

**HPG commissioned report**

# Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy

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and Alexandra Spencer

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## About this report

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# Acronyms

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|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>A4EP</b>    | Alliance for Empowering Partnership                              |
| <b>AoR</b>     | Area of Responsibility   |
| <b>CIVIC</b>   | Center for Civilians in Conflict                                 |
| <b>CSO</b>     | civil society organisation                                       |
| <b>DoD</b>     | US Department of Defense   |
| <b>DRC</b>     | Democratic Republic of Congo                                     |
| <b>ECHO</b>    | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations        |
| <b>EDG</b>     | Emergency Directors Group  |
| <b>ERC</b>     | Emergency Relief Coordinator                                     |
| <b>FCDO</b>    | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly DFID)     |
| <b>FGD</b>     | focus group discussion   |
| <b>GBV</b>     | gender-based violence  |
| <b>GBV PEF</b> | Gender-Based Violence Prevention Evaluation Framework            |
| <b>GHD</b>     | Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative                           |
| <b>GPC</b>     | Global Protection Cluster  |
| <b>HC</b>      | Humanitarian Coordinator   |
| <b>HCT</b>     | Humanitarian Country Team  |
| <b>HNO</b>     | Humanitarian Needs Overview                                      |
| <b>HPC</b>     | Humanitarian Programme Cycle                                     |
| <b>HRA</b>     | Human Rights Advisor   |
| <b>HRP</b>     | Humanitarian Response Plan                                       |
| <b>HRRG</b>    | Human Rights Reference Group                                     |
| <b>HRuF</b>    | Human Rights up Front (IASC)                                     |
| <b>IASC</b>    | Inter-Agency Standing Committee                                  |
| <b>IAWG</b>    | Information and Analysis Working Group (GPC)                     |
| <b>iCCM</b>    | Integrated Community Case Management                             |
| <b>ICVA</b>    | International Council of Voluntary Agencies                      |
| <b>ICRC</b>    | International Committee of the Red Cross                         |
| <b>IDP</b>     | internally displaced person                                      |
| <b>IFRC</b>    | International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies |

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>IHRL</b>   | International Human Rights Law                           |
| <b>INGO</b>   | international non-governmental organisation              |
| <b>IOM</b>    | International Organization for Migration                 |
| <b>IRC</b>    | International Rescue Committee                           |
| <b>IRL</b>    | International Refugee Law                                |
| <b>L/NA</b>   | local/national non-governmental actor                    |
| <b>MSF</b>    | Médecins Sans Frontières                                 |
| <b>NEAR</b>   | Network for Empowered Aid Response                       |
| <b>NGO</b>    | non-governmental organisation                            |
| <b>NRC</b>    | Norwegian Refugee Council                                |
| <b>OCHA</b>   | Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN) |
| <b>OHCHR</b>  | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN)    |
| <b>OPAG</b>   | Operational Policy and Advocacy Group                    |
| <b>PAF</b>    | Protection Analytical Framework                          |
| <b>PCC</b>    | Protection Cluster Coordinator                           |
| <b>ProCap</b> | Protection Standby Capacity Project                      |
| <b>PSEA</b>   | Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse            |
| <b>RC</b>     | Resident Coordinator                                     |
| <b>RG 1</b>   | Results Group on Operational Response                    |
| <b>SRSG</b>   | Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UN)     |
| <b>ToR</b>    | terms of reference                                       |
| <b>UNAMA</b>  | United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan         |
| <b>UNHCR</b>  | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees            |
| <b>UNMAS</b>  | United Nations Mine Action Service                       |
| <b>UNSG</b>   | United Nations Secretary-General                         |
| <b>WASH</b>   | water, sanitation and hygiene                            |
| <b>WFP</b>    | World Food Programme                                     |
| <b>WoS</b>    | Whole of System  |

# Executive summary

## Introduction

In 2016, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted a Protection Policy to reaffirm the importance of protection in humanitarian action and emphasise its significance as a collective responsibility of all humanitarian actors. Building on the adoption of the IASC Principals' Statement on the Centrality of Protection, the IASC Protection Policy emphasised two critical departures to how protection had been approached within the humanitarian sector until that point. First, it aimed to elevate protection to a system-wide responsibility, rather than just a concern of the protection cluster. This required making the shift from protection solely as a sectoral activity to a collective responsibility of the entire humanitarian system. Second, it framed protection as an outcome that humanitarian actors should seek to achieve in terms of reducing risks to violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation (herein referred to as reducing risks) of affected populations, rather than just an activity to be undertaken. This required a shift in how risks are analysed and how interventions are designed to address them.

Six years after the adoption of the Protection Policy, the IASC Principals commissioned this review to assess implementation of the Policy in a range of humanitarian crises. Using a systems-thinking approach, the review sought not only to identify the critical issues that had impacted the implementation of the Policy, but also to increase understanding of the key enablers of and barriers to progress. It also aimed to identify practices that had brought about change, and whether the right incentive structures and behaviours were being displayed to bring about change.

## Findings

Six years after the IASC Protection Policy was adopted, the review found that partial progress has been made towards its implementation. However, the ambition and intent of the Policy have not been met, and there is still a significant gap between policy and practice. While there has been significant effort and investment in approaches to support implementation, they have been incoherent, inadequate and ineffective. Collective action by humanitarian actors to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian action has not been achieved, and the aims of the Policy have not been fulfilled. For the following reasons, humanitarian actors have failed populations at risk.

### Vision, commitment, culture and leadership for protection

Humanitarian actors and others who are contributing to reducing risks must share a clear vision and common understanding of what is to be achieved. A culture that encourages them to take action to reduce risks to people affected by crises is essential if protection is to be prioritised.

Protection as an outcome is a complex concept and is not well understood or owned within the humanitarian sector. The IASC definition provides a starting point for humanitarian actors. However, it requires a simple explanation of what falls within and outside its scope with respect to humanitarian action. There is little clear, practical direction on how to translate the vision of the Policy into concrete action; a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities, including how these interact with those of states as primary duty-bearers; and no means of ensuring accountability. Protection is interpreted differently across the humanitarian sector and has not been a collective priority for IASC leaders. The direction has therefore not been set for ensuring protection is at the core of humanitarian action. Although some organisations have demonstrated their commitment by developing policies and practices to explain what it means for their work, the majority have not.

The humanitarian sector needs to build an inclusive culture to reorient humanitarian action towards reducing risks and supporting people's safety and security. This requires a shift in mindset and an operating environment in which protection is valued and prioritised. Stronger, collective, strategic leadership on protection issues is required across the humanitarian sector. Leaders and institutions need to be incentivised and to motivate others to give priority to protection as an objective and an outcome central to the purpose of humanitarian action. This requires working in a culture which encourages them to address protection issues, and rewards them when they do, even when well-intentioned actions fail. They need to be held accountable and to hold their staff to account on this objective. At present, the direction and tone have not been set for ensuring protection is at the core of humanitarian action.

### Enabling delivery of the Policy

Delivering the vision of the Protection Policy requires strong coordination and planning, the means to measure progress and sufficient capability and capacity.

While some progress has been made, there was no coordinated effort to support implementation of the Policy. Efforts that were undertaken were ad hoc and did not bring about systemic change or accountability to ensure protection is prioritised across the humanitarian response, and to focus on reducing risks.

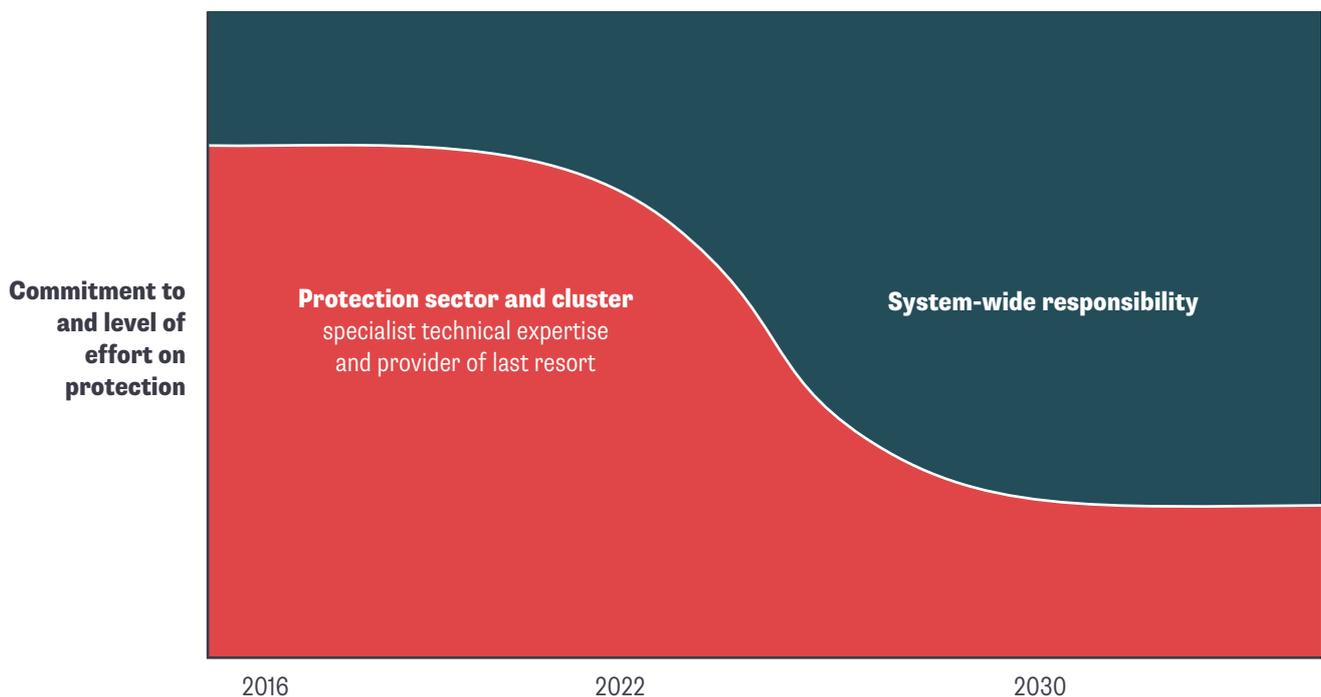
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Protection coordination structures have become overly complex and fragmented. An integrated protection approach to crisis-affected populations has been lacking. The focus on protection as a technical sector responsibility has undermined progress towards protection as a system-wide responsibility. There is too much attention on process. Approaches to protection remain predominantly focused on outputs related to responding to needs, rather than outcomes and impact focused on reducing risks. This is a key barrier to implementation of the Protection Policy.

There have been investments in strategic planning, for example through the development of Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) protection strategies and the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC). However, these tools have not had the desired effect of increasing accountability and elevating protection from a technical sector to a system-wide responsibility, as envisaged by the Protection Policy (Figure 1). As such, there has been no systemic change. Nor have these investments enhanced accountability. Capacity to deliver the Protection Policy has been insufficient. However, it is also questionable whether humanitarian actors are using available capacities effectively, and the extent to which they utilise the range of actions to address risks to affected populations.

**Figure 1** Proposed balance between protection as a technical sector and a system-wide responsibility



Leadership arrangements and coordination structures established to address protection require radical simplification to focus on outcomes and reduce risks of crisis-affected populations, rather than sustaining inward-looking processes.

## Collective responsibility for protection within and beyond the humanitarian system

Protection challenges are multifaceted and cannot be resolved by humanitarian actors alone. Building mutual understanding and collective responsibility with actors that work within and alongside the humanitarian system is key to reducing risks (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** IASC Protection Policy vision for collective approaches to reduce risks



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Local and national non-governmental actors (L/NAs)<sup>1</sup> and national and local government are key protection actors. Since the Policy was launched, minimal actions have been taken to better recognise the roles of L/NAs and to maximise synergies and complementarities among all stakeholders. Collaboration on protection between L/NAs and international humanitarian actors is not yet being optimised. This is an opportunity missed, but not necessarily lost. L/NAs need to be engaged as core and equal partners in protection.

As part of the implementation of the Policy, some limited steps were taken to mobilise development, peace and human rights actors. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is formally part of the humanitarian system and is often engaged in protection at a country level. However, integration of the wider human rights community with the humanitarian system is limited. There is limited evidence that this has led to coherent approaches to protection. Institutional cultures on all sides remain a barrier to collaborative approaches. There needs to be more focus on making collaboration the norm, rather than the exception. Consideration of how to better overcome institutional and cultural barriers is crucial to achieve this.

### Conclusions

1. There remains a lack of **conceptual clarity** and clear practical direction on how to translate the ambition of collective approaches towards reducing risks into practical action. It is not clear what fits within and outside the scope of protection in humanitarian action. A reopening of the existing definition of protection or additional guidance is not required. But clarity, and practical direction setting out what is required of all humanitarian actors, is urgently needed.
2. There is a lack of commitment to and prioritisation of protection across the humanitarian sector. This is compounded by the lack of **robust leadership and accountability** across the humanitarian system to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian responses. There needs to be a reaffirmation of the importance of protection in humanitarian action, with clear roles and responsibilities agreed within the humanitarian community at all levels for both protection and non-protection specialist organisations. Leaders and institutions need to be incentivised, supported and held to account, and they need to motivate others to ensure collective approaches to reducing risks. Significant engagement and support are required from donors and Member States to make this happen.
3. Conceiving of protection solely as a technical sector responsibility is counter-productive. Protection has not shifted to a system-wide **collective responsibility** central to humanitarian action as originally intended by the Protection Policy. Solutions need to be found to enable a cross-institutional approach to reducing risks. Protection should sit at the strategic level in addition to the technical sector, enabled by predictable, long-term, specialist support to humanitarian leadership and across the humanitarian system.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term L/NAs is taken to refer to non-governmental entities only and does not include national governments or local authorities.

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4. A **simplified architecture** is required for leading and coordinating protection in the humanitarian system. The current set-up is overly complex and fragmented and should be radically simplified and streamlined. Solutions should be found to ensuring strategic system-wide technical advisory support on protection to humanitarian leadership. The current set-up of the protection cluster and the Areas of Responsibility (AoRs) is not fit for purpose. The emphasis, within the protection cluster and its AoRs, on specific technical aspects of protection – which are driven by the mandates of specific agencies – has been at the expense of building collective approaches as a system-wide responsibility. Significant donor engagement and support is required to incentivise such reforms.
5. Protection is still not conceived as an outcome that humanitarian actors can collectively address, but as a set of activities that they undertake. Measuring the results of humanitarian action based on needs has undermined an assessment of the outcomes and impact of protection action focused on reducing risks. In the absence of a cultural shift towards viewing **protection as an outcome** rather than an activity, good practices have not been institutionalised across the humanitarian system. This requires institutional and cultural change.
6. There is a need for more **inclusive approaches** with a range of actors within, alongside and beyond the humanitarian system to engender greater collective action in support of protection. There have been minimal efforts to engage local actors, while collaboration with human rights actors could be strengthened and more done to mobilise actors beyond the humanitarian system, including development and peace actors. A normative change is needed that builds trust, respect and open dialogue and enhances synergies for addressing risks.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations set out the changes necessary to reaffirm protection as a central goal of humanitarian action and as a system-wide responsibility for all humanitarian actors. Their successful implementation is premised on sufficient political will and adequate resources within the IASC and the wider humanitarian community to take action. Unless clear steps are taken to address the conclusions of this report, future reviews risk finding a similar lack of progress to protect people at risk of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.

Ownership and participation from across the humanitarian sector are essential if these recommendations are to be implemented effectively. It is the responsibility of those leading each action to ensure that all relevant actors, particularly those at a national and local level, are fully engaged. The proposed actions need to be disseminated, socialised and institutionalised significantly more widely and inclusively.

The recommendations are targeted to where accountability for their implementation lies. However, it will be necessary to ensure that specific actions are taken by a diverse set of groups, including Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG), Emergency Directors Group (EDG) and others in order to implement them. To ensure that the recommendations lead to meaningful action it is proposed that the ERC establish a temporary strategic level, diverse implementation group of representatives of IASC agencies, NGOs and donors from across the humanitarian and protection sector to establish timebound actions and assign responsibilities for taking forward the recommendations.

### Recommendation 1: Conceptual clarity

Ensure distinction between protection as a system-wide strategic goal and protection as a technical sector designed to contribute to the strategic goal.

- **The implementation group convened by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)** should develop a succinct, operationally focused overview of what protection as an outcome entails for all humanitarian actors and how they can contribute to this strategic goal. This should be accompanied by a clearly defined, multi-year, resourced and monitored plan to encourage system-wide dissemination and adoption.

### Recommendation 2: Robust leadership and accountability

Ensure stronger institutional and individual leadership to address acute protection challenges.

- **The ERC**, supported by the **IASC Principals**, should take concerted action to support institutional risk-taking when it is in the best interests of affected populations. The IASC Principals should collectively agree approaches to strengthen their advocacy on protection, by considering a range of actions balancing the risk of taking strong positions on protection against the risk of doing nothing. This requires sustained engagement with and support from Member States.
- **The ERC** should lead the development of an accountability mechanism that sets out clear roles and responsibilities for protection, both as a system-wide strategic responsibility and as a technical sector. The accountability mechanism should be disseminated widely and supported by a light-touch review process.
- **The ERC** and **IASC Principals** should hold **Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs)** and country-based **Heads of Agencies** to account by requiring them to demonstrate what collective actions have been taken to promote protection in accordance with the accountability mechanism. They should institute an independent support mechanism for HCs on protection issues. **HCs** and **Heads of Agencies** should adopt higher risk thresholds to address protection challenges. **Senior leaders within the humanitarian system** should support them in this by giving them the institutional and political support they need to increase risk. This approach should be adopted by leaders of all humanitarian agencies and organisations.
- **Member States** should provide political backing at global and national levels to support humanitarian leadership to adopt robust approaches to protection. **Donors** should align their policies and better coordinate their approaches to protection to ensure their fundings coherent and incentivises the prioritisation of protection. They should measure success in terms of the reduction and prevention of risks to affected populations. A starting point could be a review under the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative to identify current practice and gaps.

### Recommendation 3: Collective responsibility

Commit to protection as a collective responsibility.

- **IASC Principals** and the **leaders of all humanitarian organisations** should demonstrate their commitment to protection by integrating it into their organisational policies, strategies, priorities and work plans, with clear actions specified and monitored. System-wide individual ‘champions’ on protection should be appointed to promote this approach and take forward this agenda.
- **The ERC** and **IASC Principals** should clarify arrangements to ensure dedicated, permanent, specialist support is needed for protection as a system-wide responsibility in support of HCs, HCTs and non-protection-mandated agencies in the humanitarian system. This function should sit outside and separate to the protection cluster.
- **IASC Principals** should stop requiring **HCTs** to produce HCT Protection Strategies, which have been costly, time-consuming and ineffective. Instead, a maximum 2–3 system-wide protection priorities should be agreed, and actions to address these should be embedded into HCT work plans and compact, as well as Humanitarian Response Plans.
- **The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** and **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** should build on and phase out the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap), by transitioning and transferring its expertise and resources to strengthen predictable, long-term, specialist protection support to HCs and HCTs. **Donors** should provide funding to support such long-term sustained support.

### Recommendation 4: Simplified architecture

Simplify and streamline the protection architecture to ensure more coherence while maintaining technical specialist support and coordination.

- **IASC Principals** and the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** should oversee the reform of the **protection cluster** to ensure that, at both global and country levels, it:
  - focuses on providing information-sharing, technical support and coordination within the sector rather than system-wide support on protection
  - promotes an integrated approach to protection by co-locating and/or strengthening a joint approach between the protection cluster and the AoRs
  - reduces its core functions to focus on operational technical support and coordination rather than on other tasks
  - strengthens its outreach and support to local organisations and communities.
- **Donors** should promote and fund reforms to the protection architecture and hold **IASC Agencies** to account for the delivery of this simplified architecture.

### Recommendation 5: Protection as an outcome

Ensure protection action focuses on reducing risks, and establish monitoring approaches to measure this reduction. Embed good practice.

