

## Consultations of the Syria operation

### Amman and Gaziantep, 15-18 September 2015

1. The outlines of the crisis in Syria are well known and won't be repeated here. The development of the situation and the humanitarian response are contained in the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic of 5 February 2015 and the IASC Operational Peer Review of 15 July 2015. The humanitarian response is now shaped by a Whole of Syria approach, backed by UN Security Council Resolution 2165 of July 2014. Notwithstanding the magnitude of the current crisis, the Syrian conflict and its related ills- including the refugee crisis, the growth of Islamic State, the destabilisation of Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey along with an incoherent international response- contain all the ingredients for further escalation. There is no reason to suggest we have seen the peak of the crisis.
2. The Senior Protection Coordinator in the Global Protection Cluster Support Cell in Geneva undertook consultations on expectations of the field of the GPC with the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator for the Whole of Syria Response, donors, regional directors of international NGOs, UNMAS, OCHA, cluster and sub-cluster leads in Amman, Jordan, and with Syrian NGOs and the protection cluster in Gaziantep, Turkey. What follows is a composite note of those meetings.

#### *A. Amman*

3. The consultations in Amman were wide-ranging but several themes emerged: advocacy, the need to improve and simplify concepts and processes, a desire to learn and innovate and for the GPC to exert its network power and expertise on behalf of the Syrian operation.
4. There was a consensus that the humanitarian operation in Syria is not being approached as a protection crisis. Agencies and clusters lack protection expertise and this is reflected in the lack of understanding of protection and the lack of ideas of what could be done in practice to advance the protection of people in Syria.
5. There was a consensus that the operation needs to move from emergency mode now that it is more clearly a protracted crisis with no end in sight.
6. Several humanitarian issues, such as humanitarian access, have been passed too far up the decision chain, and become part of the political stalemate. More needs to be done at a lower level. However, advocacy is not being

conducted very well, with mandated agencies not speaking out on basic protection issues and no clear outcomes being documented.

7. In this situation, the GPC is asked to facilitate some shifts in the operation. Cross-fertilisation of ideas from similar operations was mentioned, for example from Iraq, Somalia or even South-Eastern Myanmar to learn how other operations coped with cross-border operations, remote management and working with partners with limited humanitarian experience. That being said, it was felt that the remote management modality in the operation was not creative and local partners could do more than they are being asked. The GPC could also provide guidance on the transition from emergency mode to more stable operational response.
8. There was much appreciation of the role of ProCap in giving advice the RC/HC but it was felt that the GPC could give advice to RC/HCs on what the expectations are in making protection central to the humanitarian response. It was recommended that the GPC should conduct an annual audit of how operations are making protection central to humanitarian action.
9. There is a consensus that the GPC should offer more and perhaps give more direction in suggesting improvements, although if the GPC wants to be more directional then the seniority of its leadership needs to be raised. In particular, advocacy efforts are not strategic and are fragmented and the GPC should use its network power to bring focus and energy to advocacy efforts. There was a clear sense that the GPC is not using its network power to build coalitions, for example on the targeting of health and education facilities in Syria and should be raising the level at which advocacy is conducted, e.g. to the High Commissioner. The link between advocacy at the field and by the GPC is weak. The lack of messaging from the GPC about respect for IHL e.g. on the situation in Yemen is leading to a loss of credibility in the GPC.
10. The GPC was urged to demystify the meaning of protection and burst out of its small bubble of actors defining the concept. The increasing technicality of protection work needs to be corrected. The definition needs to be brought back to concrete activities and context driven, and protection outcomes need to be defined. There was a consensus that the definition of protection is not very clear and the achievable aims in any given context are not being defined.
11. It was felt that the GPC is not doing enough to disseminate global policy. The expertise and resources, which the GPC can offer are not felt in the Syria operation. In addition, the GPC is not offering practical tools for use by the field and it was felt that the GPC champions process over outcomes and is not responsive to the field, failing to provide advice on operational matters, e.g. by organising cross-fertilisation of ideas from other operations. There is no feedback loop between the GPC and the field. There is a divide between the GPC and the field and a lack of translation of ideas into practice and a lack of focus on the achievable.

