

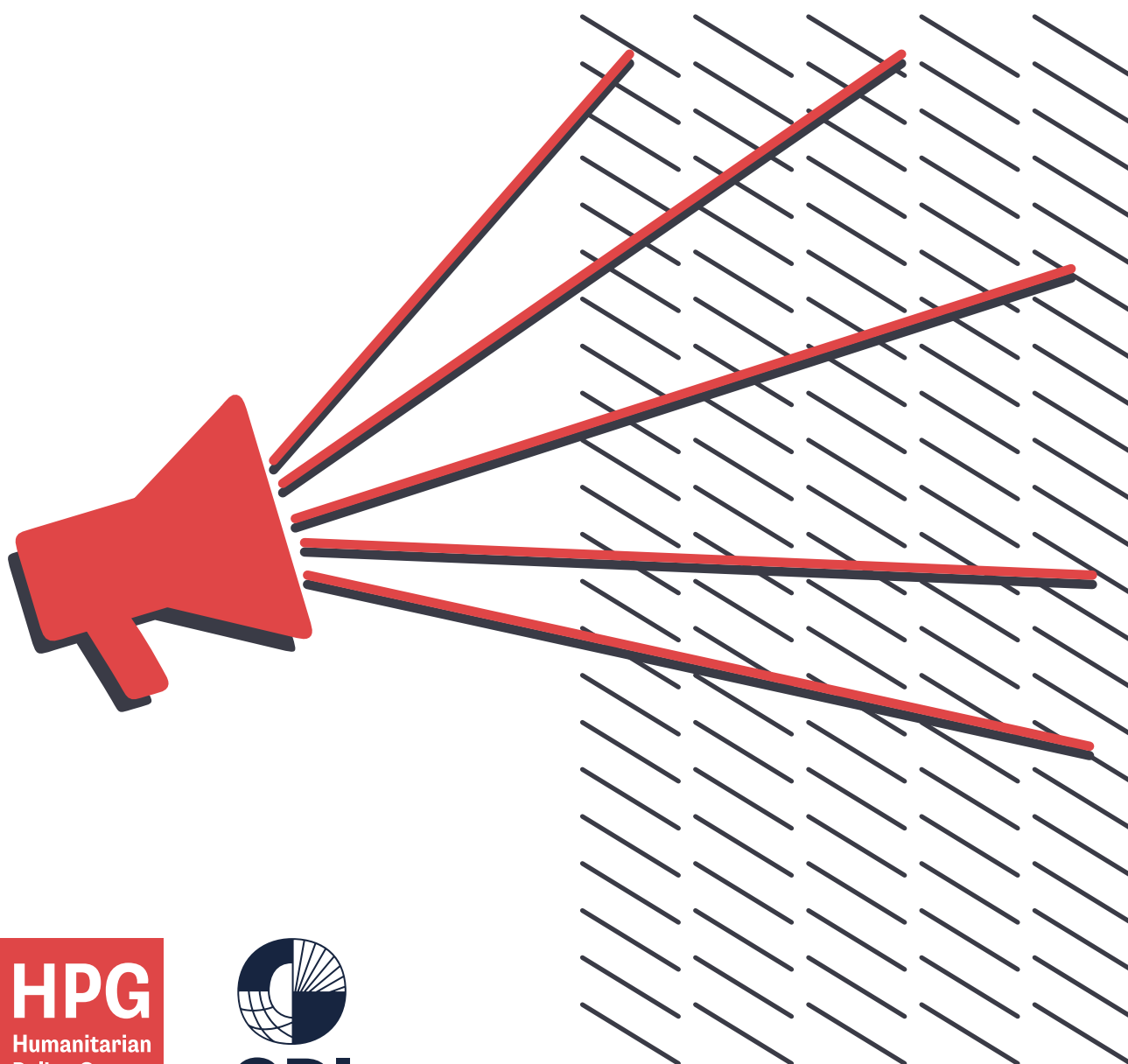
HPG briefing note

Protection advocacy by international NGOs in armed conflict situations

Breaking the barriers

Gemma Davies

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About the author

Gemma Davies is a Senior Research Fellow with HPG at ODI.

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Introduction

Collective efforts to enhance protection in humanitarian crises are a shared responsibility across humanitarian actors, as set out in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection Policy (IASC, 2016), while advocating for strengthened protection of civilians is a key part of humanitarian action (Lilly and Spencer, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). For decades, many international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have engaged in protection activities as part of their humanitarian work and have developed significant institutional capacities including for advocacy to promote the protection of civilians. Such advocacy can take many forms, both direct and indirect, ranging from private diplomacy, through third-party diplomatic channels, to public communication (Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). The advocacy capacity of INGOs has particularly evolved over the last two decades in response to widespread and grave abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law in contexts such as Darfur, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Syria, where the international community's abject failures to protect civilians in conflict became increasingly visible. INGOs vary significantly in the protection advocacy they undertake and how they prioritise and resource these efforts, with differences between global, regional and national offices within the same institution.

There is strong recognition that INGOs, particularly those with protection expertise, have a key role and added value in carrying out advocacy to promote the protection of civilians. They often have greater flexibility in approach and greater geographical coverage than their United Nations (UN) counterparts, as well as access to a wealth of information and networks through programmes, partners and communities. Some have also developed significant expertise in protection advocacy. However, research for this paper regarding the practice of INGOs in conducting protection advocacy is in line with broader trends across the humanitarian sector that previous HPG work also highlights:

- Efforts to influence the behaviour of state and non-state actors are largely ad-hoc.
- High levels of risk aversion (including from leadership) inhibit more effective advocacy.
- Utilising advocacy as a tool to improve protection of conflict-affected people has not been prioritised in recent years.
- Opportunities for more effective protection advocacy are not being strategically or consistently leveraged (see for example Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2020).

The humanitarian community, including INGOs with their specific expertise and collective capacities, needs to reaffirm its recognition of, and commitment to, carrying out advocacy to strengthen protection. They should consider where they are best placed to influence in increasingly complex, challenging and under-resourced responses, and provide adequate resources and support to priority protection advocacy issues.

4 HPG briefing note

This briefing note seeks to understand INGOs' current practice of protection advocacy, explore the challenges and dilemmas involved, and identify opportunities to strengthen protection advocacy. It is the outcome of action research conducted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) in a two-way process of engagement with INGOs, including the US-based INGO consortium, InterAction,¹ and INGO forums in two conflict contexts: north-east Nigeria and Libya.

In each context the research focused on a thematic issue selected in consultation with InterAction and the INGO forum. In Nigeria, the theme of protection risks related to conflict and hunger was chosen. In Libya, the theme selected was protection risks related to durable solutions for internally displaced people (IDPs) in the context of negotiated reconciliation agreements and their links to returns processes. INGOs are in the early stages of considering how they could strategically engage through advocacy on both themes.

This paper draws on the experiences of protection advocacy in Nigeria (on conflict and hunger) and Libya (on durable solutions), as well as the broader practice of INGO protection advocacy in both contexts and globally. This briefing note is based on a range of bilateral interviews, focus group discussions and a roundtable with interviewees from a range of both humanitarian and non-humanitarian organisations at national, regional and international levels. It predominantly relies on context-specific examples in Nigeria and Libya, with the purpose of framing them within the broader global context that shapes INGO's approach to protection advocacy in humanitarian settings. While the focus of this paper has been on INGOs, many of its findings are relevant across protection actors and the humanitarian sector more broadly.

