

Keynote at High Level Meeting of the Good Humanitarian Donorship on Protection, Disability Inclusion and Gender Based Violence

By William S. Chemaly, Global Protection Cluster Coordinator | 27 June 2022 | Geneva

Belgium, Finland thank you. Colleagues, friends, I will go straight to the point.

Our 32 operations with over 1000 partner convey from the frontlines a simple message: The single largest driver of protection risks, today, is conflict and human rights abuses.

This year 150 million people, stuck in or fleeing from conflict and disasters, need protection. This is the highest recorded figure since the creation of the cluster system 15 years ago. Last year's figure was 113M. This makes a leap of 37M in one year, the highest on record. This increase is driven by: New crises in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Myanmar. Lack of solutions in Yemen, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Conflict and human rights abuse are the core sources of protection risks. But it doesn't stop there. Then comes what I believe hurts the most: invisibility. Millions of people go through all of this in total solitude. Wondering if anyone knows or cares. Wondering if they matter at all.

Invisibility of survivors is the escape route of criminals, of men with guns. It is invisibility from one's community to come to the rescue. Invisibility from humanitarians. Invisibility from political solutions. Invisibility from justice.

No crime in times of conflict and disasters falls into invisibility as Gender Based Violence does. No group falls into invisibility as people living with disability. And in many cases persons with disability are victims or survivors of Gender Based Violence - - with invisibility reaching total darkness. So, your topic today is one of relevance and of timeliness. And so will be your actions and decisions in supporting operations to do better.

To kick off this conversation I would like to highlight four important elements for our operations on the frontlines: First, why in protection work we operate based on risks and not only needs. Second, what is working and where we need to improve in response to GBV and Disability inclusion. Third and finally, will close by shedding some light on how we can have more humanitarian access that protects and beats invisibility.

First topic, why do we in protection operate based on risks and not only needs.

Most of humanitarian planning is based on quantifying and prioritizing needs. It usually starts with needs assessments, followed by decisions on prioritization and resourcing.

In DR Congo or Ethiopia, we calculate if there are enough calories on the table, or enough water in pipelines, or number of displaced people that need shelter to design our interventions.

In our experience, for protection this an insufficient approach and could actually harm. In Afghanistan, South Sudan, Ukraine, Somalia, Venezuela, Nigeria time is of essence. We shouldn't wait - - for a killing to happen and be documented, or children to be recruited by armed group and be traced, or school be targeted and misused and get photographed, or sexual violence to be identified in a health center, or person with disability found left behind a community that has fled - - to intervene.

Of course, we should work to prevent but also assume it is happening, and mount an advocacy, engagement with armed groups and community and actual response on no regret basis.

Our assumptions are not fiction. They are based on signals and analysis of risk. They are based on facts and figure we know from other similar situations. They are based on "tip of the iceberg" documented cases that we know off.

The frontlines show that the more we are present on the ground with advocacy and responses, the more we are trusted to know what is happening and have better information and data. This is common sense. What it concretely means for disability and gender-based violence is four things:

1- We must trust established global percentages and figures as a basis for planning. We must accept them as a basis for planning, while data is improving. Don't wait for data to advocate or finance programmes. For saving lives, knowing after the act is too late.

2- We shouldn't ask for evidence prematurely or at any cost. For certain Gender Based Violence Crimes collecting evidence is not a humanitarian business. The burden shouldn't be on us to prove or disprove cases. The burden is on authorities to disprove. This gets tricky when things get politicized, and they do. This gets trickier when we start comparing humanitarian monitoring capacity with that of peacekeeping missions with human rights and protection of civilians monitoring system.

3- We should accept proxy data as a basis for intervention. When there is no food on the table, kids will drop out of school, youth will be recruited by armed groups, girls forced marriage will become more common, person with disability will be de-prioritized. I am sure there are exceptions but trusting food insecurity solid data as an indication that there is higher risk of gender-based violence should be the rule.

4- The Joint Inter Agency Framework should accept risk-based protection planning. Based on all what I said, we must agree that when it comes to protection including disability and gender-based violence, risk calculation is more appropriate than needs calculation.

We count on your support.

Second topic, what is working and where we need to improve in response to GBV and Disability inclusion.

1- Let me start with Gender Based Violence.

Among our 32 cluster operations, 95% describe the risk of GBV as severe or extreme compared to 80% last year. This is a major increase and a worrying trend¹.