12. The GPC could play a catalytic role between donors and local agencies, by giving them the wherewithal to undertake practical protection activities. There is a sense of a mismatch between Syrian NGOs (whether diaspora or CBOs) being lost in the processes of the humanitarian programme cycle. There is a recognition that the response is mainly Syrian, with remote support that is not collectively being done well. Whether Syrian NGOs are really treated as partners is open to question. The GPC was urged to help by supporting agencies rather than training them, e.g. through an operations cell. It was also recognised that there is a need to invest more in national staff who are able to have more access across Syria; they need more support but there is no culture of asking for support
13. Finally, an explanation of the services the GPC can provide would be helpful, as would a contact list.

### ***B. Gaziantep***

14. The consultations in Gaziantep kept coming back to four main themes: funding, advocacy, the protection of humanitarian workers and the need to improve and simplify concepts and processes. There was a palpable sense of frustration and a refusal to accept the on-going situation.
15. The GPC's visits to the field were seen as a good step in developing a relationship with the field. However, it has only been recently that Syrian NGOs have seen any benefit from the cluster and formed an idea of the concept of protection.
16. There was a consensus that Syria is a protection crisis, in which safety, not services, is the main problem. The lack of protection means that services cannot be delivered. The physical protection of humanitarian staff is needed and this is uppermost in agency minds. Staff safety and security encompasses a range of problems, including entry to Syria, protection from the Syrian authorities or guarantee of re-entry to Turkey. Many Syrian staff are encountering a problem of expired or expiring documents and it is impossible to get documents out of the Syrian government because of security checks by the authorities. This makes Whole of Syria meetings impossible to attend, such as the recent HNO meeting in Amman.
17. There was a consensus that funding for protection is the biggest issue for Syrian NGOs; more advocacy is needed for funding for protection, which is a complicated issue to understand. There is a need to better document and describe protection problems in Syria, and to make protection work more professional. The amount of the funding is important but also the quality: the allocation of funds is not great- the prioritisation needs to be better. In the fifth year of the crisis NGOs are becoming depressed and overwhelmed that no one is listening to them.

18. The pattern of funding is changing and protection is being prioritised although the reality on the ground is not allowing NGOs to achieve what they want. Half of the resources are being wasted because NGOs have to fit donor priorities and they have to attend cluster meetings to get funding. Funding priorities need to take account of the realities on the ground, e.g. by building infrastructure underground or allowing budgets for catastrophic health insurance/life insurance for the staff of Syrian NGOs. There is also a need for funding to allow teams on the ground to keep up with the changing weapons delivery systems, e.g. missiles rather than barrel bombs.
19. Simplification and streamlining of humanitarian processes is needed. The cluster needs to prioritise the issues it wants to take up. Agencies cannot do anything about the big problems so they are focussing on very small issues. But it is important to focus on what is achievable
20. Syrian NGOs have a lot of capacity now about protection concepts but there is a need to reconceptualise protection to fit the context. Advocacy is needed about the egregious violations of human rights. The purpose of programming GBV interventions was questioned when agencies have no safe place for their staff to work, for example schools and clinics are now being built underground because of the risk of bombing.
21. Multi-year funding is needed because sustainability of effort is important, especially as the crisis becomes protracted- a longer perspective is needed because working from year to year is not working. Resources are being wasted by a year-to-year approach, particularly in psychosocial interventions. There are no schools or cultural development for children, so they are subconsciously being involved in violence. Options need to be given to them so they are not vulnerable to recruitment. Children are being psychologically affected not just by daily goings-on but also in terms of narrowing horizons.
22. It is difficult to work in ISIL areas without being considered a terrorist organisation. There is a problem to access funds for working in besieged areas, e.g. the HPF contained no priority for besieged areas. There are restrictions on funding for some items, for example chlorine tablets because of its dual-use. The GPC could help by arranging a dialogue with donors about funding for problematic zones. Humanitarians need to take into account the ISIS areas and include them in planning so as to avoid problems in the future.
23. The GPC trainings are seen as becoming better but the connexion between the field level and the GPC needs to be improved. There is a view that there are no clear messages to New York etc. about the situation.
24. Syrian NGOs need to be included in the cluster and more materials are needed in Arabic, with tools contextualised for Syria. Plans need to encourage Syrians to engage.

