



GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER 2020 GLOBAL PROTECTION FORUM

Summary note from event organised by OCHA, UNHCR, InterAction and ICRC on 7 October 2020 on

Strengthening the Protection of Civilians in armed conflict: the role of Protection Clusters and operational actors

1. Panel

- Moderator: Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Research Associate, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute
- Opening remarks: Aurelien Buffler, Head of Policy Advice and Planning Section, OCHA.
- Panellists: Marie-Emilie Dozin, Coordinator of the Protection Cluster in Mali; Paul White, Senior Protection Officer, representing the Protection Cluster in Afghanistan; Pilar Gimeno Sarciada, Head of the Protection of Civilian Population Unit, ICRC; Samuel Cheung, Chief of the IDP Section, UNHCR; and Jenny McAvoy, Director of Protection, InterAction
- Closing remarks: Corita Tassi, Thematic Expert on Protection, Gender and Education in Emergencies, ECHO and William Chemaly, GPC Coordinator

2. Objective and overview of the session

The session focused on the role and contribution of field-based Protection Clusters to strengthening the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict. The objectives were:

- To reflect on current practical and operational challenges and constraints for Protection Clusters to address issues pertaining to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, as well as any good practices and lessons learned.
- To identify opportunities and challenges to connect the work of Protection Clusters to global efforts on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and how to better leverage these frameworks.
- To identify areas for Headquarters support to Protection Clusters in addressing protection of civilians' issues.

3. Summary of the discussion

Opening remarks by Aurelien Buffler, Head of Policy Advice and Planning Section, OCHA

The rationale to hold this event stems from a very simple reality we witness as humanitarians on the ground every day in situations of armed conflict where we work. That is that parties to conflict in many places fail to take the steps they should to protect civilians, which translates in enormous human suffering. Here I'll refer you to the various reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict of the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council over the past years on what's happening on the ground. To give you an example, still today, when explosive weapons are used in populated areas, ninety percent of victims are civilians. We have reached record levels in terms of forced displacement of refugees and IDPs. Sexual violence and forced recruitment have become pervasive in some places. Attacks against humanitarians are also multiplying. And the list goes on, again and again.

The Secretary-General has made it clear in his [report](#) to the Council what he thinks is not working. He's made clear that there's an urgent need to improve compliance with international law, including IHL and IHRL, and to make progress on accountability. He's also made it clear that there are good practices and practical steps parties to conflict can take to improve the situation on the ground. He's articulated that in concrete

recommendations, starting with advising Member States to adopt national policy frameworks; making sure that there is space for humanitarians to engage with armed groups and train armed groups on IHL; and that armed transfers and engagement is conditioned to very clear PoC criteria.

We know what we can and should do. The primary responsibility to take this forward rests with parties to conflict. Member States have pledged to ensure respect for IHL and they need to step up in some cases. It is also our responsibility as humanitarians to ask ourselves what we can do to support this agenda to better protect civilians on the ground. What are the tools at our disposal? Here our eyes turn towards Protection Clusters on the ground, which are key tools we have. How do we use the reporting and analytical capacity of our colleagues on the ground and the wealth of knowledge they have? How do we use humanitarian and protection programmes to better protect civilians? What is our advocacy power on the ground and at global level to advance protection of civilians on the ground? These are some of the questions we would like to explore in this discussion today.

We would like to hear from field colleagues what is working, what is not working, and what have they put in place that we can learn from? What kind of opportunities do they see that we're not seizing? What kind of challenges are they facing that we need to address? We would like to hear how at Headquarters we can better support Protection Clusters to make progress.

Finally, how do we connect the very good work of our protection colleagues on the ground to the very good work of our experts on PoC at global level? How we connect these two agendas: discussions at the Security Council and programmes on the ground? How Protection Clusters feed into the global PoC agenda but also how we equip our colleagues on the ground to leverage achievements at the global level to make progress at field level. Lastly, just to note we see this as a first discussion. There will hopefully be other opportunities to expand this discussion in the near future.