This study is part of HPG's 2019–2022 Integrated Programme of research on protection advocacy, which explores the current practice of protection advocacy by a range of international humanitarian actors, and their collaboration with local and international actors within the humanitarian sector and beyond.

¹ InterAction is an alliance-based organisation of NGOs that work collectively to promote peace, eliminate poverty, strengthen human rights and ensure people's dignity. For more information see: www.interaction.org.

Box 1 Definition of protection advocacy

For the purposes of this paper, protection advocacy is defined as:

a core area of protection practice for both humanitarian and human rights agencies. It is about convincing decision-makers to change. Persuasion, mobilisation and denunciation are different types of advocacy. Any one of these approaches can operate on a spectrum that uses hard or soft messages, collaborative or confrontational postures, and private or public pressure. Advocacy is a skill that is required at all levels of protection action from the most local encounter to the grandest political arena. It encompasses everything from persuading the village chief to allocate land to displaced families to influencing a senior General on the conduct of his army.

Source: Slim and Bonwick (2005: 84)

Background

North-east Nigeria and Libya are both experiencing complex, protracted conflicts with widespread and grave threats to civilians, where all parties to the conflicts are responsible for abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law. In both contexts, the international community has engaged in a variety of ways, including politically, militarily, legally and in providing humanitarian assistance. However, international engagement has often predominantly focused on broader issues such as counter-terrorism and counter-migration laws and policies. This, as well as the dominance of military and political interests, can often overshadow and/or undermine humanitarian protection advocacy efforts and further compound protection risks. INGOs often feel powerless to influence these broader processes, which may impact both their willingness to invest in protection advocacy and its efficacy when they do.

In both contexts, INGOs have an established coordination forum with policy and protection expertise. Similarly, both contexts have a protection sector INGO co-coordinator. These forums are examples of how INGOs organise themselves and collaborate with other stakeholders for the purposes of, among others, collective protection analysis and advocacy.

Nigeria

Conflict, hunger and protection

The conflict in north-east Nigeria between the Nigerian state and the non-state armed group (NSAG) Boko Haram is considered to have begun in 2009. The original Boko Haram later split into multiple factions. These groups have networks to other extremist armed groups across the region and beyond (CIVIC, 2020). All armed groups, including NSAGs and government forces, carry out grave and widespread abuses against civilians (OHCHR, 2019). Early in the conflict, state security forces reportedly did little to distinguish between civilians and NSAGs (CIVIC, 2020). Evidence collected through this research indicates that the military continues to have difficulty distinguishing between civilians and combatants.

North-east Nigeria is experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis. It has alarming levels of food insecurity with some people facing famine-like conditions (WFP, 2021), primarily due to direct and indirect impacts of the conflict (UNSC, 2021b). Military-imposed movement restrictions, insecurity and forced displacement have removed people from their sources of food and livelihoods, particularly agriculture and fishing since people are unable, or face restrictions, to gain access to land for farming. NSAGs regularly carry out direct attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including roads and supply routes, settlements, markets and farms, which impedes access to food (UNOCHA, 2021). This research found that the government has claimed, in the presence of international actors, that they seek to cut off NSAGs' access to food and other basic means of survival as part of a military strategy. This, along with high levels of insecurity, has resulted in heavy restrictions on supplies and availability of services in areas where NSAGs are suspected to be present, as well as high levels of restrictions for civilians wishing to move into and out of government-held areas.

Food insecurity creates further risks to civilian safety. For example, civilians are subject to abduction, killing and other forms of violence while moving outside government-held towns to access farm land. Individuals and households who have limited access to food and livelihoods – predominantly female-headed households – risk further protection threats, including coerced survival sex,² forced marriage, child marriage, child labour and exploitation. Many of these risks disproportionately affect women and children.³

There is growing international momentum to address conflict-related hunger across a range of political, human rights and humanitarian actors, arguably providing opportunities for influencing.

2 Given some women are unable to access or have significant limitations in accessing assistance for basic needs, including firewood, many are coerced or forced into sex in exchange for assistance.

3 In areas of government control, women and children are often not allowed to collect firewood or to farm unless they are accompanied by an adult male. This means female- and child-headed households are particularly vulnerable to threats as a result of food insecurity.

7 HPG briefing note

For example, in 2018 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2417, which ‘recalls the link between armed conflict and violence and conflict-induced food insecurity and the threat of famine’ and strongly condemns unlawful denial of humanitarian access and the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare (UNSC, 2018). The UK appointed a Special Envoy on famine prevention in September 2020, while the G7 agreed a Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Crises Compact in May 2021. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has prioritised the right to food in armed conflict and protracted crises (UNGA, 2020). In March 2021, the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) established the high-level task force on preventing famine under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This has led to the ERC establishing country-level strategies for contexts at high risk of famine. As a result, Nigeria now has a Task Force on Food Insecurity led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).⁴

INGO advocacy in Nigeria

Since the start of the coordinated response in 2014, protection advocacy relevant to the conflict in north-east Nigeria has been limited across humanitarian actors, including INGOs. The sensitivities of the context and perceived limited opportunities for successful engagement resulted in humanitarian INGOs not prioritising investment in advocacy capacity. This gap is, in part, related to a lack of systematic documentation or analysis of protection issues.

Consultations conducted as part of this research reflected consensus that INGOs have key added value in carrying out protection advocacy in Nigeria. Collectively, they have a large footprint, reach and coverage, as well as partnerships with national organisations and communities. They also have a broad range of technical expertise and access to a wealth of evidence and networks. However, there are further opportunities to leverage this expertise. The Nigeria INGO Forum was created in 2014 as a platform to give INGOs a collective voice, including on issues of protection. It has more than 50 members with diverse mandates, priorities and approaches: given the complex protection issues in this context, agreeing on priority issues to focus on would always be a challenge. However, limited capacity for and lack of prioritisation of advocacy has undermined a strategic approach to collective protection advocacy across the membership, resulting in a gap in consensus on where and how INGOs can best influence, and what impact advocacy initiatives have had to date. In order to bridge this gap, INGO Forum members have started to collectively agree protection advocacy priorities across the membership.

4 UNOCHA is leading the Operational Task Force on Catastrophic Food Insecurity Conditions, which has a joint communication and advocacy strategy. While this is focused on the operational response to food insecurity, and does not have a specific protection lens, it explicitly acknowledges that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and protection actors should be engaged.

Libya

Internal displacement, return and reconciliation

Libya is perceived to be moving towards a fragile peace. Following the Berlin Conference held in January 2020, a series of developments have taken place to stabilise Libya. This includes a nationwide ceasefire agreement (UNSMIL, 2020) that led to the formation of a transitional government in February 2021. The more stable security situation has brought growing pressure from national and local government entities for IDPs to return to their areas of origin. Dialogue on durable solutions has predominantly focused on returns, with limited options for local integration considered. In several situations, IDPs were reportedly pressured to return, for example through threats of forced eviction, obstacles to provision of humanitarian assistance, and intimidation (Libya Protection Sector, 2021).