- **All humanitarian actors** should be encouraged and supported to design their humanitarian responses based on a comprehensive assessment of risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation rather than on responding to needs. **OCHA** should use the upcoming revision of the HPC to provide guidance on this, learning from approaches set out in InterAction's Results-Based Evaluation Framework for the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence.
- **IASC Principals** should ensure that indicators and benchmarks that measure the implementation of the Protection Policy are focused on risk reduction as agreed in consultation with a diverse range of humanitarian actors and linked to the accountability mechanism.
- The **Global Protection Cluster (GPC)**'s current annual Centrality of Protection Review Report should be transitioned into an IASC product that provides consolidated monitoring in line with the accountability mechanism.

### Recommendation 6: Inclusive approaches

Effect fundamental behaviour change and build trust to normalise collective ways of working between the international humanitarian community, local and national actors, and amongst humanitarian, human rights, development and peacebuilding actors.

- **International, national and local humanitarian actors** should build on and invest in community and area-based approaches to protection. This requires putting people's capacities and priorities at the centre of the response, working in partnership with communities and building on existing government structures where possible.
- **IASC Principals** should strengthen dialogue with their counterparts in development, human rights and peacebuilding agencies to clarify how collective approaches to protection should be addressed. Steps should be taken to ensure a normative change.
- **The UN Secretary-General** should ensure the forthcoming UN Agenda for Protection brings strategic coherence to, and strengthens collaboration amongst, humanitarian, human rights, development and peace actors on protection. This should address lessons learnt from previous such efforts and embrace the involvement and important roles of a broad range of actors outside the UN, drawing from context-specific experiences to drive approaches.

# 1 Introduction

Every year, tens of thousands of civilians are killed, injured and traumatised, and their property and communities destroyed. People are separated from their families, subjected to sexual assault and other violence, forcibly recruited and deliberately deprived of basic services and necessities for survival. Millions are forced from their homes and millions more live in fear and insecurity. Women and girls, in particular, are subject to appalling sexual and gender-based violence (GBV).

In 2016, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted a Protection Policy to reaffirm the importance of protection in humanitarian action and underline that it is a collective responsibility of all humanitarian actors. The Protection Policy has been implemented in a context of persistent and evolving risks since it was adopted, with armed conflict remaining the main source of threats to civilians. It was developed at the height of the Syrian conflict, which has continued without resolution, while conflicts in Yemen, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine and elsewhere have escalated. Beyond situations of armed conflict, disasters – including those occurring due to climate variability and climate change-related events – and the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated and created new risks.

Since the late 1990s, humanitarian actors have sought to respond to the recurring patterns of violence, abuse, coercion and deliberate deprivation that drive humanitarian crises and exacerbate human suffering. While states have the primary responsibility to protect civilian populations and those on their territory, humanitarian actors have a critical role to play. The adoption of the IASC Principals Statement on the Centrality of Protection, and the subsequent IASC Protection Policy, were milestones in an ongoing effort to clarify how such risks could be strategically addressed (IASC, 2013; GPC, 2016a).<sup>2</sup> Over the past five years, key advances have been made in strengthening humanitarian response to risks. However, there are ongoing challenges, and action to ensure protection of people affected by crises from threats to their safety and security remains fragmented, poorly understood and lacking political support within the humanitarian sector. Although protection efforts across humanitarian responses have had some success, this is not as comprehensive and consistent as it could or should be.

The geopolitical context in which humanitarian actors operate has also had an impact on the implementation of the Protection Policy. The United Nations (UN) Security Council is deadlocked and has failed to take meaningful action in several contexts. Many Member States have become increasingly unwilling to support multilateral action to address protection concerns. Counter-terrorism legislation has constrained humanitarian delivery and complicated engagement with armed groups to promote protection. In many crises there has been diminished humanitarian access to affected populations, with humanitarian workers subject to the persistent threat of violence from parties to conflict and criminal elements. While not new, the challenge to deliver assistance alongside the need to work collectively to reduce risks remains acute.

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<sup>2</sup> Although introduced here, the term ‘centrality of protection’ has not been used throughout the report.

Six years after the adoption of the IASC Protection Policy, the IASC Principals commissioned a review to assess implementation of the Policy. This report sets out the main findings from the review, which took place from August 2021 to April 2022. The review is a key opportunity for the humanitarian community to address one of the main challenges facing humanitarian actors – how to understand and respond to protection issues within humanitarian crises and ensure that all humanitarian action seeks to reduce risks for crisis-affected populations. It builds on the work and conclusions of previous reviews, studies and research on this topic, and aims to bring a fresh perspective to the challenges of centralising protection in humanitarian action.

### Purpose and objectives

As stated in the terms of reference (ToR), the purpose of the review is ‘to provide the IASC Principals with an analytical review of IASC Protection Policy across the humanitarian system and in a range of humanitarian crises’.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the review focuses on the extent to which the intent of the Policy has, or has not, led to change, taking as a starting point the factors underlying what has enabled, or been a barrier to, change. The primary objectives of the review as set out in the ToR are to examine whether and how:

- There have been changes in ways of working at the global, regional and country levels in relation to the IASC Protection Policy.
- There are changes in senior humanitarian leadership awareness, approaches and practices in relation to the IASC Protection Policy at global and country level.
- Individual organisations have sought to absorb and reinforce their roles and responsibilities, and to take concrete steps to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action.
- The four commitments of the Policy are being implemented.
- Donor entities have sought to absorb, and support humanitarian actors to adopt, the ways of working set out in the Policy.

### Layout of the report

- Chapter 2 of the report sets out the approach, scope and methodology used for the review, as well as the constraints faced.
- Chapter 3 explains the background to the development of the policy.
- Chapter 4 presents the key findings of the review, organised around three overarching themes related to vision, delivery and collective responsibility for the implementation of the Policy.
- Chapter 5 outlines the conclusions of the review.

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3 For the full ToR see the IASC website at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/terms-reference-iasc-review-implementation-iasc-protection-policy>.

### A note on terminology

Throughout the report we aim to use simple and straightforward language for a broad and non-specialist audience. The IASC Protection Policy makes frequent reference to the term ‘protection outcome’. We use the term ‘protection outcome’ in the report and adopt the definition presented by the IASC.

A response or activity is considered to have a **protection outcome** when the risk to affected persons is reduced. The **reduction of risks**, meanwhile, occurs when threats and vulnerability are minimized and, at the same time, the capacity of affected persons is enhanced. Protection outcomes are the result of changes in behaviour, attitudes, policies, knowledge and practices on the part of relevant stakeholders.

In this report we refer to reducing risk in reference to reducing people’s exposure to and therefore risk of all forms of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. We use this instead of ‘protection risk’.

## 2 Approach, scope, methodology and constraints

### 2.1 Approach

The review adopted a systems-thinking approach to analyse the implementation of the Policy. This included focusing on the actions taken to bring about systemic change within the humanitarian sector in relation to protection since 2016, and whether identified changes could be attributed to the Protection Policy. It took as its baseline the 2015 Independent Whole of System (WoS) Review, which provided a comprehensive overview of protection within humanitarian action and the many challenges faced (Niland et al., 2015). There have since been numerous reviews, studies, research and publications that have documented the many challenges in strengthening protection in humanitarian responses, which this review builds upon. Indeed, interlocutors indicated that one of their main concerns was that the review would ask the same questions of the same people who have already been consulted in previous reviews and would risk reaching the same conclusions. The review team was determined that this should not be the case and have instead sought to provide a fresh perspective and focus on consensus-building around potential solutions.

To avoid becoming merely a stocktake six years on from the adoption of the Protection Policy, the review sought to not only identify the crucial issues that have had an impact on its implementation, but also increase understanding of the key enablers and blockers related to the progress made, and recommend steps to address identified gaps. It also aimed to identify emerging practices that had brought about change, and whether the right incentive structures and behaviours were being displayed to bring about change in the future. As agreed during the inception phase, the review sought to answer the four overall research questions:

- What evidence is there of the adoption of the Protection Policy's four commitments?
- What evidence is there of the Protection Policy's implementation leading to impact and change within the lives of those affected by crisis and conflict?
- What are the enablers and blockers to implementing the Protection Policy?
- What actions are required to strengthen the IASC contribution to protection outcomes?

Following the adoption of the inception report, a key issues paper was drafted.<sup>4</sup> This set out eight critical factors affecting the implementation of the Protection Policy. The key issues were combined with the four research questions above to formulate an analytical framework for the review that was used to design the data and information-gathering methods (see Section 2.3).

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4 The inception report and key issues paper are both available from the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI.

### 2.2 Scope

The review focuses on changes since the Policy was adopted in 2016 at global and country levels. It includes a range of humanitarian crises resulting from armed conflict and other situations of violence, including disasters linked to climate variability or climate change-related events and disease outbreaks. However, a focus on conflict situations was prioritised given this is where there are the most acute risks. Each of the specific contexts considered in detail in the country-based research were suffering the impact of numerous crises, for example conflict and disasters and/or disease outbreaks. With predictions regarding the increasing humanitarian impacts of climate variability and the likely intersection of climate-related risks with other risks in humanitarian settings, there will be a need for humanitarian protection roles to shift as these impacts become greater. A detailed exploration of this point is beyond the scope of this review.

The key provisions and four actions (see below) of the IASC Protection Policy were used as the reference point for the analysis and to identify where change had occurred either directly or indirectly related to the Policy. These are that all humanitarian actors, irrespective of their sector-specific expertise, can contribute to protection of affected persons by committing to:

- Address protection issues that intersect with their formal mandates and sector-specific responsibilities.
- Engage collectively to achieve meaningful protection outcomes that reduce overall risks to affected persons by decreasing threats, reducing vulnerability and enhancing capacities.
- Mobilise other actors within and beyond the humanitarian system, as appropriate, to contribute to collective protection outcomes.
- Evaluate commitments and progress towards placing protection at the centre of the humanitarian response.

The review also took a broader perspective regarding efforts by the humanitarian system to address persistent risks faced by crisis-affected populations, to understand whether the intentions of the IASC Principals and the spirit of the Policy are being fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the review did not attempt to address wider challenges in the humanitarian system that are not specific to protection, although it was mindful that many are common with those related to protection.<sup>6</sup>

Given the importance of a collective, system-wide approach to protection, the review team engaged with a wide set of actors within and outside the humanitarian system. This included actors within the humanitarian system who have been involved with the implementation of the Policy, including specialised protection actors and non-specialised actors. It also included several stakeholders working within and alongside the humanitarian system. It was considered particularly important to engage with

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5 This approach was agreed during the inception phase with the IASC Advisory Committee, which oversaw the review.

6 In particular, the review will inform the system-wide review that is planned after the High Level Panel on Internal Displacement and the Action Plan to implement its recommendations.

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local and national non-government actors (L/NAs) to whom IASC structures are not familiar; a specific consultation process (see Section 2.3) was designed to gather their perspectives.

The review recognises that primary responsibility to protect civilian populations lies with states and non-state actors to the extent that they have obligations under international law. The contribution that humanitarian actors make to protection as compared to states and non-state actors depends on the context and can change over time. Governments can and do play a role in the humanitarian protection architecture, particularly in non-conflict situations. However, this review did not consider the role of state and non-state actors given that the Policy focuses on the role of humanitarian actors.

### 2.3 Methodology

The review team adopted a mixed-methods research methodology, reflecting both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as information collection and analysis, including the following key components:

#### Desk review

A desk review was conducted on a comprehensive bibliography of the literature relevant to the Protection Policy, including previous reviews, research and studies and guidance documents from the IASC, Global Protection Cluster (GPC) and other sources.

#### Key informant interviews (KIIs)

More than 200 people were spoken to during semi-structured interviews conducted with a wide cross-section of stakeholders both at headquarters and at country level, including humanitarian actors, donors and development, peace and human rights actors.

#### Online survey

An online survey was disseminated in multiple languages through the IASC and other global networks to seek opinions on the progress made to implement the Protection Policy and on the factors that have affected implementation. There were 460 responses to the survey, analysis of which has been included throughout this report.<sup>7</sup>

#### Written submissions

Following a request sent out within the IASC, five written submissions were received from organisations and/or coordination bodies on their experience of implementing the Protection Policy.

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7 63% of respondents were based in country operations, with the remaining 37% based in global headquarters and regional offices. The most-represented constituents were from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (37%), followed by UN agencies/entities (32%) and L/NAs (15%). Donors constituted 5% of respondents.

### Detailed consultation with local and national non-governmental actors

To ensure detailed consultations with local actors, the review collaborated with three organisations – A4EP (Alliance for Empowering Partnership), NEAR (Network for Empowered Aid Response) and ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies; a global non-governmental organisation (NGO) network for principled and effective humanitarian action). Each of these disseminated the online survey to their membership and engaged in consultations and/or research with their members through focus group discussions (FGDs) in regions including Africa, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> In total, 98 people participated in these focus groups.

### Deep dives

The review included four ‘deep dives’ into the country-level experience of implementing the Policy, in Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Each deep dive involved between 12 and 15 interviews and/or FGDs with key stakeholders.<sup>9</sup> All the deep dives were conducted virtually, apart from Nigeria, where a field mission was conducted. As part of the Nigeria deep dive, the review team worked with Grow Strong Foundation, a CSO based in Borno State, which led a consultation process with 38 representatives from civil society through a survey, KIIs and FGDs. A light-touch review was carried out for Venezuela with a limited number of interviews.

## 2.4 Constraints, risks and assumptions

There were several limitations to the review. It was not an evaluation and therefore it did not aim to gather comprehensive evidence of the impact of the Protection Policy on the lives of crisis-affected populations. There was limited data available that could be used to provide quantitative analysis of the implementation of the Policy. Instead, it focused on the factors that had effected change from the perspective of enablers and barriers to progress. Given that most of the discussions had to be conducted remotely, the review team were aware that some informants may not have been as frank or forthcoming as they might have been in a face-to-face setting. Sensitivities around specific protection issues can also inhibit information-sharing. Most importantly, the review team was not able to directly engage with beneficiaries of humanitarian and protection action to gather their perspectives, which was outside the scope of the exercise, although the review engaged with local actors to gather this perspective as far as possible.

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8 A4EP conducted five FGDs and one verification session with L/NAs. This included FGDs focused on African civil society organisations (CSOs), Asian CSOs, women-led organisations and community-based organisations focused on refugee issues in Uganda. NEAR conducted two FGDs, one focused on Asia and the other on the Middle East.

9 The stakeholders included Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs), members of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), UN agencies, INGOs, the protection cluster, the inter-cluster coordination group and L/NAs, as well as development, peace and human rights actors.

## 3 Background to the Policy

Protection first came to prominence during the 1990s, leading to a definition of protection adopted by the IASC in 1999 and reaffirmed in the IASC Protection Policy (IASC, 1999; 2013):

all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee law (IRL).

Following agreement of the IASC protection definition, protection was principally addressed as a sector; when the cluster system was established in 2005, the protection cluster was created, led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, the 2012 independent inquiry into the UN's response to the latter stages of the Sri Lanka conflict prompted a rethink on protection. The UN system was found to have failed to recognise or acknowledge the scale of harm perpetrated against the civilian population by the conflict parties and to take adequate steps to help mitigate and respond, prioritising instead access to affected populations to provide assistance. The underlying issue more broadly is that protection was conceived as an activity that humanitarian actors undertook, rather than an outcome they should seek to achieve by reducing risks to affected populations.

The UN Secretary-General responded to the recommendations of the Sri Lanka inquiry by establishing the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) initiative to reaffirm the importance of human rights in the UN system, and the commitment of the UN to its responsibilities for preventing and responding to serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. It also prompted the IASC Principals to adopt the statement on 'the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action' (IASC, 2013), affirming their commitment to protection as central to the purpose of humanitarian action and clarifying that reducing risks to affected populations is a collective responsibility of the entire humanitarian system, not just specialised protection agencies. It was the first time the notion of the 'centrality of protection' was tabled in the IASC, and the statement became the precursor of the Protection Policy (GPC, 2016a).<sup>10</sup>

In 2015, the WoS review (Niland et al., 2015) highlighted significant gaps in protection and made a series of recommendations to be considered during the development of the Protection Policy. However, there was no formal follow-up mechanism to the recommendations and several of them were not acted upon. The IASC task force – led by InterAction and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – which had drafted the 2013 Statement and coordinated the review – was designated to draft the Protection Policy. Building on the Centrality of Protection Statement, the Protection Policy introduced two crucial differences to how protection had been conceived until this

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<sup>10</sup> The IASC agreed in its annual work plan to address protection in three specific ways: 1) the IASC Principals statement; 2) conducting a whole-of-system review on protection; and 3) the development and adoption of the Protection Policy.

point. First, it aimed to elevate protection to a system-wide responsibility rather than just a concern of the protection cluster. This required making the shift from protection solely as a sectoral activity to a collective responsibility of the entire humanitarian system. Second, it framed protection as an outcome that humanitarian actors should seek to achieve in terms of reducing risks to affected populations, rather than just an activity to be undertaken. This required a shift in how risks are analysed and how interventions are designed to address these.

The review sought to assess whether these two changes have occurred.

The Protection Policy focused on country-level implementation under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), which was considered the appropriate strategic and operational decision-making forum to take such an approach forward. It outlined four specific actions that all humanitarian actors should commit to taking, namely:

1. Address protection issues that intersect with their formal mandates and sector-specific responsibilities.
2. Engage collectively to achieve meaningful protection outcomes that reduce overall risks to affected persons by decreasing threats, reducing vulnerability and enhancing capacities.
3. Mobilise other actors within and beyond the humanitarian system, as appropriate, to contribute to collective protection outcomes.
4. Evaluate commitments and progress towards placing protection at the centre of the humanitarian response.

Further provisions of the Protection Policy are explained in more depth in Chapter 4 on Key Findings, against which progress in the objectives of the Policy was assessed. The analysis also aims to build on other reviews of progress in implementation, including the annual reviews of the Global Protection Cluster, a stocktake exercise conducted in 2018 by the IASC and GPC (IASC, 2018a) and consultation on the implementation of the Policy conducted by IASC Results Group on Operational Response (RG 1) in 2020.