The Gender Based Violence Response however is one of the best-established areas of humanitarian response and protection responses. It is well established structurally with a clear area of responsibility and leading agency. It has strong partnerships space. It has clear counter parts at national levels. It has strong established narrative and broad acceptance as a priority. It has strong, tested technical standards and programmes. It has strong integration with health, food security, CCCM and education sectors. It works. We can further support response to Gender Based Violence in 3 ways:

The first way, prevention that builds infrastructure. Peace and development can better support preventive gender-based violence response. In conflict and disasters settings we should see GBV top of the agenda for Peace and development actors. This should be done through the establishment of legal frameworks, supporting their implementation, building national capacity, and campaigning against GBV.

The second way, timely and comprehensive reaction. Humanitarian response should be better in reacting to GBV with advocacy, medically, psychosocially, legally and socioeconomically, and development actors should be less averse in fragile contexts. Let me illustrate.

- **Response to Gender Based Violence requires strong advocacy and engagement with armed groups and communities.** This should be a basic humanitarian intervention. Sitting down with communities and discussing what they can do to self-protect. Sitting down with men with guns and dialoguing, convincing, building rapport and changing behavior.
I am afraid to say that, as humanitarians, we are doing this less and less. This kind of programme is costly, its impact is invisible and entails a lot of risks. Yet it carries in it the heart and soul of humanitarian action to combat GBV. This is a gap. This needs courage to have presence on the ground. This needs skills and knowledge to have the right discussions and not do harm.
- **Response to Gender Based Violence requires strong medical component.** This is where a strong GBV and Health programmes work well together, lets support them. The challenge however is where we don't have strong health infrastructure. In a place like Centrafrique where GBV is a major issue, medical services cover but a fraction of the country. Investing in health infrastructure and outreach with humanitarian and development resources is an important step to respond to GBV.

¹ In CAR, the DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia and elsewhere, parties to armed conflict continued to use sexual violence as a tactic of war, terror, torture and repression.

Mali reported a 40% increase in GBV cases in 2021. In CAR, GBV-related incidents have been on the rise in January 2022 and since 2020, there has been a 26% increase.

Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan have increased due to restrictions to women and girls' rights and freedoms, while access to essential services for survivors of violence have been greatly impacted.

In Haiti, DRC and Colombia, sexual violence is used by gangs or NSAGs as a weapon to humiliate, terrorize local populations and reinforce their territorial control.

Risk of trafficking remained high in Venezuela, with an increasing number of human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation cases.

- **A comprehensive response to Gender Based Violence requires strong psychosocial component.** This is again an area that works. In most cases needs to heavily rely on humanitarian resources and interventions. The challenge is largely scale. We are not ambitious enough, nor resourced at it should be. When I was in DR Congo this year. A country with quite strong GBV attention. The scale of the response compared to the needs is minimal, leaving humanitarians with focus on urban, high concentration areas and a very scarce response in a widespread and scattered crime.
- **A comprehensive response to Gender Based Violence requires strong legal component.** An area with strong expertise. Often not resourced as humanitarian priority. In places like the Sahel or Iraq, having immediate legal follow up for GBV cases is a crucial necessary step for access to medical and other services. It is also a form of standing by survivors, who don't have otherwise any chance to access the justice system. It is a crucial support to combat impunity. It is crucial step towards peace. Whether resourced by humanitarian, development, or peace components, it doesn't matter. It is crucial. Without it a humanitarian response to GBV is hit hard.
- **A comprehensive response to Gender Based Violence requires strong socio-economic component.** Again, this is an area of strong expertise that requires scaling up. Despite the developmental outlook of this intervention. Its immediate impact is protective for individuals who receive it. It is lifesaving to have basics. It is empowering to move on despite the trails of scares. While we should make sure that persons at GBV risk or survivors have access to socio economic developmental projects, it shouldn't be ignored by humanitarians. Today, too little resources are prioritized for it.
- **The third way is rooting it out: We should all be better in fighting impunity.** I just came back from South Sudan, and despite all peace, Development and Humanitarian machinery in action, fighting impunity is hiding in the shadows while it should be front and center. It falls on all of us to use all what we can to fight impunity. However, stressing this as a political, peace and developmental priority in action and precondition would be transformative for GBV response.