25. In GBV work the traditions and beliefs of the local community must be taken into account. Community-based responses are needed and the GPC needs to disseminate information in Arabic. The guidance is not known and not read; not all the guidelines are applicable. They should be available online and are not relevant to the specific context Syrian NGOs are working in. The actors in the field are not aware of the resources that the GPC can provide or what it can do in terms of advocacy.
26. There are lots of overlapping guidelines in protection –more ideas are needed about Islam and protection. Protection is seen as a western thing. Where is the guidance on this and working with faith-based leaders? There is a long experience of dealing with refugees in the region but the materials and learning are not available across operations and the GPC should be assisting with this, including by reaching across the region, e.g. the ISIL areas. It was suggested that the GPC hold a round-table to learn lessons about how to respond to regional problems, e.g. LRA-affected areas, ISIL areas but the round-table should be held in the field so that more staff can attend.
27. The GPC needs to articulate what is “life-saving”: physical, legal and material activities of the sector and provide a better picture of what mainstreaming means. What is the role of the cluster in advocating for peace and political resolution of conflict? How do we make people accountable for their actions? Information-gathering is seen as very extractive and the cluster in the field doesn’t see any outcome.
28. What does protection mean to an aid worker when the aid worker is not safe? More advocacy is needed and the GPC must include staff safety in its strategy. Doctors, teachers are not safe and mitigation measures do not work and we need to stop thinking that they do. The GPC needs to take up more advocacy on behalf of Syria, particularly as the targeting of hospitals and schools is not well known.
29. Big international agencies are present in Syria but they are not doing protection, for example child protection case management. This is not a question of funding. The GPC should be asking them why they are not doing the work. That type of review has not happened.

### *C. Conclusions*

30. Several of the themes which emerged from the consultations echo the Independent Whole of System Review, notably the need to include local actors in defining protection for the particular context they work in and making guidance relevant and timely. Whereas there was clearly a difference in emphasis between Amman and Gaziantep about their priority concerns, a common concern was expressed about the absence of the GPC from advocacy on behalf of the Syria operation.

31. Actionable suggestions for the GPC include:
- a. Cross-fertilising ideas from other operations on relevant issues, such as remote support, capacity development in insecure environments, innovative approaches NOT in the form of further guidance but in direct knowledge transfers;
  - b. Helping the Syria operation to think through how to approach the regional dimension of the crisis, e.g. the ISIL areas;
  - c. Facilitating a dialogue between donors and agencies on the ground about the possibility of funding and the legal frameworks within which donors have to work;
  - d. Providing guidance for RC/HCs on their responsibilities to make protection central to the humanitarian operation;
  - e. Conducting an audit of the centrality of protection in the operation;
  - f. Providing examples of good practice in protection relevant to the Syria operation, including examples of faith-based approaches;
  - g. Providing a clear statement of that “life-saving” activities including services the protection sector can deliver, e.g. physical protection of civilians, livelihood support to survivors of GBV, reunification of children with families, re-establishment of civil documentation or the clearance of Explosive Remnants of War;
  - h. Ensuring that standards and guidance are developed from a diverse perspective and are automatically translated into Arabic.
32. There are several other issues which the GPC will need to reflect on further. Notably, these include:
- a. The extent to which the GPC can “direct” clusters in the field to suggest improvements or to question why major international agencies are not conducting protection activities that they are capable of;
  - b. The role of the GPC as a “global advocate”. Coming from a situation which appears on TV every day and which commands the attention of the highest levels of the international community- even if that does not translate into coherent action or sufficient funding- the role of the GPC in advocating action for Syria seems negligible. Nonetheless, there may be some aspects of the situation where the GPC could help, for example in drawing attention to attacks on schools and hospitals, in concert with other actors, and some reflection on the use of the GPC’s network power would be called for.