## 4 Key findings

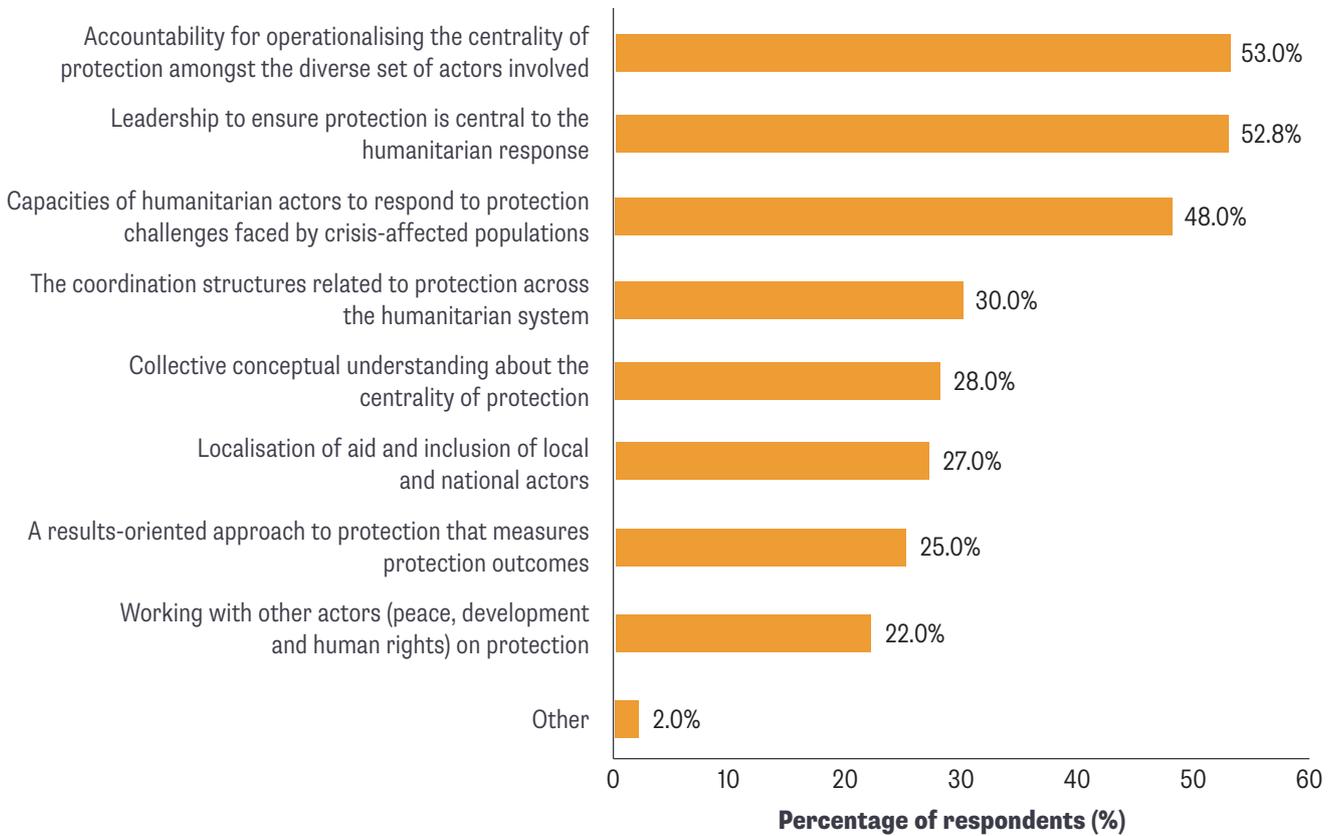
The review applied a systems-thinking approach to analyse the implementation of the Protection Policy and provide an assessment of the factors affecting progress in its implementation. It identified findings according to three themes, which are set out below, and outlined in more detail in Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3:

- **Vision, commitment, culture and leadership for protection:** these findings discuss the lack of conceptual clarity of the vision to ensure protection is central to humanitarian action, the varied interpretation of the vision and the lack of clear direction to put it into practice. It considers the requirement for a culture, leadership, ownership and responsibility to drive forward the implementation of the Policy.
- **Enabling delivery of the policy:** these findings discuss operational measures required to support protection, including institutional architecture, the means to measure, strategic planning, analysis and capacities. It explores the extent to which these have been sufficient to ensure implementation of the protection policy.
- **Collective responsibility for protection within and beyond the humanitarian system:** these findings explore the collaboration between a broad range of actors within and alongside the humanitarian sector, and whether they have been working together sufficiently to achieve the aims of the Policy.

The three themes integrate analysis of the four priority actions outlined in the Policy – namely the requirements to address protection issues, for collective action, for mobilising beyond the humanitarian sector and for accountability. The key issues paper identified leadership, accountability, clarity of concept, architecture, outputs versus outcomes, capacities, translating global policies to local realities and the involvement of non-humanitarian actors as important areas to explore. These have been reflected within the three themes.

Each of the themes is linked, and without solutions to these three themes, the vision of the Protection Policy will not be achieved. An overall finding of the review was that there had been partial progress in the implementation of the Protection Policy. Although most stakeholders considered that advances had been made to the way humanitarian actors address protection, most felt that there were still many improvements to be made. The review team identified common challenges and found that implementation of the key provisions had been uneven among contexts and actors. There was consistent feedback, however, about the factors – both enablers and blockers – that were considered most important to the implementation of the Policy (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Most important factors to making protection central to humanitarian responses



## 4.1 Vision, commitment, culture and leadership for protection

### Summary of issue and findings

Humanitarian actors and others who are contributing to reducing risks must share a clear vision and common understanding of what is to be achieved. A culture that encourages them to take action to reduce risks to people affected by crises is essential if protection is to be prioritised.

Protection as an outcome is a complex concept and is not well understood or owned within the humanitarian sector. There is little clear, practical direction on how to translate the vision of the policy into concrete action; a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities; and no means of ensuring accountability. The humanitarian sector needs to build an inclusive culture to reorient humanitarian action towards reducing risks and supporting people’s safety and security. This requires a significant shift in mindset. Leaders and institutions need to be incentivised and to motivate others to give priority to protection as an objective and an outcome central to the purpose of humanitarian action. They need to be held accountable and hold their staff to account to this objective. At present, the direction and tone have not been set for ensuring protection is at the core of humanitarian action.

The complexity and diversity of risks people face in humanitarian crises means that a clear, shared vision is essential to give all humanitarian actors clarity of purpose and understanding of the outcome for which they are aiming. This vision must be underpinned by a clear definition that is widely understood and jointly owned, and a culture that encourages the prioritisation of protection and enables targeted strategies to reduce risks. It also needs empowered, accountable leadership.

### 4.1.1 Lack of adequate clarity of concept, definition and scope of protection

#### Finding

Protection is a complex concept. The IASC definition provides a starting point for humanitarian actors. However, it requires a simple explanation of what falls within and outside its scope with respect to humanitarian action, and clear, practical direction on how to translate this into action.

#### The IASC definition

The 2015 WoS Review drew attention to the confusion around the definition of protection. It recommended an explanatory note to unpack the IASC definition of protection so that it had operational meaning (Niland et al., 2015). Instead, the IASC Protection Policy used the existing IASC definition (see Chapter 3 for the full definition) and elaborated on what the ‘centrality of protection’ in humanitarian action entails, setting out different aspects of the concept, but without actually defining it, or explaining what was expected of all actors to achieve it.

Many people interviewed for the review agreed that the IASC definition was a sound basis for working towards reducing risks. However, it does not go into enough detail, and most interviewees believed that the definition is too broad. There are advantages to this breadth in that it allows for a range of contributions from different actors. For example, L/NAs consulted tended to be comfortable with the broader definition of protection (see Section 4.3.1). However, further explanation is essential to enable humanitarian actors to identify key risks and outcomes to be prioritised. There is also a lack of clarity in terms of how humanitarian and other protection actors determine their protection roles and responsibilities in relation to the primary protection roles of states, and how this may change depending on time, the nature of the crisis and the capacity and/or willingness of states to protect.

Areas that interviewees identified as lacking clarity include: which actors are included in the definition – just those who identify as humanitarian agencies, or all those who are engaged in ensuring the safety and security of people affected by crises protection actors; whether it encompasses prevention, response and remedial actions or just some of these; and which actions should be prioritised and why. Most interviewees agree with the view originally set out in the IASC Principals’ 2013 statement that all humanitarian actors have a collective responsibility to ensure that the protection of all people at risk informs their decision-making and response (IASC, 2013); however, it is unclear to many how to achieve this. Some felt that it means that all humanitarian action needs

to demonstrate a clear and measurable primary objective to strengthen the safety of those affected by crises; for others, it is a secondary objective threaded through the delivery of humanitarian assistance activities. Some interviewees expressed concerns that such a broad range of actions falling within the scope of responding to risks can ultimately result in any assistance activity being described as addressing risks. In reality, emerging patterns of abuse should be identified, and actions prioritised to reduce these risks.

The lack of clarity around the definition of protection is borne out by survey respondents, with only 26% agreeing that there was conceptual clarity across the humanitarian community on what ‘putting protection at the heart of humanitarian action’ means in practice.

This lack of conceptual clarity and the absence of practical direction as to how to implement it causes confusion as to which risks and actions humanitarian actors should prioritise, and what is within or outside the scope of protection in humanitarian action. It also means that there is no clear baseline for measuring progress towards reducing risks and has led to fragmented approaches driven by the mandates and priorities of different organisations, rather than the priority risks facing affected people, all of which undermines the potential for collective understanding, commitment and action on protection.

### The use of the Egg Model to clarify the IASC definition

There are several ways to bring clarity to the definition of protection. The review team discussed this with many interviewees, drawing a clear distinction between two groups of actions: first, those designed to prevent and provide responsive action to prevent and alleviate the immediate effects of violations and abuses; and second, those designed to provide remedial action and contribute to an environment in which people are safe and secure, including by encouraging authorities to respect their obligations and the rights of individuals.

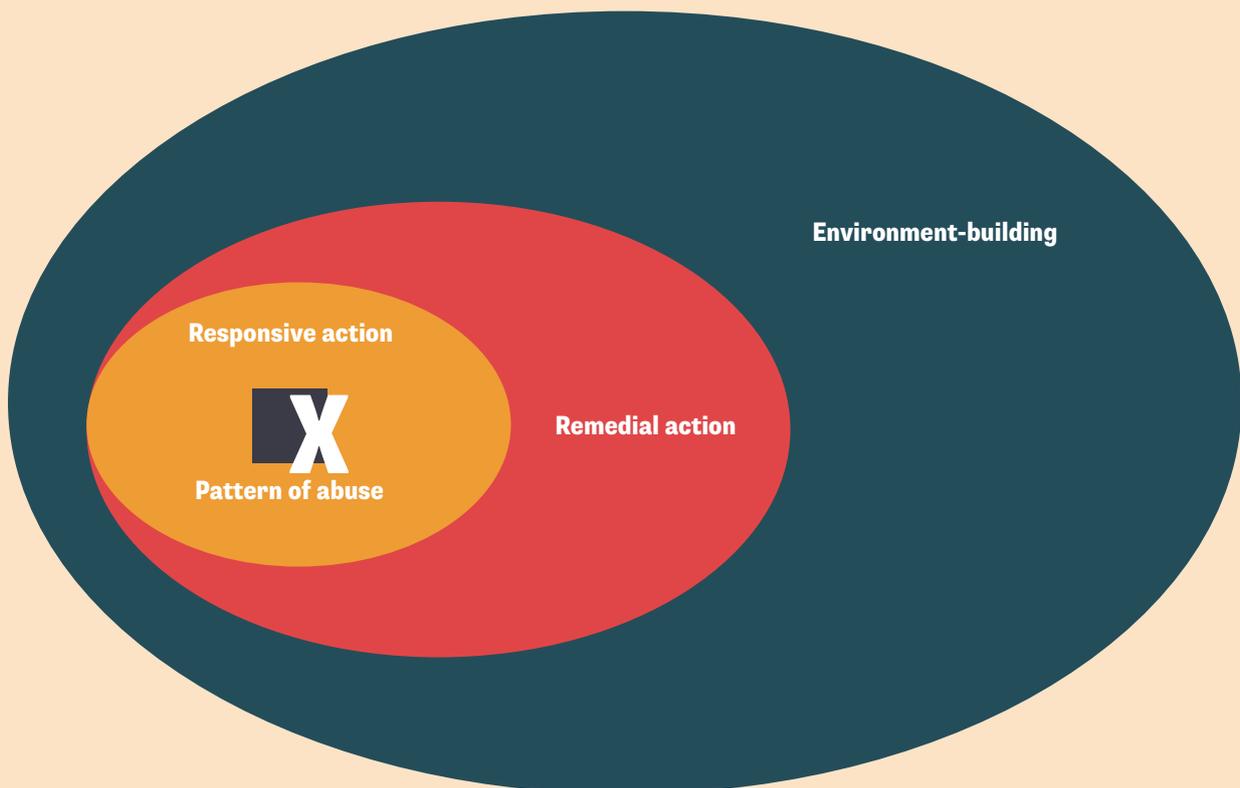
This approach resonated with many review participants and is closely in line with the ‘Egg Model’ (Box 1),<sup>11</sup> which is included in the IASC Protection Policy and is widely recognised among protection specialists.

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11 This model emerged during inter-agency discussions on protection led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and sets out an approach to thinking strategically about different types of protection action.

### Box 1 The 'Egg Model' of protection

The Egg Model of protection has been used to identify the different spheres of action to address the risks. Actions can incorporate addressing causes of abuse; preventing the occurrence of abuse; or addressing the consequences of abuse.



Three levels of action have been identified in addressing risks:

- Responsive action: to prevent, put a stop to and/or alleviate the immediate effects of a pattern of abuse.
- Remedial action: to restore people's dignity and ensure adequate living conditions after a pattern of abuse.
- Environment-building: actions to foster a political, socio-cultural, institutional and legislative environment that enables or encourages the authorities to respect their obligations and the rights of individuals.

Source: ICRC (2012).

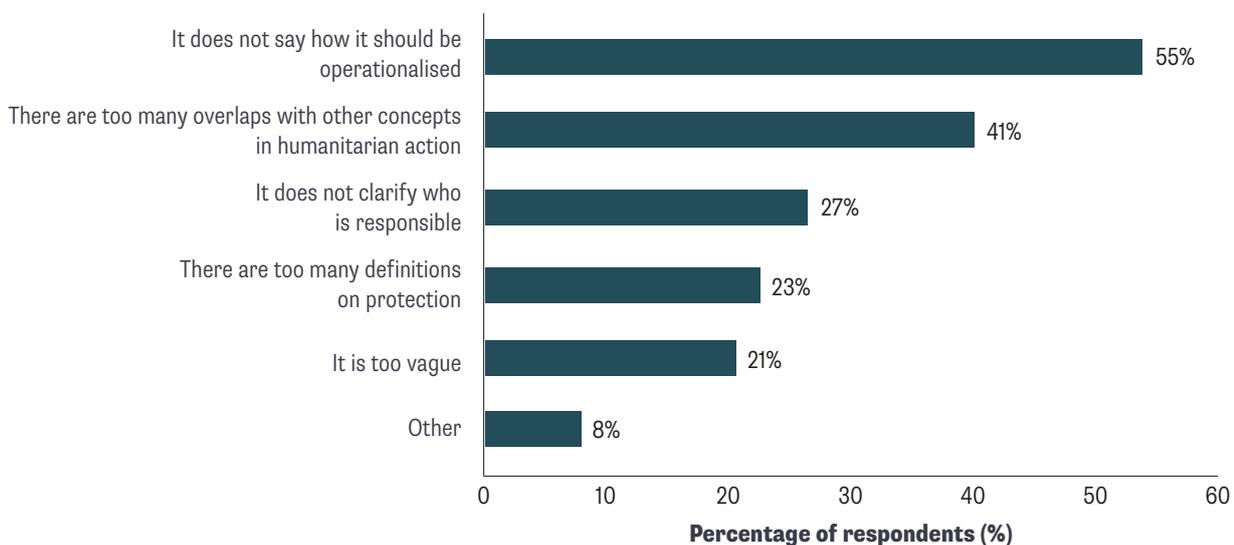
The model however appears to be largely unknown to humanitarian generalists and is rarely used to address the problem of clarity of concept for protection, or in the design of responses to prevent and respond to abuse. Nevertheless, it provides a basis for developing and communicating the implications of the current IASC definition and offers an entry point to build an understanding among organisations and could identify where they position themselves in relation to the different parts of the egg. While collective humanitarian action ideally addresses all three levels through a range of activities and actions, it is notable that, even among specialist protection agencies, humanitarian protection action primarily focuses on remedial action and environment-building, rather than responsive action.

**The term ‘centrality of protection’**

The term ‘centrality of protection’ was taken from the IASC Principals’ initial statement (IASC, 2013). It is at the heart of the IASC Protection Policy and is frequently referred to in discussions on protection. The majority of interviewees agree that it embodies the approach they would like to see, but question the use of the phrase. The main difficulty with the term ‘centrality of protection’ is that it focuses on humanitarian ways of working, rather than supporting positive outcomes for people affected by crises. It is important to move away from this jargon-driven, inward-looking approach and to describe an overarching goal for protection and the outcomes for people at risk. Protection should not be treated separately – either conceptually or structurally – from humanitarian assistance; instead, these two facets of humanitarian response should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Assistance activities may contribute to reducing risks, while improving people’s protection also enhances food security, access to water, safe shelter and health care, alongside other fundamental aspects of vulnerable people’s survival during a crisis.

In addition to this conceptual problem, Figure 4 indicates the range of concerns that survey participants had with implementing the centrality of protection.

**Figure 4** Problems with the concept of the ‘centrality of protection’



In attempting to clarify what ‘centrality of protection’ means, the GPC explains that:

The centrality of protection means more than protection mainstreaming. It includes ensuring that leadership, coordination and engagement in protection in all sectors is more strategic, aligned and directed towards a stronger response (GPC, 2016a).

While this clarification could have been useful, it does not focus on the desired outcome to reduce risks and has not been widely shared. It was not referenced by participants in the review.

In summary, the review team heard a strong call for conceptual clarity on what is meant by ensuring that protection is at the core of humanitarian responses, and how this should be put into practice. The IASC definition does not offer conceptual clarity beyond citing the standards provided in international law. Revisiting the definition would be a questionable use of time and resources; however, clarifying how the definition applies in the context of humanitarian action, what risks should be prioritised, and what responses can be implemented, is urgently needed.

#### Overlapping concepts and initiatives

Various concepts and initiatives within the humanitarian sector are closely related to protection, in that they focus on the dignity of and respect for particular groups of people or people affected by crises as a whole. These themes include gender, disability, older persons and accountability to affected populations, which are all aimed at ensuring inclusive humanitarian action. It can be argued that they fall under the broad umbrella of protection, while at the same time often being treated by the humanitarian community as separate objectives. The review heard how many agencies have adopted an integrated approach to issues of protection, inclusion and accountability. It should be clear that protection as a concept relates to these ideas in the same way that they should be embedded in the provision of humanitarian assistance. They are integral to high-quality action and programming.

#### 4.1.2 Mixed interpretations of and levels of commitment to protection

##### Finding

Protection is interpreted differently across the humanitarian sector and has not been a collective priority for humanitarian leaders. Although statements and commitments have been made in the IASC, they have not been translated into action. Although some organisations have demonstrated their commitment to protection by developing policies and practices to explain what it means for their work, the majority have not.

#### Rolling out the Policy

The IASC Protection Policy was designed to encourage all humanitarian actors to work towards reducing risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. The four actions described in the Policy provide a strong framework by emphasising engagement, collective action, mobilisation and evaluation

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(IASC, 2013). Once the Policy was agreed, protection was no longer a priority on the IASC Principals' agenda. They received occasional updates, often on specific contexts, but more attention was needed to ensure protection was prioritised and to build a commitment to implementation from the humanitarian leadership.

The absence of a clear process to roll out the Policy and support its implementation across the IASC-led parts of the humanitarian system was a fundamental barrier to its success. A work plan was developed to roll out and disseminate the Policy, but it was never adopted or implemented. A task force was formed but was subsequently disbanded.

In 2019, a Sub-Group on the Centrality of Protection was established under RG 1, with agreed tasks, including coordinating this review. However, there has still been no systematic and coordinated effort to offer practical direction on implementing the policy to humanitarian actors. This is in part because neither the Sub-Group nor the GPC has the authority to direct resources and lead a system-wide reorientation to prioritise and approach protection.

There has been ad hoc action to support the Policy's implementation. The GPC undertook a series of support missions to different countries and developed provisional guidance for drafting HCT protection strategies. Along with the Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team (STAIT) and IASC, the GPC also developed a short note on practical steps for HCs and HCTs to implement Protection Policy (GPC et al., 2016), as did the NGO networks InterAction and ALNAP. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and UNHCR held closed-door discussions with HCs and discussions on protection have taken place at various HC retreats. In 2017, protection was made one of four mandatory areas of responsibility in the standard ToR for HCTs (IASC, 2017). However, these actions often took place in isolation and failed to gain traction. In the absence of a clear, focused plan for dissemination, promotion and implementation, no system-wide approach was taken by humanitarian actors on the strategic and operational implications of implementing the vision described in the Policy.

As far as the review team could ascertain there were no plans or efforts in place to share the ambition and ideas set out in the Policy with a wider audience beyond the IASC-led system, or to influence others to adopt its approach.

The absence of clear direction on how to implement the policy in practice and of the provision of examples showing where it has made a difference has been a key barrier. A communication package on centrality of protection was developed by Oxfam for the GPC, but it was not used to help the roll-out.<sup>12</sup>

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12 The communication package on protection can be found on the GPC website at <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/tools-and-guidance/protection-cluster-coordination-toolbox/communication-package-on-protection/>.

### Understanding and interpreting the Policy

Despite all of this, the survey found that 72% of respondents felt they were familiar with the Policy, although levels of awareness were much lower than this during interviews and country-based research. Many participants told the team that they had only become aware of the Policy for the first time in preparing for the review.