Interactive panel discussion

Strategies employed by the Protection Cluster to enhance the Protection of Civilians affected by armed conflict in Mali, including links between work at the field-level and policy influence at the global level.

Marie-Emilie Dozin, Coordinator of the Protection Cluster in Mali

The context in Mali and in the Sahel in general is of great concern in terms of protection of civilians. All the issues mentioned in the opening of today's event are happening on the ground in Mali including kidnaping, forced recruitment, sexual violence, with parties to the conflict deliberately targeting civilians and basic services like schools and health centres.

Let me share some examples of what has worked for us in Mali:

First, partners have strengthened their analysis and protection monitoring systems, so we've been able to better identify and better analyse protection risks. The system in Mali is based on a very strong network of protection monitors and local committees covering the different regions and collecting information relating to protection incidents, including human rights violations. When there is an imminent threat against civilians, like an attack on a village or displacement, they share a flash alert with the Protection Cluster. We are then able through the cluster system to communicate this to operational partners, like the Civil-military Coordination or the PoC division of the UN Mission, MINUSMA. There's a connection and complementarity between the grass roots mechanisms who are in the field and able to identify violations – and how the information is channelled through the cluster system to reach operational partners like MINUSMA who has a mandate to provide physical protection. Challenges to this system remain, including insecurity, access constraints and limited resources to respond to multiple threats to civilians' protection.

But what has been effective for us is to work through these community-based mechanisms because they are a tool for protection. In Mali, the conflict is driven from the ground, mainly inter-communal violence. In a society where community is valued and where there is no presence of the State and a proliferation of armed groups, community-based mechanisms have sometimes been the only structure to provide protection. We've worked with partners to build, strengthen, train and support these existing community mechanisms. They've been able to identify protection incidents and to make referrals to protection actors so that we could also provide a response.

A second concrete example is the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on serious violations against children. This is also a system that is based on a strong community network. Child protection monitors and committees have been able to identify more than 500 serious violations against children. In Gao, for example, five community-based networks were able to identify more than 100 children associated with armed groups. Thanks to dialogue with leaders of the armed groups and awareness raising sessions in the community; they were able to demobilize and reintegrate those children in the community. Supporting community-based and grassroots mechanisms should be at the core of any protection of civilians' strategy.

We've also had some success with linking our efforts on PoC at the field level to policy influence at the global level. With respect to the MRM mechanism, information that is collected by partners on the ground feeds into the reporting system and it goes all the way up to NY Headquarters to influence the reports of the UN Secretary-General. The MRM Task Force in country is co-led by UNICEF and the MINUSMA.

Another example of how we've been able to influence issues at the headquarters level is ahead of the renewal of the MINUSMA mandate in June 2020. The Protection Cluster and protection partners in-country were able to influence, to a certain extent, the narrative and discussions that were happening ahead of the renewal of this very important resolution in NY. We tried to influence how protection and food insecurity were very much interlinked in Mali, and how conflict was the real driver of the crisis. We've been producing an advocacy note on the inter-dependence between food insecurity and protection. This note was shared with all the speakers who then briefed the Security Council Protection of Civilians Expert Group in NY, thereby influencing their understanding of the crisis and protection priorities. Strong language was maintained in the MINUSMA resolution on protection of civilians, which should be a strategic objective for the mission. To an extent, we contributed to building the narrative and influencing the global PoC agenda.

A huge amount of work has been done on PoC in Afghanistan over the years – by the Protection Cluster, other humanitarian actors and by the UN mission. Reflections on how these different stakeholders historically have worked together on PoC issues, including collective successes in terms of a collaboration in that context.

Paul White, Senior Protection Officer, currently representing the Protection Cluster in Afghanistan

There have been historic ups and downs in the working relationships on PoC in Afghanistan. Life is often complicated for humanitarians when there is a UN Mission in country. If the Mission has a broad mandate linked to a political agenda, it can make humanitarians somewhat uncomfortable.