The government-promoted narrative of the Libyan conflict has remained the same since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. It has led to an over-simplified narrative of perpetrators and victims of abuses, without being sufficiently informed by changes in conflict dynamics. This has impacted the way the international community has historically engaged in peace and reconciliation agreements, the terms of those agreements, and their links to returns and reintegration. Powerful groups strongly influenced these discussions, including parts of national and local governments, with limited balanced representation of all affected groups. For example, the 2016 UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)-brokered agreement between the Misrata and Tawergha communities saw negotiated returns of Tawergha contingent on reparations (UNSMIL, 2016). Due to unequal terms that disproportionately benefitted Misratan communities, and because the agreement was not in line with international legal standards for safe, dignified and voluntary returns, UNSMIL and the international community, including protection and human rights actors, withdrew from this process and supported returns did not take place. Today, the lack of a reconstruction or reintegration plan, including budget to support this, means that returns have been predominantly spontaneous with ad hoc support from the international community.

INGO advocacy in Libya

Prior to the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, there was no recent history of a humanitarian response in Libya. This, combined with limited humanitarian presence within Libya due to the volatile nature of the conflict, unstable and decentralised government institutions and continuously shifting power dynamics, as well as high levels of mistrust of the international community, has resulted in significant barriers to building dialogue with Libyan authorities at all levels. This leaves a significantly restricted space for INGOs to carry out protection advocacy.

The international humanitarian response to the situation in Libya was first established in 2016 and remains relatively small with limited resources. The Libya INGO Forum was informally established in 2015; however, resourced coordination capacity was first in place only in 2018, with advocacy

capacity installed in 2019. Joint INGO capacity for protection advocacy is therefore relatively new, with a small number of INGOs having dedicated advocacy capacity within their teams. The fluctuating and turbulent nature of the conflict in Libya has necessitated INGOs to predominantly engage in short-term, reactive advocacy. Coupled with this, where there have been opportunities for longer-term advocacy, this has predominantly been focused on protection related to refugees and migrants following the refugee and migrant crisis in 2015. As such, protection advocacy efforts have either focused on international actors, mechanisms and member states, or on local levels within Libya. This has resulted in significant challenges in identifying key advocacy targets and influencing change.

If the fragile peace holds in Libya, there may be opportunities to pursue longer-term approaches to advocacy. INGOs are currently focusing on approaches to strengthen protection advocacy linked to the political process, while considering how they can build a collective approach. This includes on the issue of durable solutions linked to reconciliation, should the political and security situation remain relatively stable.

Barriers to carrying out effective protection advocacy

It is well understood that carrying out advocacy to promote the protection of civilians in crises is sensitive, complex and can be risky. It requires individuals and organisations to make difficult calculations to balance priorities to carry out advocacy, ensuring that affected populations, staff and operations are not put at undue risk, all while maintaining delivery of programmes. Reaching consensus across humanitarian organisations on priority protection issues to advocate on, and advocacy positions to take, will always be challenging given the varied mandates, priorities, and risk appetite of each organisation and the individuals within it. This results in obstacles to organisations taking a strategic approach to advocacy or finding the space to carry out effective protection advocacy. As Bridges states: ‘advocacy [is] taking place without adequate support or resources, staff being excessively risk averse thanks to misinterpretation of organisational mandates and unsynchronised, ad hoc targeting strategies being employed’ (Bridges, 2010: 1258–1259).

Lack of leadership support for advocacy

Shortcomings of strategic approaches to advocacy are, in part, linked to the reticence of humanitarian leadership to raise issues of protection both within UN agencies and INGOs at national, regional and global levels. There are tensions between UN agencies and INGOs about priority protection issues and approaches to advocacy in both Libya and north-east Nigeria. The UN can be perceived as a gatekeeper that drives the agenda, narratives and priorities within the response. This emphasises the power dynamics at play, where UN agencies have greater control

over funding allocations and often operate as donors. UN-led processes were found, at times, to explicitly silence protection issues. For example, in Nigeria, respondents reported that some INGO inputs on issues of protection and access – including protection risks as a result of links between hunger, movement and access – were disregarded by UN counterparts in joint reports due to concerns of possible negative repercussions on the humanitarian response. This includes submissions for the 2020 UNSG Protection of Civilians report.

In Libya, the presence of an integrated mission means UN leadership focuses on the peace process, political outcomes and stabilisation, which risks these taking precedence over humanitarian operations. While the Berlin process has commitments to uphold international humanitarian and human rights law as well as support Libya's transition towards political solutions (UNSMIL, 2020; 2021), humanitarian and protection issues are less of a priority. This leaves limited space for humanitarian actors to engage in protection advocacy.

In both Nigeria and Libya, interviewees reported that UN and INGOs were polarised on many issues. UN and INGOs do not necessarily need to work jointly on advocacy, but disconnect between these key sets of actors undermines the efficacy of advocacy efforts to strengthen protection.

Challenges faced by UN leadership can lead to reticence in taking positions on protection issues. These include prioritisation of maintaining constructive relationships with host governments, as well as lack of senior-level support within the UN system at headquarters (HQ) and from member states, as highlighted in related HPG research (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). Lack of independence of senior UN officials at HQ to host governments can be particularly pronounced when UN officials are nationals of the host country. This is regularly cited as a key barrier to how protection risks are addressed in Nigeria.

INGO leadership, too, are not prioritising protection advocacy. Interviewees in both contexts repeatedly discussed the self-censorship and lack of appetite for protection advocacy among INGO senior management, including in specialist protection agencies. Carrying out protection advocacy can result in real and perceived risks for humanitarian organisations, as well as to individuals and their careers – a risk that many are unwilling, feel unsupported, or lack incentives to take. One INGO leader described their opinion of how perceived challenges contributed to the lack of prioritisation of protection advocacy:

Real protection issues are very difficult, the risks of getting involved are high ... so, we deprioritise protection issues because they are so difficult. ... If we want to challenge the conflict parties, who is willing to do this?

Self-censorship can often be linked to historical trends where a lack of prioritisation of advocacy had become a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. There are disincentives for INGO leadership to carry out protection advocacy: INGOs' reporting requirements to donors and their metrics of success for country programmes are often related to the number of beneficiaries reached, the

size of programmes, and the extent to which these are increased. This contributes to implicit disincentives as protection advocacy can be perceived to undermine these objectives by potentially jeopardising access and delivery of programmes.

Lack of commitment and leadership often leads to a lack of agreement on prioritising protection issues, or lack of consensus on appropriate responses and advocacy positions at key forums such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). This can lead to a real or perceived lack of space within the response for INGOs to raise protection issues at all levels, including the HCT. When protection issues are raised, interviewees suggest there is rarely action, feedback or information as to whether and how this has been used in advocacy initiatives and external engagement. Respondents indicated a weariness in raising protection issues that are continually deprioritised or blocked by UN counterparts. INGOs are said to be often isolated in raising protection issues and at times simply not heard. These barriers place limitations on INGOs more strategically using their position to advocate for the prioritisation of protection issues within the humanitarian response. For example, in Libya, it is reported that protection concerns were not consistently appearing on briefings to the Assistant Secretary General (ASG)/Resident Coordinator(RC)/Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) as messages to be raised with authorities, as coordinated by the HCT.