Some discussions at country level suggested that interpretation of the Policy may be driven by what humanitarian actors believe is appropriate or possible for them to do in a particular context. This is linked to the different definitions of protection referred to in Sub-section 4.1.1. For example, where humanitarian actors feel their actions are limited to advocacy, they predominantly perceive protection being defined as exclusively responsive and environment-building, which they see as being achieved by advocacy. However, if direct programming is possible, protection has been predominantly interpreted as the need for remedial and environment-building approaches, which are then addressed through programmatic action (Davies, 2021).

This wide range of understanding of what protection is and, by extension, who is responsible for it was thought by several interviewees at both global and country levels to have generated tension and ‘turf wars’ among mandated agencies, particularly within the UN system. This has been exacerbated by different organisations being very protective of their own mandates. For example, evidence for the review found UNHCR to have blocked the deployment of additional protection capacity under the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) if it could not be under its management and control. This was found in more than one context.

Differences in the interpretation and priorities of protection have led to barriers to more collaborative approaches between humanitarian and human rights actors. For example, language and terminology can often differ, and the humanitarian and protection architecture can be inaccessible or of little relative value to human rights actors. The greatest disadvantage, however, is that lack of coherent understanding leads to fragmented approaches, which will inevitably deliver less impact than collective, mutually supportive ways of working.

### Accountability for protection

The nature of the humanitarian system means that there will never be a single line of accountability for a collective goal as each organisation or agency is responsible for its own actions and performance monitoring. However, there is opportunity for mutual accountability based on exchange of experience and openness to challenge and debate. The starting point for mutual accountability would be agreement on a single accountability framework for protection. There are several initiatives within the humanitarian sector that could be drawn on as examples for how this could be established, including the Core Humanitarian Standard, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership or the accountability framework agreed by GBV agencies, which sets out the responsibilities of different actors for ensuring a multi-sectoral approach to GBV prevention and response (GBV, 2018).

Organisations and institutions should also put in place specific accountability mechanisms for protection within their own management structures, which should be coherent with and support a sector-wide framework. Both sector and organisational frameworks should include clear protection-specific indicators incorporated into regular monitoring and reporting processes. There is little evidence of this having taken place. The Peer-2-Peer process has meant that some HCTs have had the opportunity to learn from each other, but such reviews have not focused on protection as it was not in their ToRs. This is indicative of the deprioritisation of protection and its lower value within the humanitarian system relative to other priorities.

### Signs of positive change

Despite this negative picture, there are emerging signs of positive change. Many interviewees felt that there is now much wider use of the language of protection within sector discussions at global and country levels compared to five years ago. This is a helpful prerequisite to developing stronger commitment, prioritisation and action.

There is also evidence of growing commitment to protection by some agencies who have adopted their own policies and invested resources in ensuring that their staff are aware of how these should be implemented. The willingness of an organisation to reorient its objectives and actions towards protection and the reduction of risks seems to be determined by its values, history and leadership, encouraged by flexible funds and resources to be creative and to innovate, with a willingness to take risks (see Box 2). Barriers include competing priorities and perceptions that approaches to reducing risks are too complicated and political for humanitarian organisations to pursue. This leads to a preference by many to focus on more clearly measurable activities within humanitarian assistance where the humanitarian organisation has greater control over the impact of their actions.

## Box 2 Examples of agencies committing to reducing risks

**International Organization for Migration (IOM)** has developed policies to institutionalise the centrality of protection across emergency operations, which is now reflected in structure, workforce and terms of reference.

**The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)**'s Global Strategy 2022–2025 (NRC, 2021) includes a sub-objective to make people safer and reduce risks from conflict and violence through standalone protection programmes, analysing risks and actors available to address these issues. NRC is committed to identifying its added value and capacity to respond with protection programming, advocacy, policy initiatives and partnerships.

**Oxfam** publicly committed to the centrality of protection in 2016 and pledged to campaign for improved compliance with International Humanitarian Law, to train all staff, increase investment in community-based protection programming and carry out ongoing protection analysis (Oxfam, 2017).

**Save the Children** have adopted a Centrality of Protection Policy (ACPHA, 2021), which outlines how it will achieve its collective responsibility for protecting the most vulnerable children from harm by achieving protection outcomes for children across its humanitarian response. After piloting this approach in several countries, the policy has been rolled out across the organisation and is apparently now well embedded. This focus on the centrality of protection is unique.

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** adopted an updated Protection and Accountability Policy in 2020 (WFP, 2020). Through this, WFP commits to preventing and responding to risks associated with hunger in all contexts, and to achieving successful protection outcomes for the people it assists. WFP believes that its proximity to affected populations gives it the capacity and the responsibility to support positive protection outcomes.

In recent years, the **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)** has adopted an integrated approach to protection, gender and inclusion as part of its response to climate-induced disasters and other emergencies. As well as implementing dedicated programmes to address specific risks such as sexual and gender-based violence, IFRC adopts these approaches to all its humanitarian operations as envisaged in the IASC protection policy.

Rolling out, promoting and embedding ideas as wide-ranging and potentially game-changing as those in the Protection Policy is daunting and challenging. It is a task that cannot be addressed by circulating documents and conducting training sessions alone. Previous learning from complex roll-outs could prove useful (see Box 3).

### **Box 3 Embedding humanitarian principles – a comparable example**

It is worth considering how the humanitarian principles have come, over an extended period of time, to be widely understood and accepted, in order to enhance understanding and acceptance of protection as a core component of humanitarian action. The key steps that have led to them being valued and widely applied are listed below, and should inform those responsible for developing cross-sectoral understanding of protection:

- constant reference to their sound legal or normative underpinning
- development of a clear definition of the principles explored and explained by respected authors
- development of a strong body of work explaining how the principles are applied in practice
- reflecting the principles in cross-sector codes of conduct
- encouraging organisations to reflect the principles in internal organisational policies
- continued discussion and debate.

### **4.1.3 Absence of an organisational culture to encourage prioritising protection**

#### **Finding**

The humanitarian sector needs to build an inclusive culture to support reorienting humanitarian action towards reducing risks and strengthening people's safety and security. This requires a shift in mindset and an operating environment in which protection is valued and prioritised.

Responding to protection issues can be fraught with difficulty, political sensitivities and, at times, insecurity. In the face of this, it is important that there is a culture within the humanitarian sector and individual organisations that values protection as a priority and supports leaders to take bold decisions to ensure that there is collective responsibility to address risks. This culture needs to encompass a vision, leadership, encouragement and reward for adopting agreed approaches towards protection which goes beyond a set of guidelines to result in a clear sense of collective responsibilities and behaviours.

Although the humanitarian sector has committed to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian action, and that advocacy is a key component of protection action, many interviewees at both global

and country levels felt they were not supported to address risks, including by the leadership of their own agencies (Lilly and Spencer, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). They look for, but do not receive, encouragement and dedicated resources, and to be rewarded for taking risks to address protection issues even if well intentioned and credible actions are not ultimately successful. This was felt to be related to the lack of understanding among some senior leaders of what protection is, and how risks to vulnerable populations can be addressed. There is a widespread perception in many organisations that protection activities, particularly those that seek to prevent and respond to the most acute risks, are inherently political and may undermine humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality. This is disappointing, given that it is a simplistic analysis and contradicts the goals of humanitarian action and the Protection Policy.

Many in the humanitarian sector believe that addressing risks, particularly through advocacy, could compromise access to contentious areas and marginalised communities in order to deliver assistance (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). These perceptions are often approached from a binary and simplistic perspective. Although such dilemmas are often grounded in complex operating environments, as recently demonstrated in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Myanmar, the risks tend to be assumed rather than assessed and analysed (Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Davies, 2021). However, where access has been restricted, there is little evidence to suggest this is related to organisations' approach to protection. Organisations often prioritise their relations with a host state over challenging the state's actions with respect to its own citizens. The extremely low-risk appetite across the humanitarian system is a key barrier to strengthening the prioritisation of protection, including through advocacy.

There is limited evidence to suggest humanitarian organisations are taking steps to better manage and mitigate risks related to prioritising protection within their own operations, or to balance risks to maintaining access against risks to the protection of civilians. Many of those interviewed recognised that there was much more discussion of these issues within organisations and in inter-agency dialogue but, with some exceptions, there seems to be little confidence that there will be institutional or individual support for higher risk-taking, or when there could be negative consequences of taking risks, including from organisation headquarters, donors or states (Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). A higher risk appetite may result in some challenging engagements with authorities and subsequent threats, but would also increase understanding of what is possible. Ultimately, practice within the humanitarian sector indicates relatively low levels of investment in, or prioritisation of, engagement with duty-bearers and parties to a conflict to seek to positively influence their approaches to reducing risks to affected people. Relatedly, insufficient effort has gone into how to approach such dilemmas strategically and in the best interests of reducing risks to people affected by humanitarian crises.

Country-based representatives of a variety of humanitarian organisations reported feeling under pressure to prioritise reaching the largest possible number of people through the delivery of assistance, and perceived that engaging in protection issues could compromise this (Davies, 2021). Even where there was no reluctance in principle to engaging in assistance and protection issues, there was a strongly held perception among field staff that limited resources meant that it was difficult or impossible to do both. Other practical challenges included the need to work to short time

frames and budgets. Many interviewees also felt that having to guarantee specific measurable outcomes restricted them from exploring innovative approaches to protection that may not prove immediately successful. None of these challenges should be insurmountable. However, the thread running through all of this was that, although there is agreement in principle that ‘protection is everyone’s business’, when it comes to translating this into action, the willingness is frequently not there.

Member States and donor governments have a key role to play in supporting and incentivising humanitarian actors to prioritise approaches to reducing risks, both as donors to humanitarian responses and as political actors with varying degrees of influence. They are also well placed to ensure that humanitarian actors work closely with at-risk and affected populations and have adequate policies and standards. At a global level, many donor governments have committed to strengthen approaches to humanitarian action to reduce risks. Several have developed specific policies to achieve this. However, application of these policies and approaches is often ad hoc at best, and donors consulted for this review expressed frustration at the lack of examples of action that demonstrably resulted in positive change in people’s lives. Without this information, they feel it is difficult to develop further commitment to protection within their institutions. From the perspective of operational agencies, perceptions of low levels of diplomatic support from donors or Member States are further compounded by policies, such as counter-terror legislation, which can contradict approaches to strengthen protection – for example by blocking dialogue and negotiation with parties to a conflict. These factors build discord into donor–agency relationships and need urgent resolution. There is much that donors could do to support and incentivise innovation in approaches to reducing risks.

Stakeholders interviewed for the review’s country-based research felt that they rarely enjoyed diplomatic or donor support, although this view has been open to challenge. Short programme funding horizons and timeframes, and a perceived focus on immediate measurable results, were felt to undermine opportunities to develop programmes that would reduce risks. Lack of political or financial support undermines the possibility of building a culture focused on reducing risks for affected people and can often reward risk aversion throughout the humanitarian sector. This lack of a positive culture for engaging in protection issues is dominant within the humanitarian sector, but there are notable exceptions and signs that change is under way. UNHCR has invested in its protection cluster lead responsibilities and WFP has developed a Protection and Accountability Policy (WFP, 2020). OHCHR continues to strengthen its engagement in humanitarian action, including through its field presence through the Humanitarian Action Unit and the deployment of Human Rights Advisors. Within the INGO community, NRC and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are examples of organisations that have demonstrated a willingness to take risks, bear witness and speak out or act on protection issues. This is enabled by clear direction from their leadership, their original founding principles and flexible resourcing. Other INGOs have developed significant portfolios of work to address GBV, housing, land and property rights, and community-based protection.

### 4.1.4 More coherent, collective, strategic leadership is required

#### **Finding**

Stronger, collective, strategic leadership on protection issues is required across the humanitarian sector. Leaders and institutions need to be incentivised and to motivate others to give priority to protection as an objective and an outcome central to the purpose of humanitarian action. They need to be held accountable and to hold their staff to account on this objective.

Senior leaders set tone and strategic direction, give incentives, reward achievement and manage failures. For a summary of where leadership for protection currently sits within the humanitarian system see Appendix 1.

The Protection Policy set out the importance of leadership, with the IASC Principals calling on leaders to ‘harness the diverse mandates and expertise of IASC organisations in achieving protection outcomes’. The IASC Principals were correct in that no single entity has the authority, capacity or resources to ensure the implementation of the Policy. Ultimately, success will be delivered by coherent leadership from across and beyond the humanitarian community, demonstrated by a group of champions. With strong, collective leadership there will be clarity of definition, understanding and ownership, but without this it is likely to be fragmented and potentially contradictory.

The review found that, although leadership on protection is still thought to be insufficient to achieve the vision set out in the Protection Policy, it has improved in some areas over the past five years. Respondents reported more attention being paid to protection in organisational debates, although there was much concern that this is not adequately translated into practice. This mixed message is reflected in the survey, which found that 56% of respondents agreed that there has been stronger leadership to ensure protection is central to decision-making and responses during the past five years. However, there is still a lack of clear direction, capacity or willingness to make difficult decisions in complex environments, with leaders receiving and giving contradictory messages. Findings of the review and other research suggest diminished senior-level commitment to protection and a more cautious approach throughout all levels of leadership within humanitarian organisations (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). The priority of senior leaders has been to maintain presence and access for the delivery of assistance, often at the expense of engaging in dialogue and advocacy around more sensitive protection challenges that may be politically unpopular with certain UN Member States or that are critical of the host state. Leadership frequently remains largely based on individuals and personalities who are insufficiently supported by their organisations, and there is a lack of rigorous framework within which to make decisions.

The key enabler to effective leadership has been personal commitment and willingness on the part of key individuals to set direction and take risks. The major barrier to progress has been the lack of an organisational culture to enable protection. There is a lack of incentives, and even disincentives, for leaders to behave in this way, with perceptions that they may be criticised for exposing their organisations to risks and jeopardising the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Davies, 2021).

Leadership on protection in humanitarian responses needs to come from a variety of places across the humanitarian system, from individual organisations and their networks, from coalitions and through personal action. Specific key elements of the humanitarian system should be assessed individually and then evaluated for coherence and collective action. The following is an initial assessment.<sup>13</sup>

### The UN Secretary-General

Leadership must come from the very top of the international system. The UN Secretary-General (UNSG)'s leadership is critical to making protection a priority and encouraging a system-wide approach. The UNSG should bring issues of concern to a dialogue with Member States, identify and lead collective action to address critical trends in crises and ensure that the UNSG's Special Envoys collaborate closely with the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and HCs to establish strategies that reduce risks to affected people, including through addressing the conduct of parties to conflict.

In recent years, although there have been several attempts to position protection as a priority within the UN leadership agenda, it has not taken root either in policy or in practice. The current approach is through the UNSG's Call to Action for Human Rights, which was launched in 2020 and makes a commitment to develop an Agenda for Protection (UNSG, 2020a; b). However, evidence from the review found there was limited knowledge of the initiative beyond UN staff and almost none among NGOs. Even among UN personnel there is scepticism about what its added value will be. To ensure success, it must learn from criticisms of the previous HRuF initiative (Damplo and Saad, 2019), one of which was that its focus solely on the UN was a significant barrier to its uptake. The Call to Action must learn from this and ensure it is relevant and prioritised beyond UN entities. This lesson should also be applied to the follow-up to the High-Level Panel on internally displaced persons (IDPs), which is restricting itself to the UN system and in so doing actively excludes NGO participation in several potentially important new bodies.

### IASC Principals and the Emergency Relief Coordinator

The Policy is owned by the IASC Principals, and their commitment and leadership is essential if it is to have an impact. Following the agreement of the Policy, the deprioritisation of protection has inevitably had an impact on the profile and importance that it has received in member organisations and the sector as a whole. The establishment of RG 1 and the Sub-Group on the Centrality of Protection has

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<sup>13</sup> Other elements of the UN system, for example, Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs), also have a role to play in leading protection in humanitarian responses, but the review focused on key operational roles.

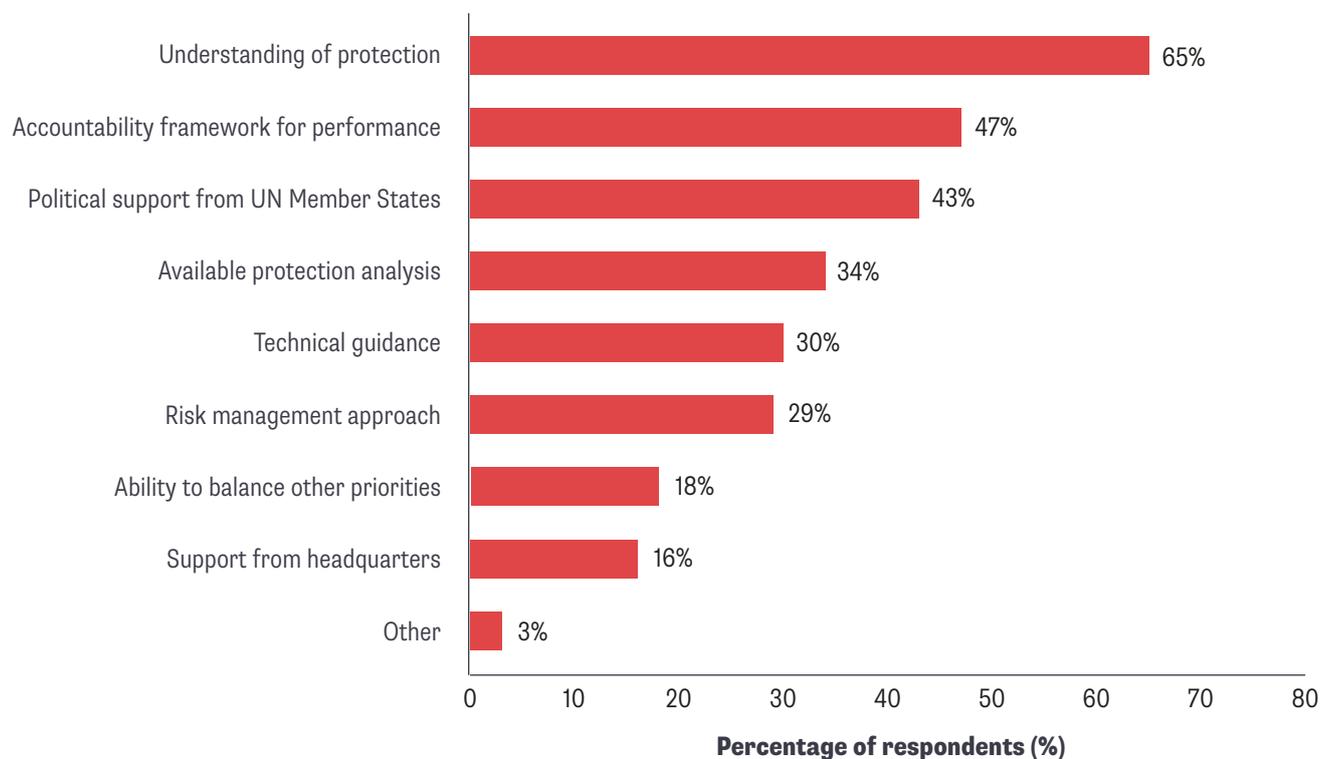
provided support to the issue within IASC structures, but the impact of these groups will be limited without the Principals' leadership. This has been illustrated by the lack of attention to rolling out the Policy and the low levels of understanding and ownership.

As Chair of the IASC Principals with direct accountability to the UNSG, the ERC sets the agenda and focus of the IASC. The direction being set by the incumbent ERC, who has been clear in his determination to address critical issues around protection within the humanitarian system, has been welcomed. However, he should turn this vision into reality early in his tenure to ensure renewed momentum and oversee a reprioritisation of protection within and beyond the humanitarian sector.

### Humanitarian Coordinators

The core responsibility for leading the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy in humanitarian crises rests with the HCs and HCTs. All HCs interviewed for the review emphasised their commitment to protection and understood the perceived dilemmas that this could pose in relation to maintaining access for the delivery of assistance. However, HC performance has been described by interviewees as mixed. Protection is not mentioned explicitly in the HCs' ToRs (IASC, 2017), although the centrality of protection is listed as a mandatory responsibility of humanitarian action in the 2021 *Leadership in humanitarian action: handbook for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator* (IASC, 2021a).