Our context in Afghanistan includes a conflict lasting over forty years now. The UN mission (UNAMA) has been in existence for 20 years. The monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) on children affected by armed conflict was established by the Security Council in 2005. The cluster system started soon after. So, in Afghanistan, it is important to reflect on what happened in the past. We can't keep "reinventing the wheel" by starting afresh with every new team as we make the same mistakes. We must reflect and develop from our successes. It's not just the Protection Cluster and lead agencies that do the work on the protection of civilians. The AoRs are vital contributors in work on the PoC.

In 2013 the Afghan operation together with others and the GPC got together and developed a [Diagnostic Tool on how to work with missions](#). It arose out of some bad experiences in places like Darfur and Afghanistan. It is a very good piece of work and it helped generate thinking in the clusters in Afghanistan so we understood each other better.

The tool identifies seven areas where we can achieve things together working with the missions and some areas that Protection Clusters need to leave alone. Of these seven areas, three could be considered as collective successes in Afghanistan:

- *Information sharing.* A key factor enabling engagement and improved coordination between actors in Missions and humanitarians was the fact that we started sharing information. The result was better protection outcomes. A working group comprising the Protection Cluster, civil military coordination and human rights facilitated coordination and information sharing. Information sharing has many aspects that flow into all parts of the operation and is vital. This was examined again by the GPC at a [civil military coordination for protection outcomes roundtable](#) in 2018. This is also a valuable document and builds on the 2013 diagnostic tool.
- *Advocacy and communications.* There have been successes in Afghanistan in identifying and using the data that we collect on civilian casualties, mortality and morbidity rates – and this being done in a systematic way. We might overemphasize the successes because for five years in a row Afghanistan has topped the list of the number of children killed and maimed in the world. We have not had as much success as we need. Yet, advocacy and communications has worked quite well through the concerted efforts of the Mission, the agencies and the clusters working together. We have tried to work with the anti-government elements to get them to reduce the use of explosive devices and change tactics. Again, although we claim some success it is not visible in the statistics over the longer timeframe.
- *Strategy development.* We have some success in working together on strategy development. We've tried to look at situations of civilians injured in various incidents. We've promoted policies that increase the protection of and assistance to civilians in strategies.

Promoting accountability is a major area of the work that has also been 's been relatively successful at various levels.

In Afghanistan we can do more on:

- *Participation in coordination forums.* We do come together from time to time but there is not enough dynamism in the relationships between for example the Human Rights component in the Mission, the clusters and some of the agencies. This is now changing as we have a new team in place.
- *Contingency Planning on PoC, together.* We do separate contingency planning in different aspects of the humanitarian operation but perhaps we should work together more on specific issues related to PoC in our contingency planning.
- *Joint trainings.* We don't seem to have our cluster teams working as closely as we could with the Human Rights component of the Mission on joint trainings. Here we can engage INGOs and local NGOs to build the network that will result in putting more pressure on both armed actors and government forces who are perpetrators of the problems relating to PoC.

Fifteen years since the establishment of the Protection Cluster at global and field levels, what we've learned about the role the Protection cluster can and should play in enhancing protection of civilians in armed conflicts, key challenges and how we can help overcome some of these.

Samuel Cheung, Chief of the IDP Section, UNHCR

It's useful to reflect back to the inception of the cluster some fifteen years ago and see to where we've come. I came across a statement from the first Assistant High Commissioner (Protection) for UNHCR, Erika Feller from 2006, when the clusters were being rolled out on a pilot basis. She described the cluster approach as having

been formulated as a means of operationalizing the notion of the responsibility to protect. I found that refreshing as it brings us back to the central motivation of R2P, which is ending the worst forms of violence and persecution, and in the case of PoC, the basics of mitigating and avoiding civilian harm to the extent that we can. For humanitarians, this is without the use of force in contrast to peacekeeping settings where there are other dimensions. As we reflect on these roots of the Protection Cluster, there is some key learning from how it has engaged on PoC and its key accomplishments:

First, it's clear that the clusters have an unavoidable and critical role. If we look at the clusters today, more than half of them are in contexts with active conflicts. The majority if not all of them have lasting effects of conflicts still with them whether active or sporadic.