The chilling effect: lack of prioritisation of protection advocacy by protection and advocacy personnel

The reticence of leadership to carry out protection advocacy has a chilling effect on the willingness of protection actors, including INGOs, to carry out protection advocacy. Interviewees described how protection staff were uncomfortable in pursuing advocacy, including private advocacy, on protection issues. Protection personnel are rightly focused on ensuring the safety of beneficiaries and delivering protection services and programmes. Often, there is a lack of recognition of the strategic role of advocacy as a tool that can be deployed to effectively prevent and respond to protection risks. As such, protection personnel can be reticent to work with advocacy teams to seek creative ways to conduct advocacy without creating risks for beneficiaries.

Similarly, advocacy experts face barriers to prioritising protection issues. There are high levels of reticence among protection staff in sharing potentially sensitive information, even within their organisations. Raising protection concerns is divisive and polarises opinions as to the approach, risks and dilemmas to responding. Advocacy experts feel they are always responsible for raising unwelcome issues, leading to weariness in seeking authorisation to carry out advocacy on protection.

The ever present trade-offs, challenges and incentives of prioritising advocacy to maintain access and delivery of services, balanced with the lack of incentives for prioritising protection advocacy, can result in sanitised advocacy messages. While it is critical for humanitarian actors to continue to deliver life-saving assistance, it can lead to a situation in which the best interests of affected

populations are not necessarily central to advocacy positions. This raises questions about the level of commitment on the part of humanitarian actors to protection, as advocacy for improved humanitarian access and operations is too often prioritised over advocacy to strengthen protection.

A rethink is required, with a focus on what affected populations and national actors need from the international humanitarian community and how that can best be delivered, considering the different roles protection actors can play and the benefits of collaborative advocacy. For example, some organisations will be better placed to prioritise delivery of services while others seek to prioritise advocacy, deploying a range of complementary approaches. Regular engagement across a range of actors is required, particularly with local and national actors, on when they would prefer INGOs to prioritise protection advocacy, even where there is a risk, while they and others continue to deliver services. Linked to this, considerations too often focus on the risks of carrying out advocacy rather than on the benefits of advocacy and risks of *not* carrying out advocacy, for example risks to populations, to upholding the principle of humanity and of undermining the stated mandate of organisations.

These examples demonstrate the knock-on ‘chilling effect’ in carrying out protection advocacy. INGOs have been seeking ways around these challenges. For example, in both Libya and Nigeria, INGO forums were taking a leading role in developing advocacy positions and strategies, advocating as a collective and creating distance from individual operational organisations. However, such approaches can only go so far, and barriers remain. These can result in protection issues not being adequately reflected at international level, with implications for the depth of international understanding of protection issues at play. This can, in turn, impact resulting international responses.

Evidence and analysis

Strong evidence and protection analysis is crucial for effective advocacy (ICRC, 2018; InterAction, 2018). INGOs, with their broad collective presence and programmes, have access to a wealth of information on protection risks that could be used to inform advocacy efforts. However, this research indicates that such information is often not systematically documented, shared or analysed by or between humanitarian organisations.

There are a number of reasons for weaknesses in information-sharing that are common across humanitarian actors. Findings from this study reflect those in InterAction’s 2018 stocktake on the IASC Protection Policy and Centrality of Protection, as well as other research (Niland et al., 2015). Reasons cited include concerns over security and the use of data, organisations seeking to control information while competing for funding, and fears that some information could reflect negatively on the agency, for example if it reflects poorly on the performance of the organisation. The lack

of trust between and across organisations, as well as the competitive nature of the humanitarian system, is a major impediment to collective approaches to protection advocacy. Concerted and consistent efforts are required to change such mindsets (InterAction, 2018).

Challenges in building evidence to inform advocacy also relate to structural issues. There is often a disconnect within INGOs between programme and advocacy teams, as well as between organisations. INGOs collect a wealth of data through their programmes, including for protection; however, too often systematic documentation of protection risks outside of specific protection programmes is not collected and/or shared for advocacy purposes. There are current efforts seeking to overcome these challenges. In February 2021, the IASC issued operational guidance on data responsibility in humanitarian action (IASC, 2021), while in August 2021 the Global Protection Cluster published a Protection Analytical Framework to provide guidance in undertaking robust, context-specific protection analysis (GPC, 2021). But a mindset shift is required for there to be continuous documentation and sharing of information for advocacy purposes, even within individual organisations. This could be a shared resource through coordination forums, including INGO forums.

Humanitarian actors are aware that robust, continuous, context-specific analysis is key to carrying out effective protection advocacy. While many humanitarian actors, including INGOs, lack adequate resources for this level of analysis, some organisations have invested in this capacity. For example, Mercy Corps has invested in political-economy analysis in many countries, including Nigeria. While this is not specifically protection-focused, it contributes to protection risk analysis and informs senior management approaches to advocacy and programming (InterAction, 2021). If challenges – real or perceived – associated with information-sharing can be overcome, INGOs could seek opportunities to further utilise this analysis, or could consider resourcing and sharing it through a common platform.

Conflict analysis should include a joint stakeholder and power analysis to identify entry points for leverage and engagement. In Libya, there are several teams carrying out analysis and scenario mapping, including the conflict sensitivity forum,⁵ which could be built on. More detailed evidence and tailored analysis would not only strengthen informed positions among INGOs but could also facilitate a wider range of relevant organisations working together – for example, with peacebuilding and human rights actors and, in contexts such as Libya, transitional justice actors. Building stronger partnerships is crucial in this regard, including with local and national actors.

5 The Conflict Sensitivity Forum is an informal platform within the humanitarian response and managed by the Peaceful Change Initiative. A range of peacebuilding and humanitarian organisations participate in this forum.

Strategies, tactics and approaches to influence change

There are clear benefits of INGOs advocating as a collective. It allows organisations to leverage their expertise, share risk and maximise opportunities for impact. INGO forums offer organisations a platform to advocate collectively at the national level and leverage relevant regional and global platforms, such as through InterAction and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) or membership of global forums.

To be effective, advocacy strategies require a theory of change. However, as is the case in many other humanitarian responses, neither Nigeria nor Libya has a response-wide HCT or protection cluster advocacy strategy (Lilly and Spencer, 2020). The HCT in Nigeria has a Centrality of Protection strategy, developed in 2017, which is currently being revised with protection advocacy included. The HCT protection strategy in Libya was redrafted in 2021. However, as with many HCT protection strategies, there is no implementation plan, monitoring or actionable objectives (see for example GPC, 2020). In Nigeria, an action plan for the revised HCT protection strategy is being drafted; it is broad, however, and there is a need for a clear approach to monitoring it within the HCT. Protection sector strategies have been developed in both contexts, but only make broad references to the use of advocacy without clear priorities or identified approaches.

At the time of writing, INGO forums in Nigeria and Libya were at varying stages of developing and implementing their own advocacy strategies. One challenge is the lack of dedicated capacity to implement sustained advocacy. Across humanitarian responses, staffing gaps and turnover, low funding allocation and short-term funding cycles have led to difficulties in sustaining long-term approaches to advocacy. In both Libya and Nigeria, as in many responses, lack of consensus on approaches to advocacy – whether due to political challenges or different agendas – can lead to a lack of space to strategically carry out advocacy. As previous research found, the ‘lack [of] a strategic and unified approach’ across humanitarian actors limits the potential for success of advocacy efforts – both in these contexts and across humanitarian responses (Niland et al., 2015; ALNAP, 2018).