Key factors in enabling strong leadership on protection issues at country level are set out in Figure 5; data was taken from the survey and confirmed through interviews, although with some variation in the emphasis given to the factors. The likelihood of achieving these requirements for leadership was attributed by many respondents to the background of the HC. HCs coming from an operational humanitarian background were judged more likely to be successful than others coming from political or development careers. In part, this was thought to be the result of HCs simply not understanding what was required but could be taught, while in some cases respondents felt that HCs were reluctant to challenge government as this would risk relationships with the host state. Reforms to HC recruitment have focused on selections based on management and coordination skills at the expense of political and negotiation skills (Metcalf-Hough, 2020). With an increasing number of double-hatted RCs/HCs coming from development backgrounds, this is increasingly likely to be a factor. There is little accountability for protection within HCs' performance evaluation processes, and they feel they are primarily held accountable for maintaining good relations with host governments and ensuring the provision of the maximum amount of humanitarian assistance to the highest numbers of beneficiaries. HCs often feel vulnerable undertaking protection advocacy, given the uncertainty around the support they can expect from UN headquarters and Member States. Taking a stand on protection issues is rarely rewarded, with political considerations often taking priority.

**Figure 5** Factors that enable strong humanitarian leadership on protection

There was a clear sense from all respondents that HCs could not rely on organisational support and endorsement from the IASC, OCHA and UN agency headquarters if they chose to prioritise protection and take on difficult and sensitive issues regarding the specific policies and practices of harmful actors. If they did so, and this led to a high-profile challenge to the UN's authority, most interviewees felt HCs would be blamed for damaging relationships rather than praised for upholding good principles and practice. Related to this, Member States are often perceived as not providing the political support required to take on such challenging issues. Ultimately, HCs do not have the support, technical resources or tools to effectively prioritise protection (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020: 7). On this, there was sympathy for HCs and a sense that they are often placed in a difficult position.

Regardless of the background of the HC and their level of experience in addressing protection issues, a recurring theme in interviews was the importance of the HC and the HCT receiving the correct level of advice on prioritising risks, and what HCs and HCTs should do to address them. Many felt that, when this came exclusively from the protection cluster, it did not result in information at an appropriately strategic level, or identify patterns of abuse which humanitarian actors could collectively address. Advice from the cluster was frequently related to specific aspects of the protection sector response and its priorities, rather than a strategic perspective. For example, protection analysis and actions are discussed from the perspective of displacement, GBV and child protection. This advice is important at an operational level but falls short of helping with prioritising strategic protection issues and abuses, including prevention and response to the most acute risks. As a result, these trends are largely absent from analysis on protection. A dedicated, long-term, strategic Protection Advisor to HCs and HCTs would help address this concern. This

post would need to be at senior level and delinked from technical protection-mandated agencies in order to offer strategic analysis and advise across all patterns of abuse. Its existence would enable the protection cluster to focus on technical support to its members.

### Humanitarian Country Teams

Leadership from HCTs and their members appears to have been patchy. Although the centrality of protection was made one of four mandatory tasks in the ToR for HCTs adopted in 2017, and was included in the HCT compacts, this does not seem to have translated into concrete actions to address the issue (IASC, 2017). In some of the countries where the review team carried out detailed research, protection was a regular agenda item and appears to have had a high profile. In others this was not the case. Where protection issues are a key driver of humanitarian challenges, such as in armed conflicts, it is easier for it to be prioritised, whereas in climate change-induced and other disasters HCT members felt that ensuring it had sufficient attention was more challenging. According to GPC data, in 2020 regular briefings on protection were occurring in half of the operations with a protection cluster, but only one-third of those briefings affected informed strategic decisions (GPC, 2020). Where it was made a standing agenda item, this did not necessarily ensure that the HCT took collective action on protection. Where protection was absent from the HCT agenda, several causes were described, including a lack of input and analysis from the protection cluster on which to base discussions; a focus by the HCT on day-to-day operational and assistance delivery issues; and a propensity to delegate protection to the cluster and advisers deployed on a short-term basis. One of the key tools for the HCT in leading the implementation of the Protection Policy is the development of HCT protection strategies. This is discussed in detail in Sub-section 4.2.3.

Clearly, simply insisting that protection should be an HCT agenda item will not automatically lead to improved action to implementing the vision of the Protection Policy. Indeed, there is a risk that it could, and in some situations has, become another tick-box exercise. However, it is important that it is owned as a strategic priority, and that each HCT finds a way of incorporating this into its ways of working.

### The protection cluster

The protection cluster has been the main focal point for leading coordination and technical support and advice on protection issues across the humanitarian system since 2005, with UNHCR as the cluster lead and NRC as co-lead. IASC guidance on cluster coordination at country level also recognises OHCHR and UNICEF as potential protection cluster leads, and OHCHR has taken up this responsibility in different contexts. However, the role of the protection cluster in supporting the humanitarian sector in making protection a system-wide responsibility is not clear. In line with other technical clusters, it is designed to offer technical support and clear direction to those charged with leading and implementing programmatic responses. However, unlike other clusters, there is a tendency for it to be seen as having responsibility for system-wide outcomes related to protection across the humanitarian response. This is an ill-founded tendency as the cluster cannot lead and be accountable for the actions of the agencies it advises and supports.

Throughout the consultations for this review, it was recognised that the leadership of the GPC at global level has improved over the past five years, with stronger resourcing and a more positive and collaborative approach towards working within the cluster and with other sectors. Nevertheless, there are still outstanding issues to be resolved. The remit of the GPC and the AoRs is extremely broad, with individual AoRs, especially the larger ones, sometimes pursuing their own agendas in isolation from the rest of the cluster. Although the AoRs are recognised by many as having been successful in their own areas of competence, greater coherence – among them, and between them and the cluster as a whole – is essential if the GPC is to be an effective technical body and less demanding of the time and inputs of its members. This issue is felt in countries where AoRs have invested in mainstreaming and capacity-building without having a coherent cluster-wide approach to working with other sectors. In addition, the GPC and AoRs continue to be led by the mandates of their lead agencies. As a result, they provide technical support to categories of vulnerable populations, such as displaced people and children, or those facing specific risks, such as GBV, rather than providing technical support on the most acute risks that humanitarian actors can collectively address within a given crisis, even if this is at the cost of their own specialism.

The review found numerous challenges with respect to the leadership of the protection cluster at the country level. In many countries, the Protection Cluster Coordinator (PCC) position has been vacant for extended periods of time or has experienced rapid turnover; for example, in Yemen there have been eight PCCs in two years. In other locations there has been ‘double-hatting’, with a member of UNHCR staff also acting as a PCC.

Country-level research carried out for the review revealed that the role of the protection cluster was unclear to many operational agencies, as was the relationship between the cluster and the UNHCR office. The most striking example of this was in one deep dive, when the UNHCR Representative insisted on signing off products from cluster discussions. In another context, the protection cluster was said to have ‘vetted’ all advocacy positions of its members. Examples of such requirements and the issue of double-hatting have raised questions as to the level of independence of the cluster from UNHCR, particularly at the country level. The review heard that, in all four countries where the review carried out in-depth research, the protection cluster was reported to be the weakest of all the clusters.

There appear to be several reasons for the weakness of the protection cluster at country level compared to other sectors. Protection is different conceptually from its peer clusters in that it is not an operational, deliverable service in the same way as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) or health. The cluster is also often perceived as a ‘process juggernaut’,<sup>14</sup> with processes and the preparation of documents prioritised over addressing substantive protection concerns. This has undermined meaningful protection analysis and action. Many described the relationship between the cluster and its members as being transactional, requiring a great deal from partners rather than cluster staff understanding what they could contribute to partners’ work. It is felt by many that there should also

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14 In-country interviewee.

be encouragement for protection clusters to be more inclusive in terms of engaging non-protection-mandated organisations and facilitating sector-wide understanding of protection issues, and how they may be addressed in practice by humanitarian organisations.

The role of the cluster requires urgent clarification. It is the technical lead in the humanitarian sector, and to fulfil this role it requires stronger leadership and sustained resourcing. This responsibility currently falls to UNHCR in its role as cluster lead, but it will also require greater engagement from wider IASC bodies if it is to achieve its purpose. The cluster is not and should not be responsible for the collective system-wide approach to protection, as this would undermine the process of holding actors across the humanitarian sector accountable for their collective efforts towards reducing risks of people affected by crises.

### International non-governmental organisations

Leadership need not, and in many cases has not, only come from the UN-led elements of the humanitarian system. NGOs are often the source of significant change, influence and impact on protection. Considerable protection expertise can be found outside the UN system, and major systemic shifts have been initiated outside of the formal humanitarian coordination architecture (see Sub-section 4.1.2).

Since 2012, in recognition of the persistent failure by the humanitarian system to meaningfully reduce risks in humanitarian crises, InterAction has led a collaborative NGO effort to identify, develop and apply methods and practices which support measurable risk reduction and outcome-oriented approaches to protection (InterAction, 2021). InterAction has developed tools, and shared materials and good practice examples, to demonstrate collective approaches to reducing risks among humanitarian actors. In addition, InterAction, ICVA and other partnerships have convened specialist groups on protection within and beyond the humanitarian sector, for example with peacebuilding and human rights organisations, to take forward operational, advocacy and programme approaches to collectively address risks.

Relatedly, some operational NGOs may be considered live models of good practice for working towards approaches to reduce risks. These include organisations such as the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), Geneva Call, Nonviolent Peaceforce and Pax for Peace, which are often able to maintain their presence, collaborate with affected people and engage effectively with parties to conflict to influence harmful behaviour or policies even in areas with limited access, or where such approaches are considered too risky under the formal humanitarian architecture. While these organisations do not characterise themselves primarily as humanitarian actors, their example should nevertheless inform the approaches of all humanitarian organisations seeking to reduce the risks to crisis-affected people.

The review found that INGO forums also play an important role at the country level to strategically position collective INGO approaches in the HCT, and by coordinating advocacy and programming on protection among their members. This work has been shown to influence thinking and practice within humanitarian responses.

As the IASC considers its approach to strengthen collective action to reduce risks, it would be worth understanding and potentially emulating the ways of working of organisations with strong track records on protection, as well as tapping into NGO expertise, creativity and innovation that has so effectively helped advance humanitarian standards and ways of working in the humanitarian system over the decades.

### 4.2 Enabling delivery of the policy

#### Summary of issue and findings

Delivering the vision of the Protection Policy requires strong coordination and planning, the means to measure progress and sufficient capability and capacity.

While some progress has been made, there was no coordinated effort to support implementation of the Policy. Efforts that were undertaken were ad hoc and did not bring about systemic change or accountability to ensure protection is prioritised across the humanitarian response, and to focus on reducing risks.

Leadership arrangements and coordination structures established to address protection require radical simplification to focus on outcomes and reducing risks for crisis-affected populations, rather than sustaining inward-looking processes.

#### 4.2.1 Overly complex and fragmented protection architecture

##### Finding

Protection coordination structures have become overly complex and fragmented. An integrated protection approach to crisis-affected populations has been lacking. The focus on protection as a technical sector responsibility has undermined progress towards protection as a system-wide responsibility.

Effective coordination is required for collective approaches to reducing risks to affected people across humanitarian actors. The Protection Policy explains the roles of different actors within the IASC who are involved in protection at the country and global levels, emphasising the fundamental role of the HCT (GPC et al., 2016: 4). However, it provides limited direction on what is expected from each of them to implement the Policy. In particular, there is a lack of clarity on who should provide technical support on protection as a system-wide responsibility. This is needed to support the HCs and HCTs and provide strategic direction across the humanitarian response. For a summary overview of the current architecture for protection within the humanitarian system, see Appendix 1.

There are now a myriad of actors, structures and coordination mechanisms related to protection in the humanitarian system. This ‘protection architecture’ has become increasingly complex and fragmented since the adoption of the Protection Policy. The research carried out for this review found that there has been significant overemphasis on routine bureaucratic processes as compared to achieving results and impact. Many of the structures established have become self-serving rather than linked to action that will make a difference for people exposed to risks in crises. Protection specialists spoke about spending an inordinate amount of time in coordination meetings and contributing to strategy development, needs analysis and appeals processes in the humanitarian programme cycle, diverting attention away from operational responses and action. While these are common challenges for all sectors, they have been particularly acute for protection. Many stakeholders felt that protection is a specialist discipline that has become overly technical and is often detached from the operational realities of humanitarian action.

It is unclear who is responsible for the technical advisory support function for protection as a system-wide responsibility, at both global and country levels. At a global level, as noted earlier, a Sub-Group on the Centrality of Protection was established under RG 1, chaired by OCHA and InterAction. However, the GPC has also played an active role in supporting the centrality of protection. While there is complementarity between the Sub-Group and the GPC, the division of responsibilities and ultimate responsibility are not clear. At the country level the lack of clarity of roles has been even more pronounced: technical support has been undertaken by different actors with an inconsistent approach in different countries. As the lead of the protection cluster, UNHCR has played a role, as has NRC as a co-lead. So too has OHCHR and OCHA, while ProCap protection advisors have been deployed to HC offices in many contexts (Box 4). As described in Sub-section 4.1.4, the role of the cluster should be to provide technical support, but this should be divorced from the organisational work of the agency deploying staff to the cluster.

### **Box 4 ProCap support to the centrality of protection**

ProCap, as an inter-agency capacity-development mechanism managed by OCHA and NRC, has played a key role in supporting the implementation of the Protection Policy. Between 2016 and 2021, ProCap undertook 115 deployments of Senior Protection Advisors to provide inter-agency technical support on protection to HCs and agencies in a range of contexts. A key focus has been the development or revision of HCT protection strategies, which amounted to 28% of all deployments during this time. In 2019, ProCap changed its operational model, aiming to provide 2–3 years’ support in specific contexts, with a significant proportion of its deployments now being hosted by either OCHA or UNHCR, although reporting directly to HCs. However, ProCap has found it hard to deploy its Senior Protection Advisors in certain contexts because of a lack of ownership of the process or lack of agreement among agencies. For example, a ProCap deployment had been pending for 12 months in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The challenges of ProCap deployments highlight the lack of clarity around who should be the technical lead for the centrality of protection and also can give the impression that it is possible to outsource the responsibility for protection.

The protection architecture also lacks strategic focus as a sector, with increasingly siloed and incoherent approaches. The current arrangement of the protection cluster in terms of UNHCR's overall leadership, with separate AoRs for GBV (UN Population Fund), child protection (UN Children's Fund), mine action (UN Mine Action Service) and housing, land and property (NRC), has increasingly lacked strategic coherence. Although there is some degree of collaboration and joint work plans between the protection cluster and the AoRs, including through strategic advisory groups, the AoRs are increasingly operating as their own clusters. The AoRs have not only separate coordination structures, but also separate sections within Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), in funding streams and in guidance. They are largely autonomous. The specialised approach of AoRs has provided positive focus on critical protection issues, but this has also led to a fragmented approach to addressing risks. It has led to a much-needed focus on vulnerable groups, such as displaced people and children, or on specific risks such as GBV, land tenure and the impact of unexploded ordnance, but the AoRs could deliver greater impact if they and the cluster worked more closely together. As the lead of the protection cluster, UNHCR has struggled to provide overarching strategic leadership and approach to protection. Overall, the protection cluster has been drawn in many directions and lacks strategic focus.

The current protection architecture also means that resources are not being used in the most efficient way. They tend to be used to sustain institutional structures, rather than focusing on actions aimed at reducing risks of affected populations. For example, since the adoption of the Protection Policy, the GPC Operational Cell at headquarters has been significantly strengthened.<sup>15</sup> It now comprises 25 separate positions<sup>16</sup> which, along with staff involved in the AoRs, is far larger than most other global clusters. The number of GPC positions is now nearly the same as the number of field protection cluster positions (31), which seems disproportionate. Many field protection cluster positions have remained empty for several months at a time, showing the imbalance of resources between global and national levels. This raises questions about whether capacities are being deployed in the best way.

The functions of the GPC have also expanded beyond what was initially envisaged when the clusters were established in 2005. It has maintained several working groups and task forces which, while providing some support, create additional demands for colleagues working across processes. For example, OCHA headquarters tracks coordination mechanisms at the national level and, in 2020, identified 298 clusters, sectors and AoRs present at the national level across all humanitarian operations globally. A staggering 110 (or more than one-third) of these coordination mechanisms related to protection, whereas the sector receives only approximately 4% of overall humanitarian funding. These figures demonstrate how protection has become a process-driven exercise, and the coordination mechanisms take up a significant amount of agencies' time. When combined with the findings on leadership of the protection cluster at country level (see Sub-section 4.1.4), this paints a picture of an overcomplicated and under-led sector.

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15 As recommended by the WoS Review, the GPC Coordinator also became a standalone role (Niland et al., 2015).

16 See the GPC Operational Cell organigram ([www.globalprotectioncluster.org/about-us/who-we-are/](http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/about-us/who-we-are/)).

The protection architecture has been unsuccessful in promoting participation by non-specialist agencies and non-UN actors. The protection cluster and its AoRs have made some progress in including INGOs and national NGOs as co-leads of the cluster at the field level. However, this is still not consistent from one country to the next, and has not led to a balanced approach between lead and co-lead, with INGO co-leads often marginalised. Interviewees spoke of how some L/NAs have not found it easy to participate or feel adequately represented in strategic decision-making (see Sub-section 4.3.1).

In some contexts, organisations have lost confidence in UN-led coordination mechanisms on protection, both at cluster and strategic levels, which has reduced their participation or led them to find alternative ways of working. For example, in Nigeria, the review team heard about the establishment of the ‘Protection Collective’ (see Box 5). In Yemen, several INGOs, supported by donors, decided to work together on advocating for change on the issue of *mahram* – the practice of women not being able to travel without a male relative. They had tried without success to raise this in the HCT for several months before taking their own action.

### Box 5 The ‘Protection Collective’ in Nigeria

In 2019, a group of INGOs in Nigeria working on protection established the so-called ‘Protection Collective’, co-chaired by the INGO Forum and InterAction, to coordinate their approach on protection analysis and advocacy. Situated within the INGO forum, the group allowed for a focused and open exchange on sensitive protection issues, which was not always possible in the large and public forum of the Protection Sector Working Group. The ‘Protection Collective’ has undertaken several important initiatives and complemented the work of the Protection Cluster, with which it has maintained close links, including through the presence of the Protection Sector INGO co-lead. Its establishment has been indicative of INGOs’ feeling that protection was not sufficiently prioritised by UN humanitarian coordination and leadership structures. It also demonstrates the willingness of INGOs to invest collectively in protection, through capitalising on their particular opportunities for influence and leverage.

In summary, a simplified protection architecture is required, with clear roles and responsibilities, while strategic-level technical support and oversight on protection, both at the sector and system-wide levels, should act in a complementary fashion without duplication. The current set-up does not meet this requirement.

### 4.2.2 A focus on outputs related to responding to needs, rather than reducing risks

#### **Finding**

There has been some progress by humanitarian actors in measuring the reduction of risks. However, approaches to protection remain predominantly focused on outputs related to responding to needs, rather than outcomes and impact focused on reducing risks.

The Protection Policy required HCTs to agree common protection priorities and activities that could be undertaken to achieve ‘collective protection outcomes’ for crisis-affected populations. The intent was to orient protection programming and strategies towards outcomes manifested as a reduction in risks. This marks a departure from usual approaches undertaken under the banner of protection, which are characterised by implementing activities, measured as outputs, which are disconnected from meaningful change in the ongoing risk people experience in crises.

In recent years, there have been increasing efforts by humanitarian actors, both UN agencies and NGOs, to adopt a results-based approach to protection, which requires designing actions that demonstrably lead to a measurable reduction in risks (Box 6). Over half (53%) of survey respondents agreed that there have been improvements in measuring results related to protection over the past five years, while 54% agreed that the implementation of the Protection Policy had enhanced results-based protection. However, the review found that good practices have not been institutionalised across the humanitarian system, and there has not been a shift in mindset to viewing protection as an outcome to be achieved, rather than an activity to be undertaken.