In addition, Protection Clusters have evolved into a forum for mobilisation of international and national action on protection and the development of protection responses. This responsibility involves working together with missions, and all those on the ground, in terms of developing PoC strategies. Historically, clusters were integral to first developing humanitarian/mission collaboration around PoC strategies. Today, this has advanced with coordination embedded, and more enhanced mechanisms for sharing of information, strategies and responses.

Other areas in which the Protection Clusters have played a key role is – sometimes by trial and error – developing key humanitarian protection practices. Some of the early ones included protection by presence, while these days we look more at aspects like the agency of communities, community self-protection mechanisms and influencing the behaviour of parties to conflict.

Finally, at the strategic level we must look at accomplishments related to HCT Protection Strategies. Out of 29 countries where there's an HCT, 22 have HCT Protection Strategies. There's also a growing norm that protection should be a standing agenda item on the HCT agenda.

At the same time, we also have to acknowledge the challenges. Based on feedback received, we have found that among many colleagues there is a lack of comfort and familiarity in strategizing, programming and responding on core, sometimes sensitive, PoC issues. This relates to three different areas:

First, it relates to skills and guidance. On this front, in 2019 UNHCR started development of a Protection in Armed Conflict Toolkit. This was partly based on a training needs assessment and the unanimous response from colleagues was that they wanted more guidance and more support on how to use IHL, on issues like humanitarian negotiations, civ-mil coordination, humanitarian evacuations, etc. To date it has been internal with UNHCR but the plan is to roll it out to all protection actors, and not only target coordinators but also frontline workers and operational protection partners so we're all on the same page and working together.

Second, at the strategic level, great progress has been made on HCT Protection Strategies, and there's been an uptick in recent years of PoC being a key aspect of these strategies. Despite this, a recent GPC review still found need for significant improvement on how we systematically include PoC issues in HCT Protection Strategies. It might be easy to rally an HCT or all the humanitarian actors together on issues like protection mainstreaming. In contrast, it's not necessarily a given on that the humanitarian system will rally around issues like PoC where there may be concerns about sensitivity, questions about how to engage with parties to conflict.

Third, it relates to improving our responsive programming on PoC. Based on preliminary responses to the survey sent ahead of this event, several issues rose to the surface and point toward building on and improving responses going forward. Major issues of concern include how we deal with risks and effects of direct harm and physical insecurity? Others included situations where there is constant intercommunal violence and deliberate disregard of IHL? How do we address root causes and early action? Clusters generally felt stronger

on advocacy, monitoring and analysis. They felt less strong on directly addressing PoC incidents through referrals and activities/programmatic responses. Going forward, possible directions for improving responsive planning (in HRPs) and concrete programming on PoC issues involve:

- Taking a step forward on monitoring and analysis – in terms of just not looking at the HCT as its only audience but how do we widen that to programming and deliverables? How do we influence behaviour based on that analysis and through wider stakeholders?
- How can we build on practices of early warning/early alerts and better link these to direct responses for victims of IHL violations or PoC incidents?
- How do we work together to influence parties to conflict/duty bearers to have more protection sensitive behaviour that is respectful of IHL? Can we be more targeted in this work? Are there some goals and milestones – e.g. best practices like political declarations or voluntary declarations in terms of adhering to norms with respect to schools and health facilities?
- Finally, how do we continue to strengthen and build on best practices in terms of local and communities self-protection?

Critical factors in effectively influencing the behaviour of conflict parties to spare civilian populations from the effects of war, drawing from the ICRC's experience.

Pilar Gimeno Sarciada, Head of the Protection of Civilians Population Unit, ICRC

We must acknowledge that the way in which we operate as humanitarian organisations is different. Our approaches to PoC are different and thankfully complimentary. Many of the approaches that the ICRC takes are based on our modus operandi, which is a bilateral confidential dialogue with parties to a conflict, and therefore some of the practices that I may put forward might not be applicable to all the organisations listening today.

One first and foremost step to be able to influence behaviour is to have a strategy of influence. That may be obvious but while we may have strategies in a country for the overall response, we might not have within these general strategies clear influencing strategies that are coherent and have a long-term vision. Changing behaviour of armed actors is something that needs to have a long-term perspective.

