

What is Protection?

Protection encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with human rights law, international humanitarian law (which applies in situations of armed conflict) and refugee law.¹

States have the primary responsibility to protect people within their jurisdiction. In situations of natural disasters, national authorities are responsible for providing assistance and protection to those affected. In situations of armed conflict, all parties to the conflict, i.e. States and organized armed groups, must respect and protect civilians. This includes ensuring they are spared from the effects of fighting

and have access to food, medical and other basic services. When national authorities or other parties to conflict are unable or unwilling to meet these obligations, humanitarian organizations may—with the parties' consent—provide assistance to the affected population. In addition, such organizations may undertake advocacy to promote the rights of the population and encourage the primary duty-bearers to meet their obligations. Some humanitarian actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have a specific “protection mandate”.

“Constant care must be taken by parties to conflict to spare the civilian population from the effects of hostilities. Failure to do so may result in the death and injury of civilians targeted or otherwise caught in attacks. It is also frequently the precursor to displacement and an increased risk of other violations, including sexual violence and forced recruitment; physical and mental suffering; and potentially chronic dependency on humanitarian assistance.”

Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, November 2010

Where people are at risk of or suffering from violence, coercion and deprivation of basic goods and services during a humanitarian crisis, humanitarian organizations seek to reduce their vulnerability by:

- Undertaking responsive actions that aim to alleviate the immediate effects of violence and abuse, put a stop to it and prevent its recurrence.
- Undertaking remedial action to ensure the provision of basic needs, restore dignity, and ensure well-being and recovery through assistance and rehabilitation.
- Undertaking environment-building action that aims to create a social, cultural, institutional and legal environment conducive to the respect for rights.

Protection is frequently a major concern in all humanitarian crises—situations of conflict and violence, as well as natural disasters. An effective humanitarian response to such situations must be informed by an analysis of the threats and risks that people face. Appropriate steps should be taken to minimize those threats and

risks, and ensure full respect of the rights of all people affected by disaster or armed conflict. Humanitarian actors must ensure that their activities do not lead to or perpetuate discrimination, abuse, neglect and violence. The way relief is delivered is also important. For example, food distribution points must not be set up in areas where

women are vulnerable to attack.

Part of the response to affected populations can include specialized services, such as legal aid, family tracing and reunification services, supporting demobilization of child soldiers and facilitating refugee registration.

¹ This is the essence of the definition as endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

“In [many] crises, civilians are bearing the brunt of conflicts over which they have no control. I remind all parties of their obligations, under international humanitarian law, to respect and protect civilians, and to spare them from the effect of hostilities.”

- Valerie Amos,
Emergency Relief
Coordinator and
Under-Secretary-
General for
Humanitarian Affairs.
Statement on the need
to protect civilians in
multiple crises, 16
November 2011

Protection is one of the 11 clusters that operate at the global and field level. UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster. It is divided into four “areas of

responsibility” led by UN agencies with particular expertise: gender-based violence (UNFPA/UNICEF); child protection (UNICEF); mine action (UNMAS); and

housing land and property rights (UN HABITAT). These are activated in the field as sub-clusters if and when needed.

What is OCHA’s role?

OCHA promotes an effective, comprehensive and coordinated response to the risks facing people affected by a humanitarian crisis. While OCHA does not provide direct services to affected populations (unlike UNHCR), it seeks to ensure that humanitarian action accounts for the overarching protection concerns and the specific risks faced in a given crisis.

At the headquarters level, OCHA provides support to the mandate of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), which includes advocating for the rights of conflict- and disaster-affected people. OCHA also has a

responsibility to support the Security Council’s work on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. This includes writing the Secretary-General’s reports on this issue; preparing the ERC’s biannual briefings to the Council; and providing regular briefings to the Council’s informal Expert Group on the issue. OCHA also engages on protection issues with Member States, regional organizations and other international stakeholders. OCHA works closely with, and is an active member of, the Global Protection Cluster; supports and undertakes the development of inter-agency policy and guidance;

contributes to building inter-agency capacity on protection; provides support to field-based protection clusters/sectors; and advocates the integration of protection into the work of other clusters. OCHA also works with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to enhance the implementation of the protection of civilians mandates by United Nations peacekeeping operations.

At the field level, OCHA supports the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator in ensuring that protection is included in the humanitarian response and addresses the risks faced by the affected population.

What does OCHA say?

1. Protection is a major concern in most humanitarian crises.

4. OCHA’s protection work stems from its coordination mandate, as well as specific tasks entrusted to it by the General Assembly and the Security Council.

2. International humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law provide the legal framework for the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

3. Enhancing protection for those affected by armed conflict and disaster is essential during each phase of humanitarian action, including early warning, contingency planning, response and transition.

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To find out more

- OCHA Policy Instruction – OCHA’s Role in Supporting Protection: International and field-level responsibilities, September 2007
Global Protection Cluster
<http://oneresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Protection/Pages/default.aspx>