#### **Box 6 ECHO protection mainstreaming indicator**

In 2017, the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) introduced a standardised protection mainstreaming indicator – the percentage of beneficiaries reporting that humanitarian assistance is delivered in a safe, accessible, accountable and participatory manner – in line with the IASC Protection Policy. On the basis of a pilot from 2017 to 2020, ECHO developed a survey tool (questionnaire) for its partners to monitor the indicator and beneficiaries’ perceptions of protection mainstreaming. The indicator was officially introduced in ECHO’s list of standard indicators in 2021, and all partners are requested to monitor and report against it (or a comparable indicator). The indicator and tool are seen as a practical way to measure the effectiveness of protection mainstreaming. However, there are still issues; some interviewees raised concerns that the indicator measures the quality of programming and accountability, which falls short of measuring approaches to reducing risks.

When the IASC Policy was adopted, the GPC circulated a set of common protection indicators that humanitarian actors were encouraged to measure progress against as part of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC). However, while data exists on certain protection activities, humanitarian actors are unable to provide a comprehensive overview of trends in how many people experienced a reduction in risks, and as a result of which kinds of action. This leads to scepticism about what humanitarian actors are achieving in terms of protection, and whether investments have led to results. This impression is made worse by the fact that protection results are frequently formulated in terms of activities undertaken and needs addressed – for example, services provided to survivors of GBV, or training undertaken – rather than the contribution of such activities to reducing risks. There is frequently a conflation of process and effect. For example, protection is often described in terms of strategies, workshops, training and other institutional processes and activities, instead of what these actually mean in terms of reducing risks to affected people.

There are methodological challenges to measuring the results and impact of protection actions by individual agencies or across the humanitarian system as a whole. It can require demonstrating that something did not happen or, if change can be identified, it is not always easy to attribute it to the action of humanitarian organisations (Christoplos et al., 2018). There are ways around this, for example by using proxy indicators or analysing trends, or by demonstrating how agencies' work contributes to reducing the effects of exposure to harm. Measuring results and outcomes also influences how planning is undertaken and objectives are articulated.

Since 2012, InterAction has led a results-based protection project focusing on the development of protection analysis, programme design and staff skills, and has provided support to country operations to apply this. The project recently commissioned an independent evaluation (Cocking and Finney, 2021), and published a collection of good practice from different agencies that sets out how the approach can be practically applied (InterAction, 2021). The Gender-Based Violence Prevention Evaluation Framework (GBV PEF) built on these approaches. The GBV PEF was finalised in 2021 following a two-year multi-agency initiative. Through extensive collaboration with NGO practitioners to distil the key elements supporting results and outcomes in protection programming, the initiative has resulted in numerous insights about critical ways of working to reduce risks, which may provide useful examples for future action to realise the vision of the Protection Policy.

Nevertheless, these kinds of approach have not been institutionalised across the humanitarian sector, or entered the mainstream. Doing this requires a change in approach to understand the risk being experienced, to focus problem-solving on the factors contributing to risk, and to do so by mobilising actors and expertise to address these risk factors. The provision of services and assistance often has a role in risk reduction, but they are a means contributing to a larger end of reduced risk, not the totality of a protection intervention. Adopting this approach would have entailed a conscious effort to reorient ways of working in the humanitarian system, for example by making considerable investment in risk analysis and in methods for outcome measurement. This was not done following the adoption of the Policy, and the implications of taking an outcome-oriented approach have not been absorbed or embraced by the humanitarian system.

### 4.2.3 Strategic planning on protection has not led to increased accountability

#### Finding

There have been investments in strategic planning, for example through the development of HCT protection strategies and the HPC. However, these tools have not had the desired effect of increasing accountability and elevating protection from a technical sector to a system-wide responsibility, as envisaged by the Protection Policy. As such there has been no systemic change.

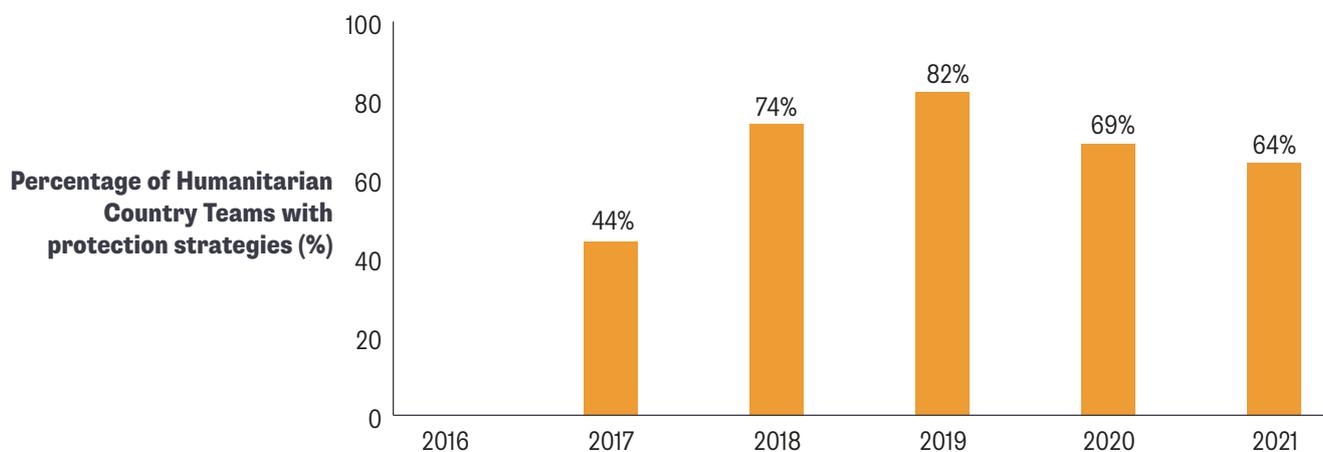
The review looked at several strategic planning processes that are referenced in, and provided entry points for implementing, the Protection Policy. In each case, it analysed whether the application of the tools and approaches developed has made protection more central to humanitarian responses.

#### Humanitarian Country Team protection strategies

The development of HCT protection strategies became the main means of implementing the Policy at the country level. The Policy outlines that HCT protection strategies should be distinct from protection cluster strategies and should be the mechanism by which the HCT agrees collective protection priorities and actions to achieve collective outcomes (GPC, 2016b: 7). Some donors incentivised the development of these strategies. For example, in 2018 the UK Department for International Development (DFID; now the FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) required UN humanitarian agencies to demonstrate how their operations were linked to HCT protection strategies. Although well intended, this led to the creation of numerous strategies, without requiring adequate investment in implementing and monitoring them. To assist the development of HCT protection strategies, the GPC circulated guidance on how they should be developed in 2016 (GPC, 2016b). The guidance reinforced that strategies should be based on a comprehensive protection analysis, and that they should identify no more than 2–3 protection priorities. The issues elevated for HCT action should be those that are beyond the capacity of the protection cluster alone to address, and where multi-sectoral collective action is required.

As Figure 6 shows, there has been significant investment in developing HCT protection strategies and they have been put in place in most humanitarian operations. However, there has been a drop in the number in the past two years, suggesting declining interest among humanitarian actors. While the development of these strategies is a clear result of the Protection Policy, the review found that they have not led to enhanced collective responsibility and action on protection.

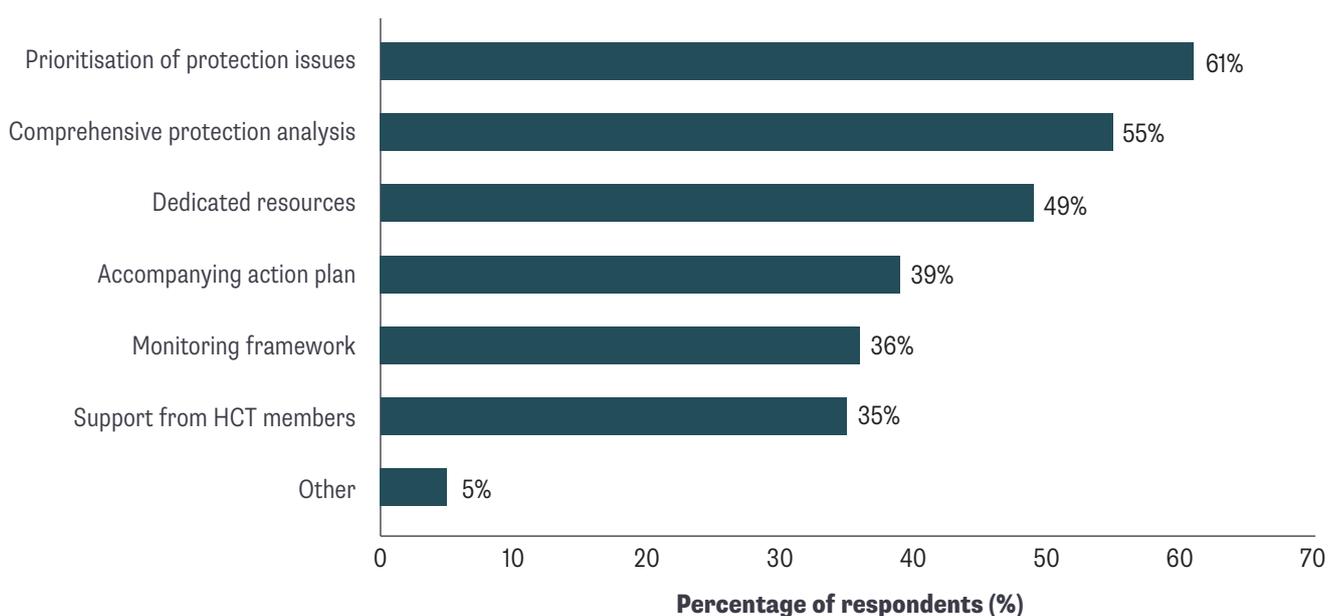
**Figure 6** Percentage of Humanitarian Country Teams with protection strategies



Source: IASC (2021b).

A GPC review of HCT protection strategies in 2020 concluded that, although they have contributed to raising the profile of protection in humanitarian responses, they have remained largely aspirational and merely a reference point for highlighting protection issues, rather than a framework for decision-making and action on protection (GPC, 2020). While this review does not include an assessment of HCT protection strategies, the information and data collected on this topic confirmed many of the findings of the GPC review. Figure 7 shows the range of factors that survey respondents considered important to the success of HCT protection strategies.

**Figure 7** Most important features of successful HCT protection strategies



The review identified several critical issues related to HCT protection strategies. First was the issue of ownership. While HCT protection strategies are meant to encapsulate the collective effort of the HCT, their development was delegated to either the protection cluster or outsourced to ProCap advisors (see Box 4) which undermined collective ownership. According to the GPC, 77% of field PCCs reported in 2020 that the HCT did not assume ownership for the development and implementation of HCT protection strategies (GPC Centrality of Protection Annual Review, 2021). The findings of this review confirm this. Although specialised knowledge may be needed to lead strategy development on protection, it does not appear that their production has increased ownership for protection across the HCT. Implementation of strategies is often left to protection clusters, thereby contradicting their intended purpose to mobilise a larger collective effort to address the most acute risks which humanitarian actors can collectively address. Despite the Protection Policy making clear that HCT protection strategies should be distinct from protection cluster strategies, this is frequently not the case, with a significant level of duplication.

Second, the scope, purpose and objectives set by HCT protection strategies have been unachievable and have not been outcome-oriented. While most HCT protection strategies follow the GPC guidance in only formulating 2–3 priorities, these tend to be defined so broadly they do not provide focus. HCT strategies are often influenced by the low-level priorities and mandates of the protection cluster and the AoRs. This is an inefficient way of conducting strategic planning,

Third, implementation of the strategies has been low and there are few means to monitor the results of actions taken. There has been practice of developing action plans attached to HCT protection strategies, and in some instances developing monitoring frameworks, but most stakeholders agreed that HCT protection strategies have had limited impact on what HCTs actually do in relation to protection. The fact that they are neither monitored nor linked to the allocation of resources means that they have little influence on humanitarian operations in practice.

Overall, while most stakeholders felt that the development of HCT protection strategies had been a step towards raising the profile of protection in humanitarian responses, most felt that they had become process-led, ultimately a ‘tick-box exercise’, and are not an effective tool for achieving the vision of the Protection Policy.

### Humanitarian Programme Cycle

The Protection Policy briefly mentions the importance of integrating protection more clearly in the HPC. In recent years, the GPC and its AoRs have worked to make sure that protection is better addressed within Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) and HRPs by providing active support to field protection clusters. At headquarters, OCHA coordinates and leads an inter-agency review of the outputs of the HNO and HRP processes, which includes the extent to which they address protection concerns. This quality assurance process has shown improvements in the way protection has been addressed within HNOs and HRPs, including by setting out a protection analysis, prioritising protection and including it in strategic objectives.

### Strategies of other clusters

To make protection more integral to the overall humanitarian response requires other sectors to respond to risks through their individual strategies. At the global level, the GPC and its AoRs have, in recent years, developed several strategic partnerships with other clusters, including health, education and food security, as well as cash assistance, to strengthen collective efforts on protection. These partnerships are evidence of the commitment of other clusters to strengthen protection within their respective strategies.

From the country-level research, the review heard of several examples of protection being increasingly taken up by different clusters and within different sector programmes, for example in Nigeria and the DRC. However, the review also heard that the absence of dedicated long-term strategic advice and technical support by protection specialists to other sectors has resulted in limited uptake or change to strengthen approaches to reduce risks by non-protection sectors. Some clusters have said they still lack practical, operational direction and support to integrate protection into their activities. The protection cluster on the other hand said it does not have the time or resources to provide sustained technical support to other clusters.

### Strategies of individual agencies

Strategies need to come from both within and beyond the HCT and within individual agencies to ensure collective responsibility for protection. Section 4.1.2 explored the commitment of organisations, both UN and INGOs, to protection through organisational policies that have been adopted or strengthened since the IASC Protection Policy. The review found that, where these had been successful, this was because they had been based on community-level engagement and developed in tandem with humanitarian plans that had clear strategic prioritisation (for example, see Box 7). For example, Save the Children's Centrality of Protection Policy, adopted in 2021, was rolled out by piloting it in several countries and listening to feedback from Country Offices. As a result, each office integrated reducing risks, especially to children, into their country strategies and programmes. The implementation of WFP's protection and accountability policy was similarly a result of several factors: advocacy by country-level and national staff on WFP's role in strengthening protection; strengthened analysis that demonstrated the links between hunger and conflict; and donor pressure, technical support and seed financing to pilot innovative approaches. When WFP was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize due to its commitment to peace and prevention of hunger-related atrocities, this acted as positive reinforcement to instil a culture and identity from headquarters that protection was a core component of the organisation. Representatives of other organisations were not as confident that they had achieved the culture shift to turn organisational strategies into action and felt that they were more likely to be able to do so in new programme areas rather than attempting to adapt long-established responses. This was largely because, once ways of working and programme practices have been established, they are difficult to change. While these represent good examples to learn from both for individual agencies and collective action, more work is required to deliver the outcomes envisaged in organisational policies.

### Box 7 Reducing risks in Yemen – keeping it simple

The following are examples of NGO approaches to protection in a difficult environment, namely Yemen. They illustrate how operational agencies translate strategy into practice.

#### Standalone projects

Community-based discussion to address threats and risks leading to action to prevent, mitigate and respond to risks:

- Service provision and referrals to respond to gender-based violence.
- Case management of incidents of child protection.
- Training across the humanitarian community in protection issues.
- Landmine action.

#### Advocacy to improve the environment

- Improving access to marginalised areas by targeted negotiations.
- Supporting local NGO participation in high-level meetings.
- Addressing *mahram* to enable female aid workers to travel without a male relative.

## 4.2.4 Inconsistent quality of protection analysis

### Finding

There has been progress to strengthen protection analysis. However, a lack of comprehensive protection analysis, either at the local or national level, has been a significant barrier to taking collective action to address key risks as envisaged under the Protection Policy.

As outlined in the Protection Policy, an integrated and in-depth protection analysis is key to collective action on protection across the humanitarian system. The protection cluster has the primary responsibility to produce such protection analysis in consultation with other actors, and to present this regularly to the HC and HCT. This should mean that protection priorities are identified and actions to address them taken (GPC et al., 2016: 7). The GPC has taken steps to strengthen the protection analysis produced by field protection clusters and, in April 2021, adopted a Protection Analytical Framework (see Box 8).

### **Box 8 GPC Protection Analytical Framework**

The Protection Analytical Framework (PAF) was developed by the GPC's Information and Analysis Working Group (IAWG), and was endorsed by the Global Protection Cluster in April 2021. It aims to contribute to collective efforts to improve and streamline protection analysis, and reflects the risk equation of threats, vulnerabilities and capacities. The framework outlines the process for collecting relevant information and developing protection analysis that can be used by Humanitarian Country Teams and other humanitarian actors. The PAF was seen as a practical way to strengthen protection cluster and intersectoral humanitarian planning processes and support decision-making around multi-sectoral risk reduction strategies, and it has been well received by relevant actors.

There have been improvements in protection analysis, but there is still significant inconsistency in quality from one context to the next. The GPC has also established an information management system for protection clusters to report regularly on a common set of protection concerns. However, the system is based on subjective judgements about the severity of protection concerns, which undermines its objectivity and credibility with other actors. However, this system has enabled the GPC to produce periodic Global Protection Updates. These show an improved level of protection analysis now being produced that did not exist at the time the Protection Policy was adopted.

Despite this progress, the country-based research for this review indicated that protection analysis is still not sufficiently robust to lead to strategic action. For example, analysis is often focused on the institutional priorities of UNHCR and the AoRs rather than driven by a detailed analysis of risks and patterns of abuse for affected populations. The protection analysis produced is also rarely accompanied by a set of prioritised actions for how risks could be addressed across agencies. These issues represent significant impediments to the implementation of the Policy. Analysis from external actors is also not being drawn upon systematically. For example, in the DRC the protection cluster's analysis is extremely limited when compared to the 'risk to civilians' analysis produced by the UN peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO. Several stakeholders also noted how the human rights monitoring, reporting and analysis of OHCHR and other human rights actors is not utilised to inform humanitarian protection analysis and strategy. This kind of information is critical to inform humanitarian strategies and actions to address risks.

It is not only the absence of robust protection analysis, but also the reluctance of HCTs to be more risk-tolerant and take action, that prevents risks to affected people being addressed. The review heard that, even where sufficiently robust protection analysis was available, it was rarely acted upon by HCTs or collectively among humanitarian actors.

Lessons can be drawn from elsewhere to improve analysis. For example, ACAPS, founded by three NGOs in 2009, has broken new ground in carrying out regular monitoring, analysis and forecasting of crises around the world. ACAPS continues to innovate methods for humanitarian analysis and is an influential standard-bearer within the humanitarian system. Such innovation can provide positive examples which can be built on for protection analysis.

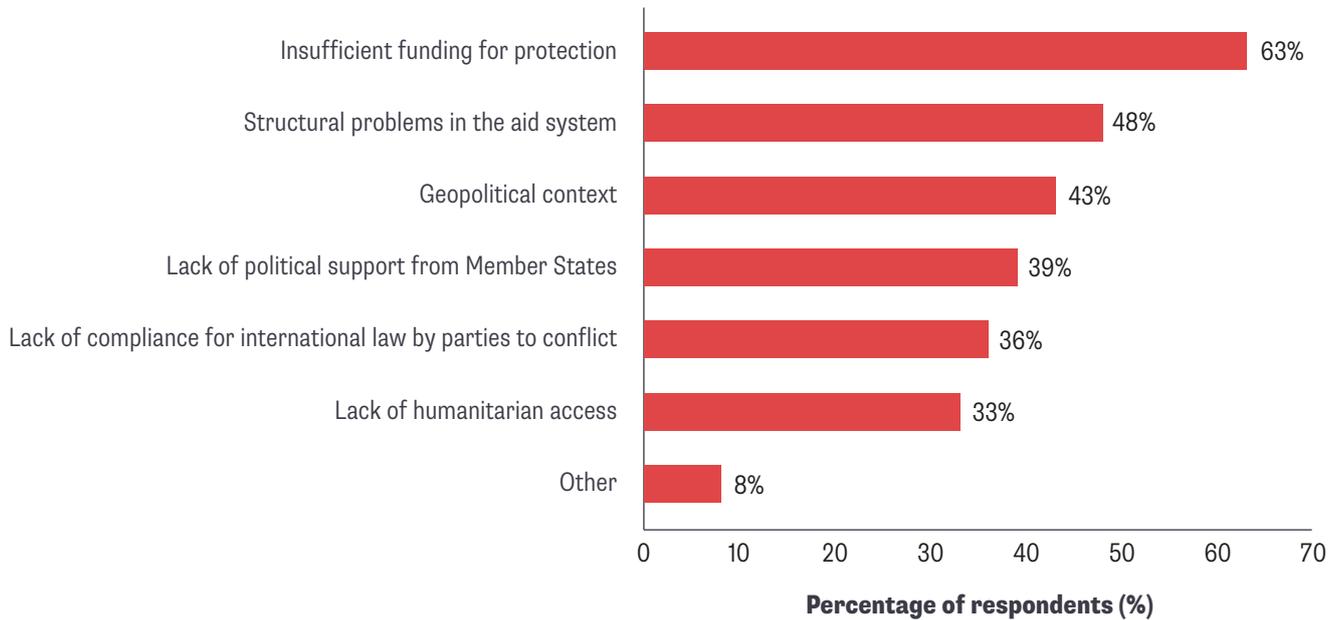
### 4.2.5 Using capacities in the right way to support implementation

#### **Finding**

There has been insufficient capacity to deliver the Protection Policy. However, it is also questionable whether humanitarian actors are using available capacities effectively, and the extent to which they utilise the range of actions to address risks to affected populations.