It is also vital to have a strong institutional memory. The strategy must be anchored in the institution/organization that is carrying out this strategy in a way that goes beyond the turnover of staff to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Second, dialogue is about constant engagement. We must influence behaviour it is not a one off. Dialogue and influencing needs persistence and our strategy must take that into account. It's not about discussing one incident. It's about the long run.

Third, another important point for influencing is understanding the pattern of harm. In order to influence, one must understand the protection concerns affecting the people we are trying to protect as well as the causes behind those concerns. Why are things happening? Is it really because there is intentionality or not? The way we're going to build our strategy of influence is going to depend on our understanding of the issues, the causes and why the behaviour of actors is the way it is.

A further point that is important is understanding the conflict parties. In order to understand their behaviour, we must know who they are. On many occasions we try to engage with actors without understanding their motivations, where they come from, what their culture is even. There are many aspects around the people that we want to influence that are unknown to us.

The ICRC has conducted an internal study recently on the quality of dialogue. This has helped us understand that there are criteria that are critical to influence behaviour. These are:

- *Capability* – or knowledge of the basic rules by armed actors. Do they have a behavioural regulations? A code of conduct? What are the cognitive and interpersonal skills they have in order to engage with us? Do we have those skills ourselves? How do they organise themselves in terms of hierarchical lines?
- *Opportunity* – the environment in which those actors move. What is the physical and social environment that enables the organization of those actors? What context and resources do they have? What is the environment and physical access to the people we want to talk to? What social norms do they use in terms of their engagement with communities? What is the community's involvement? What is their identity as a group?
- *Motivation* – whether there's a willingness or not of those actors to engage with us. What are the beliefs they have, and whether these enable or impede engagement with humanitarian organisations on issues of concern to us? Are there any values or emotions linked to this engagement? Are there issues of perception in being seen engaging with us? Any opportunistic sense that we can utilize in order to draw them into engaging with us.

Another point we have learned through practice is to put the law into perspective in a way that we can engage and influence through the social values and local norms that the communities and local actors are using. As much as we understand that IHL is of universal value there are many ways in which those values are represented across the countries that we work in. The law is always reflected in some social norms and taking a different stance and working from the humanitarian consequences and values and local norms point of view might lead to a better influencing of actors.

There is also the role of communities in terms of their own positioning in relation to the actors that we are trying to influence and how we draw from those communities in order to understand better how to influence – or influence the influencers.

Two other points especially important for the ICRC. One of them is trust as a pre-requisite for engagement. For actors to engage with us they must understand who we are. We must be predictable. In our case, the engagement is also based on the fact that we are an organization that works at the confidential level. Lastly, we do not have only one approach, but a multiplicity of approaches that work together. One of them is dialogue but we also undertake training, capacity building and support. This is on IHL issues but also for example training on war surgery for instance, evacuations of war-wounded as part of our humanitarian mandate, etc. So, we not only preach IHL, we also practice IHL.

Insights from InterAction's experience convening a group of humanitarian and human rights NGOs to influence US policy and practice on the Protection of Civilians, including how replicable that experience could be with other States who similarly engage in international military operations.

Jenny McAvoy, Director of Protection, InterAction

It's important that approaches to particular issues be very context dependent. We need to look at the very specific patterns of harm and actors involved in perpetrating them and then figure out how to engage. It's important to recognise that not all PoC issues emanate from a deliberate attempt to target or inflict harm. There's a broad spectrum of PoC concerns or examples of how parties to conflict behave. On one end you might have deliberate targeting and inflicting of deliberate harm. At the other end of the spectrum you may have no intent to harm but a lot of accidents. Somewhere in the middle what we may see is ongoing carelessness or recklessness with the use of force. Knowing what pattern of harm we're dealing with is critically important.