Aligned regional and/or global advocacy

Members of INGO forums have global-level offices with dedicated teams for carrying out advocacy focused on entities such as the UN/UN Security Council, European Union and international organisations in Geneva. Many are part of, and/or have staff deployed in strategic posts, for example within the GPC, or have technical partnerships to strengthen protection advocacy. Where there are opportunities relevant to advocacy activities, INGOs have been leveraging these networks and capacities. However, there can be disconnect between advocacy priorities across national, regional and international offices, where different crises and issues within crises can overshadow others.

In Nigeria, regional relationships between INGOs and UN agencies are more collegial where there are more open dialogue and collaborative efforts through formal and non-formal mechanisms. Linked to active research for this report, INGOs have recently been engaging more systematically in relevant regional forums to support advocacy and coordinate advocacy positions.

In Libya, displacement is central to regional and global INGO advocacy, with growing momentum to leverage operational and policy guidance from other contexts and adapt it to be specific to Libya. For examples, INGOs in Libya have engaged with the East Africa Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) for the purpose of peer learning. INGOs are known to be proactive in mobilising global networks and membership around specific events. An example is the second Berlin conference, held in June 2021, which focused almost exclusively on the political process. INGOs leveraged their global networks and the HQs of their membership, as well regional and national networks, to align on advocacy positions. Collectively they emphasised that sustainable stabilisation can only be achieved by ensuring that the lives and needs of affected populations are central to stabilisation initiatives, and that such initiatives lead to improvement in the lives of the most vulnerable (NRC, 2021). This was complemented by private advocacy to gain support for advocacy positions and recommendations.

Lastly, INGOs face limited entry points in engaging those states and/or regional bodies that increasingly exert significant influence over particular crises but may be less familiar or friendly to advocacy positions. This risks organisations reverting to delivering advocacy positions to supportive member states where they have dialogue and capacity, for example in New York, Brussels and Geneva, at the expense of targeting states which are not allies of advocacy positions but which may have more influence. Cultivating trust and relationships with regional bodies such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States and Association of Southeast Asian Nations would require a significant long-term investment that many organisations cannot manage. However, there could be opportunities to explore dedicated positions representing a collective of INGOs as a shared resource, for example through InterAction or ICVA.

Framing: international to national; principled to pragmatic

Given international humanitarian and human rights law are the normative frameworks for international protection, they are understandably the main basis for advocacy by protection actors. However, this is often at the expense of contextual framing, resulting in overly internationalised, generic and vague use of legalistic positions.

Linked to this is the tendency of protection actors to revert to denunciation based on international frameworks, often at the expense of persuasion and/or mobilisation. This can lead to perceptions that advocacy positions based solely on international frameworks are, at times, unrealistic as a tool to influence. It also assumes that advocacy targets have the same moral and legal values as those delivering advocacy – and that those values are considered of enough interest and importance to the advocacy target that referring to international frameworks is enough to influence change. For

example, the Government of Nigeria has reportedly indicated that international humanitarian law does not apply in Nigeria because the military operation constitutes a counter-terrorism operation.⁶ While there is a role for organisations to remind the government that international humanitarian law *does* apply in counter-terror contexts, simply restating this – without situating it within the context or engaging in propositions towards potential solutions – may have limited impact. The proliferation and fragmentation of NSAGs in conflicts around the world, the increasing power of actors outside of formalised governance systems, and the waning influence of traditional states and systems emphasises the need for approaches grounded in cultural and contextual understanding.

There is a tactical balance to be struck by using a combination of approaches where international frameworks are complemented with an understanding of the interests and incentives of advocacy targets, grounded in relevant regional and national laws, policies and social constructs. This requires a balanced assessment of the risks and benefits of deploying principled and/or pragmatic approaches and of the potential for success in reducing risks for civilians. This goes back to implementing a theory of change. For example, the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) has for years been involved in sustained dialogue with governments and militaries focusing on approaches to mitigate civilian harm, rather than solely focusing on legalistic arguments (CIVIC, 2021). For example, in Nigeria and the Sahel this has seen developments in policies to strengthen the protection of civilians.

These trade-offs can be further balanced through collaborative approaches. For example, forced evictions have been taking place in Libya, which risks large-scale forced displacement. While some organisations have taken the position that forced evictions should not take place under any conditions, others have sought to influence the conditions under which evictions take place. With such sensitive issues, there are no clear solutions, and humanitarian organisations need to ensure they do not legitimise abuses by state and non-state actors. There are examples where collaborative action using both principled and pragmatic approaches can have impact. For example, when forced evictions were taking place on a mass scale in Mogadishu, Somalia, human rights and humanitarian organisations documented abuses and raised international attention to them, undertaking a range of complementary private and public advocacy approaches. This created pressure on Somali authorities, allowing humanitarian protection actors to work with the government on the conditions under which evictions took place (HPG interviews, 2021; see also Amnesty International, 2013).

One interviewee urged all organisations in Libya engaged in advocacy to ‘think in Arabic’, with analysis, messages and asks based on the context and referring to local and familiar frameworks. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) conducted an analysis of Libyan legal frameworks relevant to refugees and migrants and produced a legal guide, including to inform advocacy positions; however, utilisation of this analysis is reported to be low (ICMPD, 2020). ICMPD are currently conducting a review of all legislation relevant to IDP protection in

6 Both Boko-Haram and Islamic State West Africa are proscribed groups.

Libya, including the decisions of national bodies. The final product will present opportunities to strengthen advocacy grounded in national frameworks. For example, the Supreme Judicial Council have made some progressive judgements relevant to the returns of IDPs. Referring to these positions of a respected authority in Libya could strengthen the potential for impact. Limited use of national legal and policy frameworks in advocacy positions emphasises the need for INGOs to work in closer collaboration with national actors in the development of advocacy approaches. It also emphasises the requirement to strengthen complementarity between international humanitarian and non-humanitarian organisations, such as human rights and peacebuilding actors, who may have greater capacity to analyse such frameworks.

In Libya, discussions on collective INGO advocacy positions towards forced evictions took place, including whether ‘red lines’ relevant to durable solutions would be defined.⁷ This too presents dilemmas: where red lines are defined, all INGOs would need to observe them. Without this, any influence over the process of evictions would be lost. An alternative approach could be to move beyond red lines and consider how to mitigate identified risks to civilians. Organisations can then identify the level of residual risk that they are willing, individually and collectively, to take (InterAction, 2018).

Targets, partners and interlocutors

In both Nigeria and Libya, INGOs expressed a preference for advocacy with a range of direct and indirect targets. However, actual practice is predominantly focused on indirect advocacy – a finding that is consistent across humanitarian actors in different contexts (Lilly and Spencer, 2020). In both contexts, various INGOs have different levels of access to parts of government at national and subnational level, and these have faced limitations due to constraints on sustained presence.