Capacities, in terms of financial resources, skills and competencies, are needed to reduce risks. The Protection Policy briefly mentions the importance of harnessing the capacities of all humanitarian actors to promote collective approaches to reduce risks. As Figure 8 shows, survey respondents considered that insufficient funding for protection is the most important external constraint on the implementation of the Protection Policy. A report on protection financing published in November 2020 by the NRC and GPC found that the protection sector continues to be underfunded in relation to both its requirements and those of other sectors (Lilly, 2020a). Between 2013 and 2019, it received only 38% of its requirements compared with 61% overall for humanitarian appeals. In 2021, the protection sector received 43% of requirements. This is only funding to the protection sector and does not include resources other sectors dedicate to protection. However, the same work also found that protection needs are not always accurately reflected in humanitarian appeals, and the performance of protection agencies is a key factor in the allocation of funds. Indeed, the review heard from donors that, in some situations, when they have made funding available for protection programming there have not always been the partners to implement the required interventions.

**Figure 8** External constraints affecting implementation of the Protection Policy



Evidence from the review is not persuasive that increased funding for protection is the most important solution to strengthen protection in humanitarian action, given that the humanitarian system has been unable to demonstrate what it has been able to achieve based on the resources that it has had at its disposal. Beyond levels of funding, it is important to consider how capacities are being used, in order to inform approaches for what humanitarian actors can realistically achieve. As noted previously (Figure 3), the capacity of humanitarian actors was cited among survey respondents as the third most important factor for ensuring that protection is central to the humanitarian response. Only 24% of respondents agreed that humanitarian organisations have sufficient capacity to ensure the centrality of protection, while only 25% of respondents agreed there was sufficient capacity to meet the expectations of the Protection Policy.

Many stakeholders spoke about how the Protection Policy had set unachievable goals that are aspirational and unrealistic, given the multiple constraints faced by the humanitarian system. It was a widely held opinion that humanitarian actors have limited capacities to prevent and directly respond to acute risks to affected people, such as atrocities and the impact of hostilities on civilians. However, as previously discussed, other actors are more effectively engaging in direct prevention and response to abuses with positive results. This suggests that, while there are challenges in seeking to prevent and respond to patterns of abuse, it is possible to do so. As such, the humanitarian system is not investing in the appropriate capacities, effectively deploying existing capacities, or prioritising responsive action.

There has been more progress to address risks relevant to remedial and environment-building actions such as GBV, child protection and other forms of violence and abuse, as well as support to legal rights and civil documentation. These results are often less visible and are masked by failures in addressing the prevention and response to abuses. The priority should be to demonstrate where impact can be achieved with the skills, capacities and resources available to humanitarian actors, rather than presenting the problem as a lack of funding.

### 4.3 Collective responsibility for protection within and alongside the humanitarian system

#### Summary of issue and findings

Protection challenges are multifaceted and cannot be resolved by humanitarian actors alone. Building mutual understanding and collective responsibility with actors that work within and alongside the humanitarian system is key to reducing risks. The review examined how the IASC Protection Policy was implemented with two key groups of actors:

- **Local and national civil society actors.** L/NAs and national and local government are key actors within the humanitarian system. Since the Policy was launched, minimal actions have been taken to engage L/NAs to address risks. Collaboration on protection between L/NAs and international humanitarian actors is not yet being optimised. This is an opportunity missed, but not necessarily lost. L/NAs need to be engaged as core and equal partners in protection.
- **Human rights, development and peace actors.** As part of the implementation of the Policy, some limited steps were taken to mobilise development, peace and human rights actors. OHCHR are formally part of the humanitarian system and are often engaged in protection at a country level. However, integration of the wider human rights community with the humanitarian system is limited. There is limited evidence that this has led to coherent approaches to protection. Institutional cultures on all sides remain a barrier to collaborative approaches. There needs to be more focus on making collaboration the norm, rather than the exception. Consideration of how to better overcome institutional and cultural barriers is crucial to achieve this.

### 4.3.1 Insufficient steps taken to engage and support L/NAs on protection

#### Finding

L/NAs were not consulted or involved in the development or implementation of the Protection Policy. As a result, awareness and ownership is low. This exclusion means that an opportunity has been missed to include well-informed actors who are keen to be involved.

L/NAs are recognised as critical actors in humanitarian and protection action. Whilst the role that L/NAs play can and does vary across contexts, they often have a strategic advantage in relation to protection that, when effectively leveraged, can be complementary to the expertise of international actors, and can guide collective programming and advocacy (Metcalf-Hough, 2019). They frequently have better community understanding and acceptance than international humanitarian actors. L/NAs are often linked to community-based structures. They are more likely to be present in the worst crises and less likely to leave. Their work often spans humanitarian, development and peace divides, and so is critical to ensuring longer-term approaches to protection. Through those links, they can contribute towards contextualised and more sustainable protection programming and advocacy.

The review explored the extent to which engagement with, and support to, L/NAs on protection has improved since the Protection Policy was put in place.

#### Consultation and general awareness of the Policy among L/NAs

L/NAs were not consulted or engaged in the development and implementation of the IASC Protection Policy at global or country levels. In many cases, L/NAs saw the Policy for the first time as part of the consultations for this review. There is therefore limited awareness and ownership. However, consultations with L/NAs revealed that there is strong support for the intent of the Policy, and scope for increased collaboration in the future.

The consultations for this review show that the role of the IASC as a norm-setting body is not well understood and not necessarily accepted by L/NAs. In theory, some L/NAs are, to some extent, represented in the IASC via the observer status of NGO consortia; however, the structure of the consortia and the IASC itself often make this challenging.

Awareness of the language around protection used in the Policy is low among L/NAs consulted. The L/NAs consulted have a preference for a definition of protection rooted in human rights and development, which is broadly consistent with the definition set out in the Protection Policy, but somewhat different from the views of others consulted in the review, as noted in Sub-section 4.1.1. They perceive international humanitarian actors as adopting an overly narrow interpretation of protection focused on responding to violence and abuse, rather than economic, social and cultural

rights, for example (Gray Meral et al., 2021). While this does not necessarily reflect practice across contexts and humanitarian responses, it is at odds with how some in the international humanitarian system would prefer to see greater prioritisation of the risks that humanitarian actors can address.

### Policy implementation and L/NAs

The IASC Protection Policy makes no specific reference to how the implementation of the Policy relates to L/NAs. This is a significant oversight given the documented power dynamics within the humanitarian system, which already place L/NAs at a disadvantage in terms of access to information and resources, and involvement in decision-making (Barbelet et al., 2021).

L/NAs have not been informed of, or involved in, implementing the IASC Policy. In north-eastern Nigeria, a detailed consultation with local CSOs found that knowledge of the Policy is low compared to other key international policies and standards relating to protection, such as IASC Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) policies and principles, Child Safeguarding Standards and Child Protection Minimum Standards. For each of these policies, simple guidelines and tools have been developed to support roll-out to L/NAs. Such practical guidance is hugely valued, and organisations consulted questioned why similar efforts were not made in support of IASC Protection Policy implementation.

The country-level implementation of the Policy has largely focused on HCT protection strategies and national-level coordination processes. L/NAs are frequently excluded from these processes due to underlying structural issues and power dynamics within the humanitarian system, which limits their capacity to meaningfully engage.

In the survey, respondents were asked how meaningful involvement of L/NAs in protection efforts could be improved. The most frequently selected response was ‘participation of local and national humanitarian actors in coordination mechanisms’.<sup>17</sup> L/NAs consulted told the review that UN-mandated protection coordination mechanisms are designed for international actors, not local actors. Women-led organisations highlighted that many of these meetings are dominated by men, and women are not given space, a concern since women are often one of the most at-risk groups in humanitarian crises. More generally, local actor inputs are frequently felt not to be taken seriously. Coordination meetings often happen in the capital, and local CSOs with direct insight from communities often do not have access to these forums. Many of these issues are not just specific to protection, but they are especially keenly felt when community-based knowledge and engagement is so critical to reducing risks. The fragmentation of coordination structures on protection noted earlier is also not helpful to L/NAs, who often have limited resources to attend numerous meetings and find it hard to keep track and make meaningful inputs to the myriad different processes related to protection.

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<sup>17</sup> The most popular answers were: ‘Increasing diverse participation of local and national humanitarian actors in coordination mechanisms’, selected by 59% of respondents; ‘providing more training on protection that is context-specific’ (48% of respondents); and ‘simplifying existing guidance on protection to make it more accessible and reduce jargon’ (35% of respondents).

Nevertheless, there are several positive examples of coordination processes that have set out to improve collaboration with L/NAs. The GPC has taken steps in the last few years to increase the number of L/NAs that are members of the protection cluster, some of which now co-lead at the sub-national levels. For example, in Yemen the iCCM (Integrated Community Case Management) Inclusion Task Force, which includes several local NGOs, was created to help ensure that minority views were understood and appropriately considered as part of the overall response. The protection cluster in Yemen has CSO contacts in key hubs such as Marib, Taiz and Sana. In north-eastern Nigeria, a local CSO, the Grow Strong Foundation, is co-coordinating the child protection sub-sector (AoR). This contributes to increased outreach and collaboration with a wider range of local CSOs. Whilst such measures are certainly helpful, they are not yet the norm, and are likely to be insufficient to create transformative change on their own. L/NAs consulted for the review highlighted the importance of supporting and empowering sub-national CSO networks as a means of improving the alignment of protection responses to the risks faced by communities.

### Roles played by L/NAs in protection

Those consulted feel strongly that L/NAs should be given more responsibility for protection in most contexts, and that international actors should be there to support and reinforce capacity, and where necessary undertake advocacy at the political level to reduce risks. It was also highlighted that L/NAs often have a higher level of legitimacy with communities facing risks – they are themselves often rights holders, or directly represent rights holders, and are well placed to support communities to understand and claim their rights (see Box 9). Joint policy advocacy with INGOs on protection, targeting international donors and governments, is seen as good practice.

The review recorded many cases of L/NAs carrying out successful protection interventions. L/NA consultations also revealed several examples of community-based protection structures that are not linked to the international system – examples were highlighted from Uganda, Nigeria, Palestine and the Philippines (see Box 9). Indeed, it is important to remember that, in some settings, collaboration with international actors can present risks to local actors when working on sensitive protection issues, and they might face backlash from the authorities (IASC, 2021b). Equally, it is important not to assume the risk appetite of L/NAs and how these risks might be managed (Davies and Spencer, forthcoming). Indeed, L/NAs spoken to as part of the review saw international humanitarian actors as increasingly risk-averse, especially in contexts where there are serious abuses. More discussion with L/NAs on risk appetite and risk sharing in high-risk environments is critical.

### Box 9 The roles of L/NAs in community-level protection

In **north-eastern Nigeria**, local, women-led organisations are providing safe spaces for women to share and learn. While these spaces are used as a focal point for services to women affected by conflict and displacement, they also provide a forum to discuss how to prevent violence against women and other forms of abuse. This has led to strategies such as using male champions to engage with perpetrators of violence against women, and training youths to engage in discussion and report protection incidents at the community level.

In **Uganda**, local CSOs working in refugee settlements have created 'Peace Committees'. These are community structures trained in protection referral pathways and protection documentation. They register cases with the camp protection desk (which is part of the camp management structure) and provide victim support. This process is complemented by community sensitisation and dialogue around topics such as human rights and peacebuilding. It often leads to the community themselves mediating disputes both within the camp, and between refugees and host communities.

In **Myanmar**, community protection mechanisms have been developed by local CSO networks and faith groups working in conflict areas. These groups have also been active in dealing with protection issues since the 2021 coup. Community protection mechanisms focus on gathering information relating to armed group movements, frontlines and attacks on civilians. This enables them to offer advice and guidance to the community on protection threats so that the community can take appropriate and timely action to reduce risks.

In **Palestine**, local CSOs have created community protection groups that include men, women and people with disabilities. These groups are responsible for deciding on the most appropriate approach to protection issues identified in the community. They understand community capacity and what kind of protection the community can provide without external support. The role of CSOs is then to support these groups to connect with specialist agencies where required. For example, women who have experienced violence may benefit from referral to a shelter; displaced persons may need connecting to providers of legal assistance.

### Enablers of and blockers to the involvement of L/NAs in protection

In the survey, 'lack of resources' was the most frequently cited barrier faced by L/NAs in efforts to strengthen collective approaches to reducing risks (selected by 55% of survey respondents). Consultations confirmed that provision of sustained funding continues to be a critical challenge for L/NAs. In the protection sector, the level of direct funding to local actors still falls a long way short of the 25% target that was set by the Grand Bargain (GPC, 2021).<sup>18</sup> Available information on local and self-protection approaches reveals a similar problem. This was echoed in the consultations with L/NAs as part of this review.

Trust is a critical factor for collaboration. L/NA consultations revealed that it can be harder to build and maintain trust on protection issues than it is in other areas. This is due to the perception that protection is a sensitive issue due to culture, power dynamics, politics, allegiances, confidentiality requirements and information-sharing challenges.

Partnership models are also a barrier to increased collaboration. For example, in Afghanistan and Nigeria the view was expressed that the relationship between L/NAs and international partners is mostly contractual in nature, an issue that has been documented elsewhere (Gray Meral et al., 2021; Davies and Spencer, forthcoming). Many L/NAs work with INGOs on protection but tend to be sub-contractors and not equal partners. INGOs are often directly competing with L/NAs for funding.

Ultimately, the top-down approach to developing the Protection Policy and the absence of an implementation plan are not fostering collective working or coherent approaches to protection. International funding is not being invested in local solutions to the extent needed. There are not enough links with, and resources for, bottom-up approaches to protection initiated at community level and supported by local actors.<sup>19</sup> Coordination often excludes local actors, and a collective understanding of risks and their potential solutions is often poor as a result. Power and incentive structures need to be better understood and challenged if systemic change is to occur (as highlighted in Konyndyk and Worden, 2019). L/NAs consulted stressed the importance of inclusive and consultative leadership within the UN and international actors as a critical factor.

There are signs of change. There has been innovation in collective working with and among L/NAs. While positive, this has generally been driven by the Grand Bargain and its localisation commitments, rather than linked to the Protection Policy. L/NA representatives consulted in the review were not resistant to the Policy (when it was explained to them) and could see the value in improving collective working going forward, provided that a consultative and inclusive approach is adopted.

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18 The most recent study by the GPC states that, in 2021, only 9% of protection funding has gone to local actors (7% as direct funding).

19 This links strongly to key components of the Protection Policy. For example, the Policy aims to align response to the priorities of affected people and to assist people to claim their rights.

### 4.3.2 Limited coherence between humanitarian, human rights, development and peace actors in approaches to strengthen protection

#### Finding

Collaboration on protection between humanitarian and human rights, as well development and peace actors, is not the norm. Institutional and cultural factors are a barrier to collective approaches and there is limited evidence of coherent approaches to reduce risks.

#### Human rights actors

Human rights actors are an integral part of the humanitarian system, with OHCHR being part of the IASC and both participating in and leading protection clusters in some contexts. At the time the policy was adopted, it was anticipated that its implementation would complement the UN's HRuF initiative, although was ultimately unsuccessful (see Sub-section 4.1.4) and did not lead to increased collaboration between humanitarian and human rights actors. OHCHR has led the protection cluster in several contexts including Timor-Leste, Nepal, Haiti and Palestine. It participates in the humanitarian coordination architecture across many other areas given the cross-cutting nature of human rights. With its institutional mandate and expertise in human rights protection, OHCHR has complemented the role of UNHCR and its leadership of the cluster by contributing to broader monitoring and analysis, as well as linking cluster members to international, regional and national human rights mechanisms including Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, in order to strengthen approaches to prevent and respond to risks (OHCHR, 2015 ; Metcalfe-Hough, 2021).

Greater collaboration between humanitarian and human rights actors is undermined by institutional, structural and cultural factors (Metcalfe-Hough, 2021). There is recognition that, while human rights and humanitarian actors are trying to address similar issues, they have different approaches, languages and systems. Interviewees spoke to the fact that, from their experience, normative coherence between humanitarian and human rights actors has not been achieved.

One of the most significant developments towards long-term collaboration between humanitarian and human rights actors has been the Professionals Standards for Protection Work (ICRC, 2018), which 'reflects shared thinking and common agreement amongst humanitarian and human rights actors'. The GPC has established a Human Rights Task Force to help increase field protection cluster engagement with human rights actors, languages and processes, including human rights mechanisms.

There was strong agreement among interviewees that leadership is key in setting the tone for enhanced collaboration and communication. As such, collaboration is often context-specific, ad hoc and based on individuals and personal relationships, rather than predictable long-term approaches. Given changes in leadership and other key personnel in humanitarian responses, collaborations are rarely sustained over time.

The review found a number of examples of collaboration at country level. In Yemen, the HC and the Special Envoy have sought opportunities for collaborative efforts to mitigate risks to civilians, and recently issued a joint statement on human rights violations by parties to the conflict (UNOCHA, 2022). The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has a human rights component that contributes to protection analysis and referrals, and publishes a Protection of Civilians Report to track civilian casualties.

Joint advocacy between human rights and humanitarian actors is seen as a particular area for focus (Metcalfe-Hough, 2021; see, for example, Box 10). However, questions have been raised regarding how to manage the risks of and challenges to a more collaborative approach (ACPHA, 2021). While recognising that the operating environment for humanitarian actors has become more restrictive, human rights organisations consulted in the review noted that collaboration, including through information-sharing and analysis, and seeking complementary approaches to prevent risks, had been on a downward trend in the last five years. Human rights organisations consulted in the review spoke of a lack of trust in humanitarian actors at an institutional level, often resulting in limited information-sharing. They spoke to how trust and information-sharing built up gradually with humanitarian actors was often seen to break down quickly as soon as humanitarian crises escalated, threats to humanitarian access increased, or humanitarian organisations perceived that sharing information with human rights actors could jeopardise access. This, along with the growing risk aversion of humanitarian organisations in recent years and their reluctance to take risks in sharing information in politically charged environments, has led to challenges in maximising complementary approaches between humanitarian and human rights organisations. However, risks to greater collaboration are often overstated, with insufficient attention to mitigating risks (HPG interviews for this review; see also Metcalfe-Hough and Bowden, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; 2021; Davies, 2021). As such, some human rights actors contend that strengthening protection is of equal value to aid delivery for humanitarian organisations.

### **Box 10 Example of a joint approach by humanitarian and human rights actors**

The Human Rights Reference Group (HRRG) was established in Gaziantep, Turkey, in 2015 to bring humanitarian and human rights actors together to address identified protection gaps. The HRRG is led by a Human Rights Advisor (HRA) from OHCHR, who provides technical advice to the humanitarian leadership in Gaziantep and at the regional level, working closely with the protection cluster. The largely informal arrangement, with membership across national and international humanitarian and human rights actors, has allowed for more comprehensive protection analysis, advice to leadership on which protection concerns to prioritise, and engagement of humanitarian actors with human rights mechanisms.