In the US context, it was following the US airstrikes on the MSF hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan that prompted a group of InterAction humanitarian members to come together to take a critical look at the US contribution to civilian harm in its own military operations. We looked at formal policy as well as informal practices and joined forces with human rights organisations to address these issues. We have been able to open up a meaningful dialogue with the US Department of Defence on [measures](#) that the US can and should take to minimise harm to civilians in its military operations and through its security partnerships with other States and non-State actors. In doing so, we have been calling on the US to take action in order to avoid and minimise harm and to encourage their allies and other actors to do the same.

A few key reflections:

First, we commonly speak of direct engagement with parties to conflict in order to influence or change their behaviour. This protection dialogue is indispensable and critically important, but we also need to keep the broader policy environment in mind, at a national level, including legislators and parliamentarians, media reporting and public opinion. In doing so, we should particularly ensure that the voices of affected people are heard, acknowledged, and are responded to in some way. This helps to ensure that the policy context and dialogue around these issues is practical and oriented towards problem-solving real issues.

Second, we need to think of our role as humanitarians as not only as addressing specific problems but helping to counteract a permissive environment whereby harm to a civilian population is tolerated as the inevitable reality of an armed conflict. We can change the overall environment in which harm is occurring. We've learned a lot from this process in the US context whereby the US Congress has now required the US Department of Defence to develop a policy on minimizing civilian harm.

Third, one critical lesson learned from this experience is how we frame our concerns can have an enormous effect on how that dialogue unfolds, and on the receptivity of the actors we're trying to influence. It is critically important for us as humanitarian and human rights organisations to get beyond simply reciting IHL and HR obligations – and consider alternate ways of framing. It's critically important to get to the practical and operational dynamics that we're trying to change. In other words, how exactly are people suffering harm and what changes do we need to see in order to disrupt that ongoing pattern of harm? Relying solely on the law can get us mired in a legal debate whereas in fact the practical matter of ongoing harm needs to be dealt with and, as humanitarians, our goal is for that harm to be reduced. It's imperative that we have a strong analysis of those patterns and can come with practical recommendations.

Finally, it's been helpful for InterAction to zoom in on some neglected topics and unpack them, do some detailed diagnosis and analysis in order to be able to push the envelope on critical issues. For example, in the US policy context there's a heavy emphasis on individual civilian casualties and addressing the circumstances of death and injury to individuals. What tends to be neglected is the widespread destruction of civilian objects, i.e. civilian property and assets, public services, and infrastructure. By doing some devoted work on the circumstances in which this destruction occurs, and possible measures to minimize that destruction, InterAction has been able to broaden the scope of attention.

There are many other topics that warrant this kind of unpacking. For example, how militaries partner with one another and whether there's mutually reinforcing accountability for measures to minimize harm to civilians. A critical issue that the humanitarian community should be seized with is the relationship between conflict and hunger. It's been a few years since the four famines and we have yet to really look at how policies and behaviours of parties to conflict create the conditions for famine and to have a more holistic, strategic joined-up way of thinking about it as humanitarians and more strongly incorporate this into our dialogue with parties to conflict.

On the question of how replicable InterAction's experience could be with other States who similarly engage in international military operations, I would caution against a simple copy and paste. We should never do that. It always needs to be context-specific. However, some things are replicable. For professional military forces who care about honour, professionalism, reputation, serving their population, dialogue should be possible. Shaping their policies and practices should be possible. In terms of the resources at our end, it's tapping into the knowledge and expertise of a community of actors that share a singular common purpose to have a constructive, practical and concrete dialogue and mobilising this collective influence.

Highlights from Q&A

The discussion then turned to questions posed by the participants, including:

