What is Protection?

Protection is a broad term for activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of all individuals in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, regardless of their age, gender or social, ethnic, national, religious or other background.¹

In situations of disaster or civil unrest, national authorities have primary responsibility for the well-being of those affected. In situations of armed conflict, all parties to the conflict are responsible for ensuring that the civilian population is respected and protected. This includes ensuring they are spared the effects of fighting and have access to food, medical services and other basic needs. When national authorities or non-state parties to conflict are unable or unwilling to meet these obligations, humanitarian organizations may undertake complementary activities to ensure the rights of the affected population are upheld. This may be done by directly assisting the affected population or through action, including advocacy, to enable or encourage the primary duty-bearers to meet their obligations. Some humanitarian actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have a specific “protection mandate”.

Where people are at risk of violence, coercion and deprivation in a context of humanitarian crisis, humanitarian organizations seek to reduce people’s level of risk by:

- Preventing, or ensuring protection from, abuse and alleviating its immediate effects through responsive action.
- Using remedial action to restore dignity and ensure well-being and recovery through assistance and rehabilitation.
- Cultivating a social, cultural, institutional and legal environment conducive to respect for rights through environment building.

Protection is of over-arching concern during humanitarian crises and therefore fundamental to humanitarian action. Humanitarian policy and response strategies are informed by the need to minimize the various risks people face and ensure full respect of the rights of all populations affected by disaster or armed conflict. Humanitarian actors must also ensure that humanitarian response does not result in discrimination, abuse, neglect and violence. The way relief is delivered can be important. For example, ensuring that collection points are not provided in areas where women are vulnerable to attack. Ensuring affected populations are respected and protected also involves specialized services, such as providing legal aid, providing family tracing and reunification services, assisting demobilization of child soldiers and facilitating refugee registration.

Protection is one of the 11 Clusters (see OCHA On Message: Humanitarian Architecture) that operates at the global and field level. It is led by UNHCR.

What is the role of OCHA?

OCHA promotes an effective, comprehensive and coordinated response to the risks facing populations affected in a humanitarian crisis². While OCHA does not

“In the conduct of military operations, care must be taken to spare the civilian population from the effects of hostilities. Violations of international humanitarian law by one party to a conflict offer no justification for non-compliance by other parties.”


¹ This is the essence of the definition as endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee
² OCHA Policy Instruction - OCHA’s role in supporting protection: international and field-level responsibilities. Sept 2007

OCHA on Message is a reference product that enables staff to communicate OCHA’s position on key issues. For more information contact the Reporting Unit at ochareporting@un.org.
provide specialized services (like UNHCR), it seeks to ensure that humanitarian action accounts for the over-arching protection concerns and the specific risks faced in a given crisis.

At headquarters level, OCHA achieves this through support to the Emergency Relief Coordinator’s mandate. This includes a range of tasks. In relation to the Security Council, OCHA prepares (with inputs from partners) briefings on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, ensuring that the Security Council can take these concerns into account in its actions. OCHA also reports to other UN bodies, such as the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Human Rights Council, on protection concerns in a thematic and country-specific manner. OCHA works closely with, and is an active member of, the Global Protection Cluster; supports development of inter-agency policy and guidance; contributes to building inter-agency capacity on protection; provides support to field-based protection clusters/sectors; and supports integrating 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 in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

These activities are also undertaken in the field, where OCHA supports the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator in ensuring that the approach and strategy to a humanitarian response takes into account and addresses the risks faced by the affected population.

**What does OCHA say?**

- Humanitarian action seeks to save lives and alleviate suffering; protection is at the heart of everything that we do.
- People are vulnerable to the risk of violence, coercion and deprivation in natural disaster situations as well as during armed conflict.
- International law provides the framework for the protection of populations affected in a humanitarian crisis.
- Enhancing the protection of conflict and disaster affected populations often also requires action by peacekeeping, human rights, political, development and disarmament actors.

**To find out more**

- OCHA policy instruction – OCHA’s role in supporting protection: international and field level responsibilities. Sept 2007
- Global Protection Cluster Working Group [http://oneresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Protection/Pages/default.aspx](http://oneresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Protection/Pages/default.aspx)

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**Case study**

Kalimantan, Indonesia: Following regional conflict between 1999 and 2000, 50,000 IDPs were forced into the stadium in Pontianak and effectively abandoned by the local government. A group of international NGOs reported to OCHA that the government was refusing to discuss the issue with the IDPs and did not recognize IDPs’ rights. OCHA facilitated coordination with NGOs and the government who subsequently announced a new policy of relocation. The government had already built houses in a new area, but the IDPs rejected these as they had not been consulted. OCHA stepped in again, continuing advocacy on IDP rights to the government, bringing the parties together and ensuring projects run by NGOs relating to the area were included in a consolidated appeal. As a result, the IDPs and the government selected a new location. By 2002, the vast majority of IDPs had voluntarily moved to the new location.⁴

⁴ Michael Elmquist, former Head of OCHA Indonesia, Regional Workshop on Networking and Collaboration among NGOs of Asian countries in Disaster Reduction and Response, 2002