Notwithstanding the systematic engagement of OHCHR and other UN human rights actors with humanitarian mechanisms, the review found limited awareness of the IASC Protection Policy among human rights actors. Furthermore, humanitarian actors do not have a strong understanding of the role that human rights actors can potentially play. The evidence for coherent approaches to reducing risks is therefore not yet persuasive.

### Development and peace actors

The Protection Policy made a clear commitment to mobilise actors beyond the humanitarian system, with a focus on development and peace actors. In recent years, there has been increasing attention across the broader aid system on collaboration between humanitarian, development and peace actors. The New Way of Working, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, introduced the notion of ‘collective outcomes’ to which all actors should subscribe, not only through responding to needs in the short term, but also through addressing underlying vulnerabilities over the long term. The protection dimension of this is seen as an opportunity to collectively mobilise efforts towards reducing risks (Lilly, 2020b). There have also been collaborative processes within the UN, such as the GPC strategic advisory group and the OCHA-led protection of civilians working group. Although there have been some encouraging new practices, these are not yet being applied widely enough, and there has not been a transformative change in how humanitarian actors collaborate with development and peace actors, as envisaged in the Policy.

There have been several policy developments since the Protection Policy was launched. For example, the IASC has developed guidance on how collaborative approaches between humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors should be applied, including through the development of collective outcomes.<sup>20</sup> However, questions remain about how this should be implemented, both in general and specifically with regard to protection. Within the protection community, the GPC has organised consultations on the issue, included it as a priority in its Strategic Framework 2020–2024 (GPC, n.d.), is providing technical support to specific field protection clusters and is in the process of developing guidance.

At country level, the review heard of several examples of collaboration between political and humanitarian leadership on protection issues. Human rights-related examples are listed above, but there are also examples involving development and peace actors. In the DRC, a working group has been established between the IOM, UNHCR, UN Police and UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), as part of planning for the withdrawal of the MONUSCO peacekeeping operation. Reducing risks to civilians is a focus of the working group; however, while this coordination mechanism was agreed to be a positive development, it was felt that it had been put in place too late. While such positive examples of engagement between humanitarians and UN peace operations are commendable, they are not yet the norm.

Development and peace actors do not generally engage in humanitarian coordination processes as these tend to focus on the needs of humanitarian actors.

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20 See Results Group 4 on Humanitarian–Development Collaboration: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/results-group-4-humanitarian-development-collaboration>.

For organisations that have tried to engage, more commonly in transition and stabilisation contexts, the review heard that the focus of humanitarian actors on systems and processes undermines opportunities for strategic collaboration. Where there are UN Special Envoys, as in Yemen, members of the political team are not part of the humanitarian architecture and do not see a role for themselves in implementing the IASC Protection Policy. This is understandable and illustrates the challenge that, while humanitarian actors are mandated by the Policy, political actors are not.

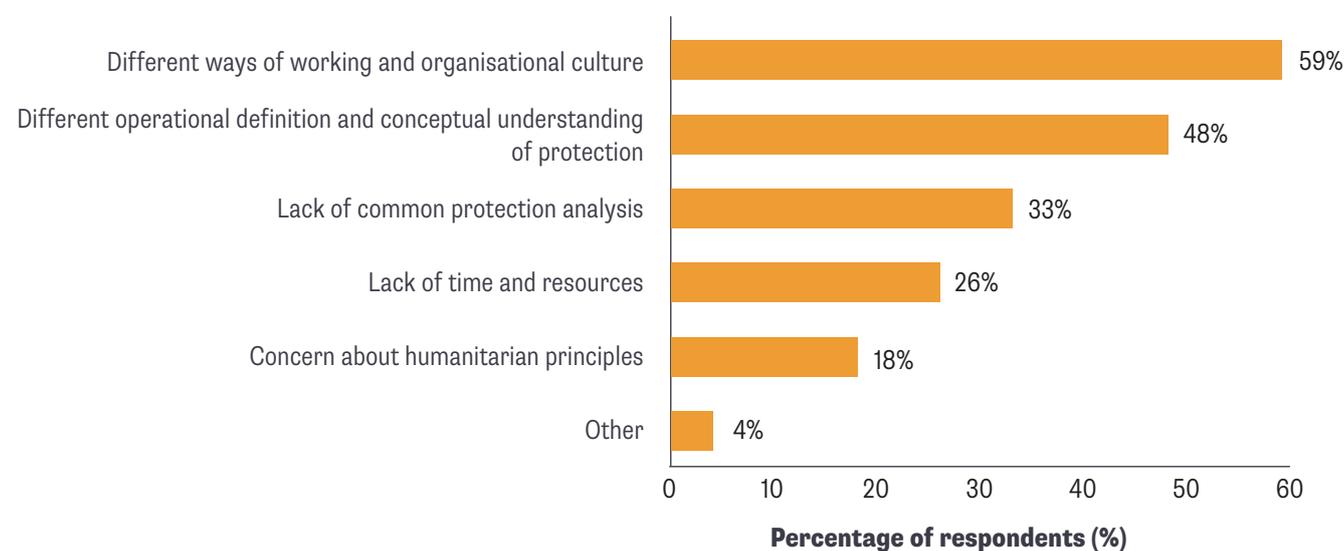
Outside humanitarian coordination structures, there are limited forums for other actors to engage with humanitarian actors, on equal terms. Nevertheless, some positive examples were shared with the review team where NGO peace actors in Nigeria and DRC are systematically engaging with humanitarian actors on key protection issues.

Notwithstanding the systematic engagement of OHCHR and other UN human rights actors, there is limited awareness among human rights, development and peace actors of the IASC Protection Policy. The evidence for coherent approaches to reducing risks is not yet persuasive and there is not a shared vision among key actors at a global level.

### Enablers of and blocks to increased collaboration with human rights, development and peace actors

The review explored the main barriers to increased collaboration between humanitarian, development, peace and human rights actors (Figure 9; Box 11). In the survey, 59% of respondents selected ‘Different ways of working and organisational culture’ as a key barrier to collaboration (the most frequently cited factor). ‘Different operational definition and conceptual understanding of protection’ and ‘lack of common protection analysis’ were also cited. However, it is challenging to interpret the survey data in this area because of the diversity of settings in which humanitarian, human rights, development and peace actors collaborate.

**Figure 9** Main barriers to increased collaboration with human rights, development and peace actors



### **Box 11 Example of a joint approach by humanitarian and human rights and peace actors**

In the US, a coalition of humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding INGOs has been engaging the US Department of Defense (DoD) in order to strengthen the DoD's understanding of International Humanitarian Law, and has been working with the DoD to identify approaches to mitigate civilian harm in US overseas military operations. By leveraging the policy, legal and operational expertise of the organisations involved, this has seen advances at both policy and operational levels with the DoD (Metcalf-Hough, 2022).

Since 'ways of working and organisational culture' appears to be a significant barrier to effective collaboration, this was explored further in interviews. Representatives from peace, development and human rights actors stated that humanitarian actors tend to be largely driven by systems and processes (such as the HPC, funding appeals and cluster meetings). This focus is seen to undermine collective analysis and strategic decision-making. Interviewees at global and country level spoke to the lack of appropriate forums for strategic engagement, including the HCT. For example, the amount of time spent on the HPC, including annual HNOs and HRPs, was seen to be excessive, especially given the perception that the latter predominantly serves as a fundraising tool. While 'nexus working groups' have been established in some contexts, some view them as not serving a useful purpose due to conversations being driven by competition for funding and by territoriality, rather than collaboration and problem-solving. Rarely were they found to focus on risks to affected people. Another critique was that humanitarian organisations are unwilling to 'give up' their niche, with one interviewee stating that 'collaborating means compromise'.

Another key area highlighted as a barrier to collaboration in the survey was 'different operational definition and conceptual understanding'. Peacebuilding actors in particular spoke to how humanitarian protection 'jargon' and the legalistic approach to protection are perceived by some as narrowing approaches to reduce risks to affected populations. They viewed this 'normative' and 'strictly guided' approach as counterproductive from the point of view of collaboration and inclusion of new actors.

In summary, there are a range of positive efforts to strengthen collaboration with actors outside the humanitarian system. However, these are often context- or organisation-specific, are usually driven by individual champions and have not led to normative change.

## 5 Conclusions

These conclusions present the overarching themes from the review and priority areas where corrective measures and actions will be required. Six years after the adoption of the IASC Protection Policy, the review found that partial progress has been made towards the implementation of the Policy. However, the ambition and intent of the Policy have not been met, and there is still a large gap between policy and practice. While there has been significant effort and investment in approaches to support implementation, they have been incoherent, inadequate and ineffective. Collective action by humanitarian actors to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian action has not been achieved, and the aims of the Policy have not been fulfilled. For the following reasons, humanitarian actors have failed populations at risk:

1. There remains a lack of **conceptual clarity** and clear practical direction on how to translate the ambition of collective approaches towards reducing risks into practical action. It is not clear what fits within and outside the scope of protection in humanitarian action. A reopening of the existing definition of protection or additional guidance is not required. But clarity, and practical direction setting out what is required of all humanitarian actors, is urgently required.
2. There is a lack of commitment to and prioritisation of protection across the humanitarian sector. This is compounded by the lack of **robust leadership and accountability** to ensure protection is at the core of humanitarian responses. There needs to be a reaffirmation of the importance of protection in humanitarian action, with clear roles and responsibilities agreed within the humanitarian community at all levels for both protection and non-protection specialist organisations. Leaders and institutions need to be incentivised, supported and held to account, and they need to motivate others to ensure collective approaches to reducing risks. Significant engagement and support are required from donors and Member States to make this happen.
3. Conceiving of protection solely as a technical sector responsibility is counter-productive. Protection has not shifted to a system-wide **collective responsibility** central to humanitarian action, as originally intended by the Protection Policy. Solutions need to be found to enable a cross-institutional approach to reducing risks to affected people. Protection should sit at the strategic level in addition to the technical sector, enabled by predictable, long-term, specialist support to humanitarian leadership and across the humanitarian system.
4. A **simplified architecture** is required for leading and coordinating protection in the humanitarian system. The current set-up is overly complex and fragmented and should be radically simplified and streamlined. Solutions should be found to ensure strategic system-wide technical advisory support on protection to humanitarian leadership. The current set-up of the protection cluster and the AoRs is not fit for purpose. The emphasis, within the protection cluster and its AoRs, of specific technical aspects of protection – driven by the mandates of specific agencies – has been at the expense of building collective approaches as a system-wide responsibility. Significant donor engagement and support is required to incentivise such reforms.

5. Protection is still not seen as an outcome that humanitarian actors can collectively address, but as a set of activities that they undertake. Measuring the results of humanitarian action based on needs has undermined an assessment of the outcomes and impact of protection action focused on reducing risks. In the absence of a cultural shift towards viewing **protection as an outcome** rather than an activity, good practices have not been institutionalised across the humanitarian system. This requires institutional and cultural change.
6. There is a need for more **inclusive approaches** with a range of actors within, alongside and beyond the humanitarian system, to engender greater collective action in support of protection. There have been minimal efforts to engage local actors, while collaboration with human rights actors could be strengthened and more done to mobilise actors beyond the humanitarian system, including development and peace actors. A normative change is needed that builds trust, respect and open dialogue, and enhances synergies for addressing risks.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations set out the changes necessary to reaffirm protection as a central goal of humanitarian action and as a system-wide responsibility for all humanitarian actors. Their successful implementation is premised on sufficient political will and adequate resources within the IASC and the wider humanitarian community to take action. Unless clear steps are taken to address the conclusions of this report, future reviews risk finding a similar lack of progress to protect people at risk of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.

Ownership and participation from across the humanitarian sector are essential if these recommendations are to be implemented effectively. It is the responsibility of those leading each action to ensure that all relevant actors, particularly those at a national and local level, are fully engaged. The proposed actions need to be disseminated, socialised and institutionalised significantly more widely and inclusively.

The recommendations are targeted to where accountability for their implementation lies. However, it will be necessary to ensure that specific actions are taken by a diverse set of groups, including Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG), Emergency Directors Group (EDG) and others in order to implement them. To ensure that the recommendations lead to meaningful action it is proposed that the ERC establish a temporary strategic level, diverse implementation group of representatives of IASC agencies, NGOs and donors from across the humanitarian and protection sector to establish timebound actions and assign responsibilities for taking forward the recommendations.

### Recommendation 1: Conceptual clarity

Ensure distinction between protection as a system-wide strategic goal and protection as a technical sector designed to contribute to the strategic goal.

- **The implementation group convened by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)** should develop a succinct, operationally focused overview of what protection as an outcome entails for all humanitarian actors and how they can contribute to this strategic goal. This should be accompanied by a clearly defined, multi-year, resourced and monitored plan to encourage system-wide dissemination and adoption.

### Recommendation 2: Robust leadership and accountability

Ensure stronger institutional and individual leadership to address acute protection challenges.

- **The ERC**, supported by the **IASC Principals**, should take concerted action to support institutional risk-taking when it is in the best interests of affected populations. The IASC Principals should collectively agree approaches to strengthen their advocacy on protection, by considering a range of actions balancing the risk of taking strong positions on protection against the risk of doing nothing. This requires sustained engagement with and support from Member States.
- **The ERC** should lead the development of an accountability mechanism that sets out clear roles and responsibilities for protection, both as a system-wide strategic responsibility and as a technical sector. The accountability mechanism should be disseminated widely and supported by a light-touch review process.
- **The ERC** and **IASC Principals** should hold **Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs)** and country-based **Heads of Agencies** to account by requiring them to demonstrate what collective actions have been taken to promote protection in accordance with the accountability mechanism. They should institute an independent support mechanism for HCs on protection issues. **HCs** and **Heads of Agencies** should adopt higher risk thresholds to address protection challenges. **Senior leaders within the humanitarian system** should support them in this by giving them the institutional and political support they need to increase risk. This approach should be adopted by leaders of all humanitarian agencies and organisations.
- **Member States** should provide political backing at global and national levels to support humanitarian leadership to adopt robust approaches to protection. **Donors** should align their policies and better coordinate their approaches to protection to ensure their fundings coherent and incentivises the prioritisation of protection. They should measure success in terms of the reduction and prevention of risks to affected populations. A starting point could be a review under the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative to identify current practice and gaps.

### Recommendation 3: Collective responsibility

Commit to protection as a collective responsibility.

- **IASC Principals** and the **leaders of all humanitarian organisations** should demonstrate their commitment to protection by integrating it into their organisational policies, strategies, priorities and work plans, with clear actions specified and monitored. System-wide individual ‘champions’ on protection should be appointed to promote this approach and take forward this agenda.
- **The ERC** and **IASC Principals** should clarify arrangements to ensure dedicated, permanent, specialist support is needed for protection as a system-wide responsibility in support of HCs, HCTs and non-protection-mandated agencies in the humanitarian system. This function should sit outside and separate to the protection cluster.
- **IASC Principals** should stop requiring **HCTs** to produce HCT Protection Strategies, which have been costly, time-consuming and ineffective. Instead, a maximum 2–3 system-wide protection priorities should be agreed, and actions to address these should be embedded into HCT work plans and compact, as well as Humanitarian Response Plans.
- **The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** and **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** should build on and phase out the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap), by transitioning and transferring its expertise and resources to strengthen predictable, long-term, specialist protection support to HCs and HCTs. **Donors** should provide funding to support such long-term sustained support

### Recommendation 4: Simplified architecture

Simplify and streamline the protection architecture to ensure more coherence while maintaining technical specialist support and coordination.

- **IASC Principals** and the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** should oversee the reform of the **protection cluster** to ensure that, at both global and country levels, it:
  - focuses on providing information-sharing, technical support and coordination within the sector rather than system-wide support on protection
  - promotes an integrated approach to protection by co-locating and/or strengthening a joint approach between the protection cluster and the AoRs
  - reduces its core functions to focus on operational technical support and coordination rather than on other tasks
  - strengthens its outreach and support to local organisations and communities.
- **Donors** should promote and fund reforms to the protection architecture and hold **IASC Agencies** to account for the delivery of this simplified architecture.

### Recommendation 5: Protection as an outcome

Ensure protection action focuses on reducing risks, and establish monitoring approaches to measure this reduction. Embed good practice.

- **All humanitarian actors** should be encouraged and supported to design their humanitarian responses based on a comprehensive assessment of risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation rather than on responding to needs. **OCHA** should use the upcoming revision of the HPC to provide guidance on this, learning from approaches set out in InterAction's Results-Based Evaluation Framework for the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence.
- **IASC Principals** should ensure that indicators and benchmarks that measure the implementation of the Protection Policy are focused on risk reduction as agreed in consultation with a diverse range of humanitarian actors and linked to the accountability mechanism.
- The **Global Protection Cluster (GPC)**'s current annual Centrality of Protection Review Report should be transitioned into an IASC product that provides consolidated monitoring in line with the accountability mechanism.

### Recommendation 6: Inclusive approaches

Effect fundamental behaviour change and build trust to normalise collective ways of working between the international humanitarian community, local and national actors, and amongst humanitarian, human rights, development and peacebuilding actors.

- **International, national and local humanitarian actors** should build on and invest in community and area-based approaches to protection. This requires putting people's capacities and priorities at the centre of the response, working in partnership with communities and building on existing government structures where possible.
- **IASC Principals** should strengthen dialogue with their counterparts in development, human rights and peacebuilding agencies to clarify how collective approaches to protection should be addressed. Steps should be taken to ensure a normative change.
- **The UN Secretary-General** should ensure the forthcoming UN Agenda for Protection brings strategic coherence to, and strengthens collaboration amongst, humanitarian, human rights, development and peace actors on protection. This should address lessons learnt from previous such efforts and embrace the involvement and important roles of a broad range of actors outside the UN, drawing from context-specific experiences to drive approaches.

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# Appendix 1 Protection architecture

**Table A1** Concepts, leadership, planning and coordination of protection architecture

| Dimension of protection              | Protection outcomes   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
|                                      | As a goal and system-wide   | As a sector and a cluster  |
| <b>Protection concepts</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Centrality of protection</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General protection</li> <li>Child protection</li> <li>Gender-based violence (GBV)</li> <li>Housing, Land and Property (HLP)</li> <li>Mine Action</li> </ul> |
| <b>Related humanitarian concepts</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</li> <li>Humanitarian access/humanitarian diplomacy</li> <li>Protection of human rights</li> <li>Inclusivity (gender equality, disability inclusion, leave no one behind)</li> <li>Accountability to Affected Populations</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protection of Civilians (in conflict situations)</li> <li>Internal displacement</li> <li>Nexus approach</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Leadership</b>                    |   |  |
| Headquarters                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN Secretary-General</li> <li>Emergency Relief Coordinator</li> <li>IASC Principals</li> <li>INGO CEOs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Coordinator</li> <li>Chief of Areas of Responsibility (AoRs)</li> </ul>   |
| Country level                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators</li> <li>Head of UN Agencies</li> <li>INGO Country Directors</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Field Protection Cluster Coordinators</li> <li>AoRs/Sub Clusters</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Planning frameworks</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Protection Strategy</li> <li>Humanitarian Needs Overview</li> <li>Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)</li> <li>HCT Compact (and work plan)</li> <li>HC Compact</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protection Cluster Strategy</li> <li>Humanitarian Needs Overview</li> <li>HRP – including protection sector plan</li> </ul>                                 |
| <b>Coordination mechanisms</b>       |   |  |
| Headquarters                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IASC Principals and Deputies</li> <li>OPAG and EDGs</li> <li>Results Group 1 (including Sub Group)</li> <li>InterAction Protection Working Group</li> <li>OCHA PoC Working Group</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>GPC Strategic Advisory Group (and related Task Teams)</li> <li>AoRs (Child Protection, GBV, Mine Action and HLP)</li> </ul>                                 |
| Country level                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HCT</li> <li>Ad Hoc Task Force (HCT Protection Strategy)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Field Protection Cluster</li> <li>AoRs (GBV, Child Protection, Mine Action and HLP)</li> <li>Inter-Sectoral working groups</li> </ul>                       |







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