- **How to Influence a conflict party that is not so well structured, doesn't have a clear line of command and whose motivations or opportunities are less clear.** There are many approaches for influencing decentralised armed groups. These include tracking patterns of violence, identifying instances in which the group has shown a willingness to protect the civilian population or restrain itself, and understanding motivation including trying to distinguish between violence as something that is done intentionally as a policy, and something that happens as a practice, but is not necessarily mandated. If you don't have a centralised group, your strategy of influence must tackle the commanders at local level as opposed to hierarchically. Engagement strategies should mirror the structure of the group. For more information on this topic, see: ICRC's [The Roots of Restraint in War](#) that explores the different types of armed actors and provides some guidance on to how to influence behaviour depending on the structure of the group. Some practical experiences were shared. In Afghanistan one approach has been to identify an NGO that has the strongest relationship with the group, and work through them. In Mali, the community in some instances has been able to find a solution with those groups.
- **How to bring local actors, including grass roots actors and local communities, and their capacities into the strategic approach to protecting civilians adopted by a Protection Cluster (or Protection Cluster and UN mission).** In Mali, local grass roots actors and community protection initiatives link up through the Protection Cluster to the UN mission. But the cluster system remains difficult to navigate when you are not familiar with it. Protection Cluster Coordinators must make an extensive effort to facilitate interaction with local communities and networks and build on their knowledge and capacities. In Mali, the Protection Cluster is building on these relationships with local NGOs and communities through its NGO partners, and promotes their engagement in strategic discussions, analysis and advocacy. There are many obstacles for the participation of local NGOs, and even more so for local communities in the cluster system. We still have a lot to do in this regard. Some notable practices among Protection Clusters to facilitate that interaction with local actors to boost their capacities and work with them as fundamental partners on PoC concerns were noted. These include facilitating confidential bilateral dialogue at the local level and mapping of motivations, interests, opportunities together with those who have the knowledge on the ground. However, this must be done more systematically.
- **How to build on community self-protection mechanisms and strategies, including looking at how communities have sought to take preventive action to resolve community conflicts before they escalate into protection of civilians' concerns.** The panel underlined the strong role of communities themselves in driving priorities and engaging in a direct dialogue with parties to conflict. While it is not always safely possible in every context there's a lot more that we could be doing on this front. Some research highlights that well-organised communities are effective in undertaking their own negotiations with parties to conflict. As humanitarians, perhaps we need to think about our role as a facilitator or a broker for more direct dialogue between military forces, even NSAGs and the population under their control. We also have an important role to play to ensure that whatever agreements are reached are sustained and implemented in practice. In Mali, a local NGO in the region of Mopti worked for close to a year with two communities on a peaceful charter to strengthen the social cohesion between these communities. It's a model that they

are looking to replicate in other parts of the country. There is a wealth of other examples of different types of self-protection mechanisms, especially for early warning and referrals. Several organisations are doing this digestion, cataloguing and examination. However, country examples are very contextualised and local and may be difficult to replicate.

- **The correlation between strong senior leadership and the prioritisation of the protection of civilians in politically charged conflict situations.** It was noted that it's crucial that leadership be well advised by protection experts. A Humanitarian Coordinator can move ahead quite progressively but needs solid advice. Strong leadership is an enabler, but it shouldn't be a pre-requisite for action on the protection of civilians. Experience shows that typically strong leaders do want to have a voice on the protection of civilians. The ones who are less vocal are the ones that we need to target. Obviously, there are evolutions of situations and priorities on the ground. Partly the challenge is understanding that PoC involves both short-term and long-term work. It involves long term major behavioural changes that come with peace processes. But there is also a significant amount of PoC work that serves short-term needs and realities, particularly on the responsive end, in terms of mitigation and at the community level. Leadership is at all levels. At the very top of the UN system, we know the Secretary-General's commitment to the PoC agenda is unwavering. There are multiple entry points for influencing the protection of civilians at the ground, NY, and around the world.

Closing remarks by Corita Tassi, Thematic Expert on Protection, Gender and Education in Emergencies, ECHO

Comprehensive contextual and qualitative risk analysis should remain at the core of any PoC strategy to ensure effective decision-making and an evidence-based response and advocacy. Stakeholder analysis is essential – including identification at the local, national, regional, and global level of the potential enablers and blockers as well as the degree of participation, influence and interest on the PoC agenda. The Protection Cluster should strengthen its support affected communities, operational actors in analysing threats, vulnerabilities, existing capacities and potential opportunities to engage with armed actors and other relevant stakeholders.

