

What is Protection?

When conflict erupts or disaster strikes, affected people often need protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and the elements, and protection of their dignity and human rights. Protection is enshrined in the principle of humanity and an objective of humanitarian action; it is an issue that must inform all aspects of humanitarian response. For humanitarian actors such as OCHA, protection is about advocating for and supporting full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law.¹

States have the primary responsibility to protect people under their control. In situations of armed conflict, all parties to the conflict,

whether States or organized armed groups, must respect and protect civilians, including by taking all feasible precautions to spare them from the effects of hostilities.

Humanitarian organizations may offer to provide assistance and protection to those affected. This may include activities such as promoting the population's rights and encouraging primary duty-bearers to meet their obligations, or directly assisting the affected population, including through specialized services such as legal aid, family tracing and reunification, supporting the demobilization of child soldiers and facilitating refugee registration.

Some humanitarian actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross

“The failure of parties to take constant care to spare civilians in the conduct of military operations and to take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event minimize, civilian casualties initiates a downward spiral characterized by the death, injury and maiming of hundreds of civilians in conflicts every month, and by the displacement of thousands more, forced to flee their homes, communities and livelihoods towards a very uncertain and tragic fate.”

Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, May 2019

or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have a specific protection mandate.

In humanitarian crises, when people are at risk of violence, coercion and deprivation of basic goods and services, humanitarian organizations seek to reduce people's vulnerability by:

- Responsive action aimed at ending, preventing or alleviating the effects of an emerging or established pattern of abuse.
- Remedial action aimed at restoring people's dignity and ensuring adequate living conditions through assistance and rehabilitation.
- Creating and consolidating an environment conducive to respect for the rights of people through, for example, capacity-building.

Protection is a key concern in humanitarian crises and central to humanitarian response. The Inter Agency Standing Committee's Protection Policy stresses that protection is a shared, humanitarian system-wide responsibility.

Humanitarian actors must also ensure that

humanitarian response does not lead to or perpetuate discrimination, abuse, neglect or violence.

The Protection Cluster is one of the 11 clusters that operate at the global and country level. The Global Protection Cluster, led by UNHCR, is the primary forum for coordinating

protection responses. It is divided into four subsidiary bodies with designated lead agencies with particular expertise: gender-based violence (UNFPA); child protection (UNICEF); mine action (UNMAS); and housing land and property rights (NRC). These are activated in the field as sub-clusters, as needed.

“[T]he fundamental thing we need to change is the way belligerents behave in conflict. Unless we – the international community – focus our energies on confronting this issue, we will see the scale of humanitarian need balloon out of control.”

- Mark Lowcock,
Under-Secretary-
General for
Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief
Coordinator

What is OCHA's role?

OCHA promotes an effective, comprehensive and coordinated response to humanitarian crises, and it works to ensure that humanitarian action responds to the over-arching protection concerns and specific risks faced in a given crisis.

At headquarters, OCHA supports the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) to advocate for the protection of conflict- and disaster-affected populations, and it supports Security Council and wider UN engagement to strengthen the protection of civilians in armed conflict. OCHA is responsible for the Secretary-General's reports and the ERC's briefings to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and for the Secretary-General's annual briefings to the Council on the protection of medical

care in conflict. OCHA briefs the Council's Informal Expert Group on protection of civilians on behalf of the humanitarian community, and it engages with Member States, regional organizations and other international stakeholders to advocate protection issues. OCHA works closely with and is an active member of the Global Protection Cluster, supports the development of inter-agency policy and guidance, and contributes to building inter-agency capacity on protection. OCHA also works with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to promote effective and appropriate cooperation on protection where United Nations peacekeeping operations are deployed.

At the country level, OCHA supports the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) to ensure

an effective and coherent response to the protection and assistance needs of affected populations, particularly internally displaced persons, including through advocacy and resource mobilization. OCHA supports the HC to ensure that cross-cutting protection concerns are reflected and addressed in the work of all clusters through inter-cluster coordination; that core protection priorities are incorporated within humanitarian assessment and strategic planning; and that they inform humanitarian decision-making and response. OCHA also participates in and supports the Protection Cluster. OCHA does not implement specialized protection activities or programmes.

What does OCHA say?

1. Protection is a key objective for and an expected outcome of humanitarian action and must be at the centre of humanitarian response.

2. Humanitarian response seeks to enhance protection by minimizing the various risks people face and ensuring full

respect of their rights, whether they are affected by disaster or armed conflict.

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

4. OCHA's role in supporting protection stems from its coordination mandate, as well as specific tasks set out by the General Assembly and the Security Council.

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To find out more

- [IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action \(2016\)](#) and the [IASC Principals Statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action \(2013\)](#)
- [Global Protection Cluster](#)