Most humanitarian actors, including INGOs, had no direct engagement with NSAGs in either context (Lilly and Spencer, 2020). In Nigeria, national counter-terror legislation denotes dialogue with NSAGs as illegal, leaving very little room for engagement. In Libya, NSAGs are fragmented and volatile, while limited INGO presence negates opportunities for the level of analysis and trust required for engagement. Altogether, there are clearly very high risks and few opportunities for all humanitarian actors, including INGOs, to directly engage NSAGs.

National and subnational governments

In both Nigeria and Libya, senior INGO representatives are not continuously present in conflict-affected areas, which has undermined opportunities to build relationships with government

7 ‘Red lines’ refer to a critical situation or set of circumstances where INGOs cease to operate or engage as it would undermine humanitarian principles and/or international human rights standards. See InterAction (2018).

stakeholders. In Libya, the government has high levels of mistrust for foreign entities, including UN agencies and INGOs. Additionally, most INGOs do not have sustained presence in the capital, which has undermined opportunities to build dialogue with the central government and relevant authorities. Given the limited legitimacy and acceptance of the central government outside of Tripoli, there is a need to strengthen engagement at both subnational and local levels. INGOs have stronger presence here, with varying levels of engagement for operational purposes. This can be built on to engage in dialogue to promote protection.

In Nigeria, INGOs have some engagement with parts of government at the national level. However, in Borno state, where humanitarian needs are the highest, relationships between the state government and INGOs are poor. In both contexts, where there *is* engagement with government actors, dialogue is predominantly restricted to issues of operations and access. These challenges result in low levels of consistent and coherent engagement with government on protection advocacy.

Some level of engagement with authorities is required to maximise opportunities to influence government positions relevant to protection. In Nigeria, INGOs' tone of communication to government are reported to come across as combative at times, risking closing down avenues of communication. In other contexts, INGO engagement with government is deferential. Building trust is required to effectively influence. Who represents organisations in engaging with government, how they are perceived and how they communicate requires consideration. Representatives should be credible to government counterparts, experienced in negotiation and familiar with government positions and interests. This requires cultural and contextual understanding. The government, or parts of the government, could be considered as allies rather than solely targets of lobbying. In Nigeria, for instance, the Borno state governor has had a continuous position that in-kind food assistance is not sustainable. This could be an entry point to engage the government in dialogue on potential alternatives to livelihoods and identify opportunities to relax restrictions on free movement in specific areas where security conditions are permissible. While governments may have political agendas to push, a level of sustained engagement with government counterparts is key to overcoming mistrust and misunderstandings and advancing a dialogue on protection.

Box 2 Military engagement for advocacy in north-east Nigeria

Protection risks linked to conflict-related hunger in north-east Nigeria are in part linked to military-imposed restrictions. However, INGOs, like most humanitarian actors, have limited engagement with the military on protection issues. UNOCHA hosts a Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) forum,ⁱ where dialogue is predominantly focused on issues of access and security. At the time of writing, INGOs were not adequately represented and were rarely consulted on dialogue that had taken place on behalf of humanitarian organisations with the military. Personnel within UNOCHA and within the Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF) frequently changes, representing a barrier to building trust and sustained dialogue. Reportedly, protection issues were rarely discussed and there were questions as to the level of familiarity that CMCoord personnel had with international humanitarian law.

It is questionable whether humanitarian organisations have the level of detailed analysis required on the intersection of food insecurity-related protection threats with movement and livelihood restrictions at a local level in order to consider solutions. Organisations outside the humanitarian response have built a dialogue with parts of the military in north-east Nigeria over time and have been able to constructively engage in dialogue on protection issues. INGOs could consider the implications of various advocacy approaches, and what approaches might achieve results – for example, the chances of success through condemnation compared to solutions-oriented dialogue.

For example, in north-east Nigeria, where movement and livelihood restrictions vary significantly between locations, there could be opportunities to consider examples of positive actions taken by the military to enable livelihoods and seek to engage in dialogue by building on these. This could provide opportunities to engage in phased advocacy: building a relationship through dialogue on these positive actions could allow for subsequent conversations on more sensitive protection issues.

There may also be opportunities for indirect engagement where relationships exist. For example, a range of INGOs have a dialogue with the US Department of Defense on protection of civilians; the US and UK militaries are present in Nigeria and offer joint civil-military cooperation training to NAF,ⁱⁱ and non-humanitarian actors hold direct relationships with military and engage them on protection issues. These relationships could offer entry points to strengthen direct or indirect engagement on issues of protection. However, this would require INGOs to invest in dedicated and adequate relevant CMCoord, protection of civilians and engagement capacity in the long term.

- i UNOCHA coordinate a Civil–Military Coordination Working Group in north-east Nigeria, which provides guidance, policy and operational support and advice to the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator/HCT. The CMCoord Forum is an operational platform. There is a CMCoord forum in Abuja, where both operational and strategic discussions can be discussed; however, this does not meet regularly, INGOs are not part of it, and it does not seem that protection issues are discussed here.
- ii The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office previously led initiatives aiming to work with the UK Ministry of Defence in Nigeria to further Nigeria’s protection of civilians policy, and set up civil–military engagement of humanitarian organisations directly with NAF, including in Maiduguri.

Local and national actors

Despite the strong drive to strengthen localisation in humanitarian responses, humanitarian actors are still falling short of recognising and supporting the capacities of local actors in protection responses, including for advocacy (see Metcalfe-Hough, 2019; Lilly and Spencer, 2020). The GPC Strategic Framework 2020–2024 recognises this, and prioritises the need for protection actors to amplify local voices and represent local advocacy positions to relevant targets (Lilly and Spencer, 2020).

In recent years, steps have been taken to address this. For example, South Sudan and Jordan have national NGO forums, which are supported to various degrees by INGO forums, while Somalia and Palestine have national NGO representation in protection and NGO forums – with similar examples across many responses. In both Nigeria and Libya, INGOs have formed partnerships with a range of local actors. National organisations have relationships with government at local, subnational and national levels, as well as with relevant line ministries, that INGOs do not necessarily have. This presents opportunities for INGOs and national organisations to conduct joint analysis and build on the networks that partners have in place.

INGOs at times have specifically not engaged national partners in protection advocacy due to valid concerns that it might pose to risks to the partners. However, INGOs recognise that this means they have not adequately engaged national actors in protection analysis, advocacy strategies or the assessment of risks to the range of partners carrying out advocacy; instead, risks were, to an extent, assumed. In Nigeria, one national NGO representative said they felt better placed than INGOs to lobby government directly, particularly at local levels, as well as relevant line ministries where they had existing relationships. In Libya, a national actor interviewed was more cautious about the risks, while HPG research in South Sudan found that national actors had experienced retaliation for carrying out protection advocacy (Davies and Spencer, forthcoming). There are, however, opportunities for INGOs to assess risks in partnership with local actors to inform the advocacy approach and the roles actors will take, and then allow individuals and organisations to make informed choices on the level of acceptable risk to all actors.

Similarly, INGOs are engaged with community networks through programmes, and there are opportunities to build on these for the purposes of advocacy. The INGO forum in Nigeria recently carried out community stakeholder mapping in areas of operation, including where influence lies – for example, across elders and religious and community leaders – and is developing a community engagement strategy based on this. While still a work in progress, this demonstrates the value of collective investment in carrying out analysis.