2- Let me move on to disability inclusion.

We believe that disability is a result of a negative interaction between a person and an environment that poses barriers. Our humanitarian system is part of that environment. This is today a very real gap in our collective response as many of the protection risks that person with disabilities are grappling with today are deeply concerning:

- In Central African Republic where I was earlier this year, women and girls with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are significantly more likely to experience sexual and gender-based violence than others.
- In Yemen, children with disabilities are at greater risk of abuse and neglect and of being victims of discrimination and violence compared to the overall average.
- In Iraq and Somalia, we see increased risk of targeted coercion for persons with disabilities by extremist groups for participation in front lines and suicide bombing.

- In Tonga, Madagascar, and Myanmar, and more recently in Ukraine, often unable to rapidly move away from areas impacted by conflict or disasters in search of safety, persons with disabilities are at increased risk of being left behind during acute emergencies.
- Cutting across these risks, is the broader exclusion from all types of humanitarian services due to attitudinal, institutional, and physical and communication barriers in their environment, ultimately further deepening and entrenching exclusion and vulnerability.

Disability inclusion is at a different stage within the humanitarian architecture as compared to Gender Based Violence response.

Structurally we are still unpredictable about where it sits. Where should disability inclusion sit in the coordination structure? Who is the mother/father agency for disability inclusion that bears the flag, rallies and is predictably providing resources for response? This is a timely question as the protection architecture and the whole cluster architecture is being reviewed. We support having disability inclusion as either a predictable reference group in operations or having it as an area of responsibility as part of the protection cluster with clear lead agency. Either way this should be done through investing in partnerships with and having leadership of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities to strengthen their capacity for engagement and representation of issues which concern them. So structurally we need your support to have predictability.

In terms of actual response, we are still quite weak as a humanitarian system overall. The most feasible and low hanging fruit is to get mainstreaming disability inclusion across different sectors right. It's been on our collective agenda for more than a decade now. We know what needs to be done. We need teeth to implement it. Here are three helpful ways:

1- We need to ensure that a dedicated portion of funding of any service is going for disability inclusion. This should include mandatory components in program proposals ensuring that barrier and facilitator assessments are carried out and adaptation of programmes to remove barriers is planned and thought through. The IASC Guidelines, Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, adopted in 2019 is there to guide up on the details. Make compliance mandatory. Donors can plan an active role in monitoring this compliance over a period of 3-4 years. Only then will it become part of work-as-usual. But, it needs to be jump started through this modality.

2- We need to scale up disability inclusive emergency response with tailored assistance for persons with disabilities.

3- We must ensure disability inclusion within development and peace building based interventions. This can be done through building disability inclusive infrastructures and specialized services in countries, including in fragile environments / chronic crises. And sustain multi-year funding for specific services such as protection and disability empowerment programs to support leadership; functional rehabilitation, inclusive livelihoods, and the provision of contextually appropriate assistive technology (AT) is essential. Such supports must extend and be embedded across the nexus.

Now by way of conclusion, let me circle back to how we combat invisibility.

The answer is simple. We have to be there. We have to have access. We estimate that all together - national, local and international NGOs and UN members, today, can reach at best 25% to 50% of those in need of protection. At best. Because in several contexts, including Yemen, Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique, this figure is significantly lower.

We are basically leaving about 110M people without a serious chance of a comprehensive protection response. Humanitarian access all together is under major pressure. For protection response, the picture is more severe, because: Having access for protection requires sustained presence on the ground.

- It is by being there and with active local partners that we build trust with communities, with authorities and armed groups.
- It is only by being there and with active local partners that we can monitor, understand, and engage to change behaviors, address issues and run services.
- It is by being there and with active local partners that we send a signal of caring and solidarity and can tell the story when need be.

So, we are not doing very well in access for protection because it is seriously difficult. But also, this kind of access cannot be negotiated like we negotiate access for trucks. We cannot truck-in protection to combat gender-based violence and address the needs of persons with disability. We need a new way of thinking:

- A more holistic definition of humanitarian access that protects.
- A new way of measuring and monitoring access beyond that of trucks.
- A new set of tools to negotiate this kind of access.
- New partnerships that can stay, deliver, and engage to change behaviors.

It only by having this kind of access that we can truly work with and for persons with disability and counter gender-based violence. We count on you. As humanitarian donors. As political actors. Join us.