrality of Protection, that provide a platform for country-level protection advocacy and regional/headquarters-level support and interventions.
- Build support and **strategic alliances among country leadership**, within and outside the humanitarian system, to advance and ensure buy-in for protection priorities.

Effective Advocacy on Protection

1. Champion **strategic analysis** and **system-wide responses** to protection
2. Generate **regular discussions and decisions** on protection, including as a standing agenda item on UNCT/HCTs
3. Build a "**protection coalition**" with like-minded partners
4. Spearhead contributions to **data and evidence** that inform the humanitarian community on threats, risks, vulnerabilities and capacities of crisis-affected populations
5. Engage with **state and non-state authorities, including armed groups, and other duty bearers**, on key protection issues through advocacy, diplomacy, negotiation and capacity-building
6. Promote the search for **solutions from the outset** of the emergency

⁸ The [Global Protection Cluster Protection Advocacy Toolkit](#) (2023) may be a useful reference.

Coordination

Based on inclusiveness and transparency, coordination is critical not only to minimize duplication and address sectoral gaps, but also to maximize individual and collective contributions to protection based on each partner's role, expertise and experience. Key actions include the following:

- Allocate **sufficient staffing and other resources** to meet coordination requirements (e.g., dedicated protection working group or protection cluster coordinator and support staff, including information management).
- In refugee settings, the **Protection Sector**, which may include technical sub-sectors to coordinate child protection and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response activities, should engage all actors in the production of a protection and solutions strategy, including refugees and host communities, and support other sectors to mainstream protection and inclusion considerations, ensuring that the overall response is designed with a protection-sensitive approach.
- In humanitarian emergencies where the Protection Cluster is activated, develop a **cluster strategy** that represents the needs of the **broader crisis-affected population**, irrespective of agency mandates, and which delineates priorities, capacities and interventions by protection actors, including areas of responsibility. The cluster strategy should be **supported by a robust operational response from UNHCR**.
- Promote **coherence and streamlining** of the protection coordination architecture, including pooling of resources where possible, while supporting local/national actors and AAP from the onset of the emergency.
- Forge **strong relationships with protection partners** (e.g., UNICEF, OHCHR, UNFPA and international and national NGOs engaged in protection activities), **meeting regularly as a protection coalition** on advocacy and operational coordination, as well as ICRC and the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.
- Invest and expand consultation and **dialogue with other actors**, including those outside the humanitarian sector, for expert advice and, where necessary, response (e.g., UN missions and peace operations, donors, civil society, academic networks, private sector – as appropriate and in accordance with the principle of “do no harm” – and policy actors, including regional entities).
- Where UNHCR is cluster coordinator for protection, shelter and CCCM, ensure **strategic tri-cluster leadership** that enables harmonized and complementarity action to maximize a protection impact. Promote an **integrated, area- and needs-based** approach to protection and foster a culture of inclusiveness with partners, while also acknowledging and harnessing differences in expertise and experience, including through a strategic use of UNHCR's three-cluster leadership inter-cluster coordination.

UNHCR as Protection Cluster Lead and Protection Agency

In non-refugee humanitarian emergencies, UNHCR has committed to steer the development and implementation of comprehensive cluster strategies, and, as Provider of Last Resort, mobilize internal and external resources to fill response gaps. The UNHCR representative is accountable to the HC on behalf of the Protection Cluster and of UNHCR as the cluster lead agency.

As protection cluster lead, UNHCR's obligation is to ensure clusters are well-run in fulfilling their core functions. As such, UNHCR should engage and mobilize protection partners through principles of partnership and, taking into account complementarities of mandate and expertise of relevant organizations, ensure coordinated delivery of protection for the crisis-affected population, including but not limited to those affected by conflict, displacement or disaster, as applicable.

Coordination alone is not enough. As a main protection agency, UNHCR should ensure a robust operational response that underpins and is aligned with the protection cluster strategy and drives implementation of protection in the humanitarian response plan.

Operations

Protection leadership requires not only analysis and advice, advocacy and coordination, but also a robust operational response that drives protection in a respective refugee response or humanitarian response plan. This should involve appropriate investment in standalone protection programming, joint protection and other sectoral interventions, as well as protection mainstreaming, such that key protection activities are implemented and government and partners are supported to advance protection for displaced, stateless and affected communities. Some key actions, among others, can include:

- In partnership with all relevant stakeholders and as a priority, seek to secure the **inclusion of affected people** throughout the displacement continuum in existing national systems and services, such as protection, housing, education, health, social safety nets, etc. and contribute to inter-agency efforts to strengthen national systems.
- Where national services are not available or not accessible, set up an effective operational response, based on UNHCR's comparative advantage, prioritizing **community-based protection, AAP mechanisms**, as well as interventions to **prevent, respond to and mitigate** the most urgent and immediate protection risks and needs, including registration, civil documentation, legal aid, protection from gender-based violence and child protection.
- Consider how UNHCR's **registration expertise and tools** can support others' operational responses during emergencies, such as modules of the proGres database and PRIMES system for partner assistance and services. Similarly, consider how community-based networks and AAP mechanisms and others can help shape partner programs.
- When facing **complex operational issues**, proactively offer advice based on protection monitoring and technical expertise. Examples range from humanitarian evacuations of communities facing an imminent threat to life (including leveraging UNHCR's expertise in emergency resettlement and complementary pathways); sensitization on maintaining the civilian character of asylum, including in sites; minimum standards for engagement in temporary cease fire arrangements in an ongoing armed conflict; supporting responses that contribute to freedom of movement and addressing displaced and hard-to-reach communities outside of camps; upholding safeguards and best interests consideration in issues affecting unaccompanied refugee children.