The need to strengthen networks with national actors, including partners, national staff, civil society and diaspora, was recognised as a key gap for INGOs in both Libya and Nigeria. It requires long-term investment in building relationships and allocated capacity for continued and consistent engagement. Effectively building on these networks would provide opportunities for improved analysis and more complementary positions between national and international actors. INGOs should develop and use existing networks to seek to elevate the voice of affected populations and local and national actors. They could also play a convening role by opening up space and supporting local and national actors to directly engage with decision-makers at national, regional and global levels.

Collaboration with non-humanitarian actors

There is recognition among humanitarian actors that ‘addressing the complex protection threats against civilians affected by armed conflict requires a holistic, multidisciplinary response from a range of international actors’ (Metcalf-Hough, 2021: 3). Policy discussions around the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and the UNSG’s ‘Call to Action for Human Rights’ have promoted collaborative approaches, but questions remain on the implications of greater collaboration for managing risks and challenges. Too often this continues to result in siloed approaches between sets of actors while differences of opinion remain regarding what level of collaboration is desirable (see Metcalf-Hough, 2021).

In many responses, including Libya and Nigeria, there is limited evidence of coordinated dialogue or collaborative approaches across different sets of actors, including humanitarian and non-humanitarian INGOs (see Lilly, 2020). Siloed approaches not only lead to missed opportunities for organisations to leverage their respective advantages; more importantly, they can create additional risks for civilians and put populations at harm. For example, in Libya and Nigeria, a comprehensive and safe approach to returns and reintegration requires safety guarantees, including for routes of return, access to services and infrastructure, access to economic and social infrastructure, and meaningful reconciliation, social cohesion and justice efforts. This requires inputs and a level of alignment as to analysis, operational and policy approaches from a range of humanitarian, human rights, peacebuilding, security and development actors. If these are absent, it could impact conflict dynamics and create further protection risks to civilians.

In Libya, there is a human rights unit embedded within UNSMIL; and in Nigeria, there is a human rights adviser to the RC’s office. In both contexts, human rights organisations are engaged in

similar protection issues to humanitarian INGOs, and peacebuilding actors are active to varying extents on issues of protection – there are opportunities to build more collaborative approaches to protection advocacy between these sets of actors. In Libya, this research brought together representatives from a range of humanitarian, human rights and transitional justice organisations. A number of participants noted that these dialogues were the first time in years that this range of organisations had come together, and spoke of the benefits of joint analysis. INGOs are particularly well placed to progress more collaborative approaches to advocacy with human rights and/or peacebuilding actors, given their flexibility, overlapping mandates, multi-mandates, expertise within INGOs that undertake both humanitarian and/or peacebuilding or human rights activities, and their shared objective of reducing risks for populations.

Diplomatic and donor actors

The diplomatic and donor community have a powerful voice and are often key targets and allies for INGO advocacy, representing a key channel for INGOs to represent advocacy positions. In both countries, donors sit on the HCT and have supported INGOs in taking forward advocacy positions, including to the HC/RC and other HCT members as well as their political counterparts.

INGOs engage regularly with donors and states at national, regional and global levels – including at key forums such as the UNSC. For example, at the 10 September 2021 UNSC meeting on the situation in Libya, violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as concerning restrictions of humanitarian access, were discussed. While causality as a result of private advocacy will always be difficult to assess, UNSC statements and those of delegates indicate some success whereby INGO positions were emphasised (UNSC, 2021a). This is a regular tactic for INGOs. However, a familiar challenge in conducting private high-level advocacy is understanding how that information has been used. Interviewees relayed the need for further follow up to be carried out in understanding what actions had been taken by third-party states and what the outcomes were in order to identify opportunities for follow up.

Risks and challenges

The significant challenges, risks and dilemmas involved in carrying out protection advocacy are not new, and are evolving (Metcalf-Hough, 2020). Advocating on protection issues poses dilemmas for humanitarian organisations in balancing the responsibility to advocate for the strengthened protection of civilians against judgements as to the potential associated risks, including to affected populations, organisational duty of care to staff and ensuring the continued delivery of programmes. This can require difficult judgements in deciding when, how and if to advocate.

While an understanding of potential risks related to conducting protection advocacy is paramount, this study found that the range of potential risks is often assumed rather than

assessed and can be overstated or oversimplified. In Nigeria, INGOs' perceived risks of retaliation by the government related to past experiences of retaliation; however, none of these past events were related to protection advocacy. While the risks referred to – such as threats to or actual suspension of operations; closure of programmes; and increasing restrictions introduced to INGOs in requirements to operate, including registration and restrictions on imports and work permits – had been experienced by INGOs, they were often historic, isolated cases or were linked to specific circumstances. INGOs can experience an extremely challenging operating environment in Nigeria, including facing unfounded accusations by government officials. For example, local government and military have claimed that some INGOs support NSAGs. In the past these allegations led to the temporary suspension of INGOs. This, coupled with the mistrust towards INGOs – as demonstrated by instances of government officials publicly claiming in press releases that individual staff members and/or organisations were working against the government or in support of NSAGs – has had a chilling effect on the willingness of organisations to carry out advocacy to promote protection of civilians.

In Libya, key risks and challenges to INGOs were also related to registration and the ability of INGOs to sustain access to and within Libya. Again, this issue is faced by INGOs generally in Libya, not only those specifically engaged in advocacy.⁸ As Mahony (2018: 43) states, 'humanitarian organizations sometimes hide behind the oversimplification that all advocacy is too risky and "political"'.

The 'dynamic of excessive self-censorship' that Mahony referred to was frequently raised throughout this research in both contexts, a finding relevant to both INGOs and UN agencies. Not all protection advocacy necessarily represents a substantial risk; however, opportunities to conduct advocacy should still be considered where there is a residual risk. The risk of not carrying out any protection advocacy is also a risk. From an advocacy perspective, silence in the face of atrocities is itself taking a position and can undermine the independence of organisations, particularly when abuses by one party to a conflict are rarely raised. In some circumstances where widespread and egregious abuses are carried out, silence can lead to perceptions that organisations are negating the experiences of affected groups, as has recently been the case in Tigray in Ethiopia (Women of Tigray, 2021). In extreme cases, it could lead to perceptions that humanitarian organisations are complicit in the abuses experienced by civilians. If organisations do not develop tools to manage risks and minor harassments, they risk being more easily controlled and manipulated (Mahony, 2018).

Potential risks need to be put into perspective, and mitigating measures identified in line with operational risk management approaches. There is no evidence in either Nigeria or Libya of an analysis of risks related to protection advocacy, or consideration of ways to mitigate these risks – either individually within INGOs or as a collective. While the risk appetite of individual INGOs

8 Reasons for a lower number of stated risks is likely related to low sustained INGO presence in Libya, with historically low levels of advocacy and direct engagement with government.

will understandably vary, as will mitigating measures and the level of acceptable residual risk in carrying out protection advocacy, this analysis could initially be carried out jointly, potentially through INGO forums.

There are a range of potential approaches to mitigate risks. For example, non-operational organisations such as INGO forums, or collective INGO forums at global levels such as InterAction or ICVA, could advocate on behalf of operational organisations; collective advocacy can itself act as risk mitigation through sharing risk; and information can be shared with organisations with a mandate and/or higher risk appetite and/or no operational presence, such as human rights organisations. Lastly, INGOs could create distance in deploying advocacy positions where the risks of doing so in-country are considered too high, or the impact limited, by using regional and/or global opportunities to disseminate advocacy positions (for more suggestions see the recommendations).

Conclusion

The findings of this and related research reflect a trend across the humanitarian sector, including with INGOs, where protection advocacy has not been prioritised. The complexities and risks involved in carrying out protection advocacy require leadership support, yet this is all-too often lacking and little has been done to counteract uninformed perceptions of risk. As is the case across the humanitarian system, INGO leadership lacks incentives to carry out advocacy, situated in a broader humanitarian ecosystem that is risk-averse.

This research found that INGOs at various levels recognise the need to do more regarding protection advocacy, but are often dealing with barriers within their organisations, in INGO forums and in the wider humanitarian response. First, these barriers range from lack of institutional leadership that prioritises the internal capacities and resources required for evidence-based advocacy and encourages a more risk-tolerant approach, to a lack of coherence in more strategic collaboration across INGOs and with a broader range of actors, to a lack of support from, and even active discouragement by, UN leaders in-country. Second, effective protection advocacy requires a long-term and sustained approach, which is undermined by short-term planning and resourcing timeframes of humanitarian organisations and high levels of staff turnover at national levels. Lastly, inadequate resources for and therefore capacity to carry out protection advocacy can put INGOs in reactive mode, rather than having the capacity to build and analyse evidence and carry out long-term, strategic advocacy.

At the country level, these barriers mean INGOs have not progressed as far as they may have liked in approaches to protection advocacy. This is needed all the more in the rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Traditional approaches to advocacy based on international frameworks

can no longer be solely relied on; greater flexibility is now essential to conduct protection advocacy. Creative and innovative approaches to advocacy are required in order to get around some of these barriers and to maximise opportunities for impact.

Humanitarian INGOs are part of a complex ecosystem of actors relevant to protection issues, from community to international levels. Long-term investment in partnerships is required, including with local and national actors and actors outside of humanitarian responses. INGOs need to strategically consider where they can add most value in conducting protection advocacy, which may increasingly be behind the scenes, working in greater collaboration with other actors, and opening up spaces to support local actors and affected people to directly engage in advocacy.

Ultimately, there is a requirement for leadership and support across all levels of local to global advocacy for all actors involved in the humanitarian response. This requires detailed analysis as to the levels of risk in carrying out advocacy, ways to share and mitigate risks, and agreement on the level of residual risk organisations are willing to take. This should be set out alongside the risks of *not* undertaking advocacy. Without this, the system-wide paralysis in carrying out protection advocacy may result in an age of silence.

Recommendations

This research indicates a need for INGOs to review the prioritisation of and investment in protection advocacy. While skills, expertise and approaches to advocacy are developed at the global level, the lack of investment in adequate capacity at the national level has often left INGOs focusing predominantly on reactive approaches to advocacy, undermining opportunities to focus on strategic, creative approaches.

INGOs need to prioritise and invest in the issues and actors where they could have the most influence, recognising that successful approaches to advocacy require long-term, sustained engagement to achieve results. Developing partnerships, including with local and national actors, and non-humanitarian actors, could offer additional support to advocacy capacity, as would further utilising global expertise and platforms, including through collective forums such as InterAction and ICVA, as well as within individual organisations.

These recommendations are not new to INGOs nor to the broader sector, but reflect a need to go back to basics. While these recommendations are targeted at INGOs, they are relevant for the protection sector and humanitarian actors more broadly. Not all INGOs will have the resources or expertise to carry out all of these recommendations. However, with greater investment in collective approaches, including through membership of INGO forums, different agencies can make their expertise available as a shared resource across INGOs through their partnerships and forums.

Evidence

- Strengthen collective analytical capacity. This could be through a shared resource and cost across organisations, for example through INGO forums or in clusters. Consider partnering with national analysts, relevant national organisations and civil society groups. Ensure that there are context-specific, actionable and realistic advocacy positions based on such analysis.
- Ensure leadership support in seeking opportunities to build synergies across programme and advocacy teams, and clarify where responsibility lies in building evidence for advocacy initiatives.
- Strengthen conflict analysis and ensure it informs programme and advocacy approaches, accompanied by stakeholder and power analysis. This could be carried out through INGO forums as a shared resource and cost, or existing analysis could be made available by organisations who have developed this expertise.

Strategies, tactics and approaches

- Consider ways to incentivise and support INGO leadership to prioritise protection advocacy, for example in performance appraisals. This could include private, non-visible advocacy efforts.
- Ensure advocacy strategies are developed alongside a long-term, multi-year theory of change with a pathway for the activities, messages and approaches required to contribute to the desired change.
- Consider prioritising 1–3 advocacy issues that INGOs could have success in collectively influencing, with analysis of how INGOs can leverage their partnerships, platforms and interlocutors to maximise the potential to influence. Consider where INGOs are well positioned to have influence and invest in this in the longer term, including in the analysis and relationships required to build influence.
- Analyse relevant national and regional laws, policies and frameworks in order to contextualise advocacy actions. This could be carried out by organisations with expertise and shared across INGOs.
- Where relevant, consider investment in CMCoord capacity as a shared resource among INGOs and/or seconded into broader coordination architecture. This should be long-term to build and sustain dialogue.
- Invest the resources required for effective advocacy and ensure adequate capacity. Invest in advocacy capacity across the range of actors engaging with protection risks, including national actors, rather than treating it solely as a stand-alone technical capacity in country programmes.
- Consider investment in dedicated positions in key regional forums. These roles could represent a collective of INGOs as a shared resource, for example through existing collectives such as InterAction and ICVA.

Targets, partners and interlocutors

- Assess which advocacy targets INGOs could be effective in influencing, and craft messages towards the interests and positions of that target. Stakeholder and power analysis would support this. Consider a community leader stakeholder mapping where relevant. Ensure these inform advocacy strategies. This, too, could be a shared resource, or carried out by individual organisations with capacity and made available to broader INGOs.
- Map where members and partners have relationships with components of government at national, subnational and local levels. Consider opportunities to further protection dialogue on behalf of collective INGOs using these entry points.
- Prioritise strengthening networks with national actors (partners, national staff, civil society and diaspora). Ensure this engagement is resourced.
- Play a convening role by linking local and national actors to relevant national, regional and international stakeholders to directly engage with decision-makers.

Risks and challenges

- Carry out an assessment of risks relevant to protection advocacy in partnership with all actors engaged in protection, including national actors. This could be done under the INGO forums.
- Carry out a risk mitigation exercise, in partnership where relevant. INGOs at all levels should agree the acceptable level of residual risk for each advocacy initiative. Options for risk mitigation could include: using non-operational organisations to deliver advocacy, such as INGO forums or collective INGO forums at global levels; sharing risk through collective advocacy; and sharing information with organisations with a mandate and/or higher risk appetite.
- Seek ways to share and collectively mitigate risk (see 'risks and challenges' section). This could be through collective advocacy products, collective and/or unbranded research, private advocacy, working with organisations with a higher risk appetite or low/no operational presence (human rights and peacebuilding actors), unbranded campaigns, non-visible support to civil society campaigns, or ghost-writing public documents.

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Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