Solutions

Promoting durable solutions to refugee problems is a core part of UNHCR's mandate, with the ultimate objective to enable the forcibly displaced live their lives in dignity and peace. In UNHCR-led refugee responses and inter-agency responses to internal displacement, protection leadership involves promoting the search for solutions from the outset of the emergency and ensuring a protection lens by which success is measured in ensuring that refugees, internally displaced populations and affected persons are protected and obtain full respect for their rights. Key actions include the following:

- Prioritize actions that contribute to rendering **conditions conducive for safe, dignified and comprehensive solutions**, including (where relevant) for refugees returning from countries of asylum, including community engagement, law and policy, identity and other documentation of legal identity (including what is necessary to ensure the prevention and reduction of statelessness), shelter, secure land tenure, livelihoods, peaceful co-existence and conflict resolution.

- Play a **catalytic and supportive role with GCR stakeholders** in bolstering national ownership and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing for solutions, including through early involvement of development and peace actors.
- **Galvanize and contribute to government-led efforts** to address the needs of IDPs - including those who are integrating locally, returning to places of origin or settling in other parts of the country, as well as the wider displacement-affected community.
- In situations of internal displacement, support RC/HCs and UN/HCTs to develop a **government-owned and protection-oriented solutions strategy**, based on evidence-based protection analysis and a community-based protection approach prioritising interventions to prevent, respond and mitigate the most urgent and immediate protection risks to help ensure that protection is placed at the centre of the humanitarian response and solution efforts.
- Initiate and participate in multi-stakeholder **assessments, profiling and analysis**, engaging relevant national bodies and other actors to develop a comprehensive understanding of the longer-term protection and assistance needs, vulnerabilities, socio-economic conditions, capacities and aspirations of forcibly displaced and displacement-affected communities.
- Leverage UNHCR's broader field presence, proximity to the forcibly displaced, and experience in engaging communities and advocate for displaced voices to be at the centre of decision-making in solution planning, processes, and implementation.
- In situations of internal displacement, consider playing a leadership role in the Durable Solutions Working Group, where established, to ensure **protection considerations** are central to planning and decisions on **solutions**.



Conclusion

In the face of immense global challenges, with expanding emergencies and unprecedented levels of forced displacement, robust leadership and accountability is critical to ensure protection is at the core of collective responses, including refugee situations and inter-agency responses to humanitarian emergencies. This means that UNHCR not only internalizes the 'centrality of protection' in all its activities, but also plays a catalytic and supportive role, engaging humanitarian, development and peace actors in a collective effort to address key protection concerns for forcibly displaced, stateless and crisis-affected populations. Protection leadership does require an investment in, for example, sufficient capacity to undertake protection analysis, ensuring holistic coordination supported by robust operational delivery in key areas of the protection response, vigorous advocacy for protection space on behalf of all actors, and proactively lending its expertise to advise governments and partners on critical protection issues. While the dividends of proactive protection leadership have been most evident in emergencies, they are also relevant in non-emergency situations, helping address early warning signs of potential conflict, displacement or large-scale human rights violations and ensuring a firm protection foundation in transitions to longer-term development. With a mandate based on protection, UNHCR is well placed to ensure strong protection leadership, from preparedness efforts to immediate, life-saving activities, protracted situations and to seeking solutions.



Tips to Expand Interest and Engagement in Protection

1. Champion and defend protection space in UNHCR-led refugee responses and inter-agency responses to humanitarian emergencies.
2. Invest in and regularly provide concise, insightful and evidence-based protection analysis for the crisis-affected population, including by using the UNHCR Protection Brief
3. Elevate protection priorities (for the crisis-affected population in general and IDPs specifically) to the regional and global levels through relevant mechanisms, e.g., Human Rights Council, Security Council
4. In situations where UNHCR leads the clusters for protection, shelter and CCCM, fully leverage these partnerships at the strategic level, particularly on protection
5. Involve traditional and non-traditional partners in protection (including conflict, political and security) to strengthen system-wide responses for crisis-affected communities
6. Build strong alliances with local protection actors and the leads of the protection cluster areas of responsibility and non-protection actors and offer to lead or contribute to the development of an HCT protection strategy



This document, developed by the Division of International Protection in 2024, is meant to assist country representatives and staff in exercising a protection leadership role, both in UNHCR-led refugee responses and in responses to complex humanitarian emergencies. It is particularly relevant to situations where UNHCR is engaged in a complex humanitarian emergency, notably with internal displacement, or a natural disaster, irrespective of whether clusters (or cluster-like mechanisms) have been activated. Elements of this document may be equally relevant in situations where there are early warning signs of potential conflict, or large-scale human rights violations.