While the Protection Cluster and its members should have an active and proactive role in shaping collective efforts on the PoC, it is important to reiterate that comprehensive PoC strategies are an inter-agency and collective effort and an effective PoC strategy should be built across sectors, stakeholders and frameworks. A more coherent and stronger evidence-based approach is needed, including systematic and consistent information management and sharing, capacity building, training, joint contingency planning, early warning systems and evidence-based advocacy. It's also crucial to ensure improved community engagement, increased accountability towards, and communication with, affected communities. PoC is a collective effort that goes beyond humanitarian partners and involves military, peace and development actors in a comprehensive nexus approach. Encourage multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches aimed at decreasing risks faced by the affected populations.

Reducing harm and providing appropriate responses to the affected population is our core mandate. This also must include advocating and negotiating at global, national and local levels for more relevant policies and practices aimed at reinforcing a longer-term dialogue on, and framework for the PoC. The Protection Cluster should reinforce its support of existing civil military coordination mechanisms and its engagement with civil components of peacekeeping and military missions as well as with development actors to enhance systematised and coordinated frameworks and mechanisms: PoC is a shared priority. However, it remains essential that such engagement does not to impair humanitarian principles, or the perception there of, and our ability to negotiate access and deliver assistance to affected populations.

The promotion of IHL is a priority for ECHO. The protection of civilians and advocating for the restrictions of the means of armed conflict and the methods of warfare remain an essential component of any ECHO funded action. ECHO supports the identification of the challenges related to ensuring IHL compliance with a focus on

funding pragmatic ways to address and respond in an effective manner to IHL violations and to concretely improve the protection of civilian populations.

Closing remarks by William Chemaly, Global Protection Cluster Coordinator

How can the Protection Cluster contribute to work on the protection of civilians (PoC)? Much of the PoC efforts happens outside the coordination of the protection cluster, and that is how it should be. Clusters, however, should be aware of these efforts, encourage, learn from them, connect to and contribute to them. The first way the clusters can contribute is by serving as a space for exchange of good practice and tools to ensure continuity on PoC work from year to year. If well done, such an approach would allow for incremental improvements and avoid recreation of the wheel time and again. The second way the clusters can contribute is simply by doing their basic protection coordination work well and predictably well.

The GPC has made a commitment in its current Strategic Framework to ensure the basics of protection coordination are in place in all operations. Four elements in particular came out of today's discussion with regard to Cluster contribution to PoC work: (1) Ensure the basics are in place, including in terms of good engagement with communities, strong protection analysis, monitoring and referral pathways that are responsive, and triggered by alerts from communities. (2) Utilise existing systems (tools, policies and mechanisms) to enhance the Protection of Civilians and contribute to them more consistently. (3) More predictable field Protection Cluster contribution and linkages to the global PoC agenda, and with key actors, including peacekeeping-missions. (4) Advocacy and influencing, including by using existing platforms or fostering a space for complementarity between actors to exchange on different approaches and practices and ensuring institutional knowledge.

4. Key recommendations for further discussion by GPC actors¹

- **Strengthen in-depth and continuous contextual analysis of patterns of harm, including stakeholder analysis** to understand capabilities, motivations and interests of conflict parties and other relevant actors on PoC issues of concern, as well as opportunities and impediments at the local, national, regional and global-levels to reduce the risks that civilians experience in armed conflict and ensuring strategic and programmatic responses in line with this contextual analysis.
- **Contributing to and leveraging global efforts, existing tools and mechanisms to advance the protection of civilians in armed conflict.** Multiple tools and entry points already exist, including the annual report of the UN Secretary-General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict and monitoring and reporting mechanisms such as the MRM and MARA, as well as at the country-level, including various civil-military coordination platforms. The Secretary-General's recommendations are a basis for dialogue on the protection of civilians at national and subnational levels. These include a consistent call to States to adopt national policy frameworks on the protection of civilians, which provides an opportunity for civil society and other actors to feed into this process and engage national actors on their PoC efforts and implementation of relevant policies.
- **Recognizing, reinforcing, and fostering more direct efforts from protection actors through complementary and coordinated approaches to the protection of civilians in armed conflict.** Efforts to strengthen PoC involve a range of humanitarian actors and approaches to directly respond to immediate needs arising from and engage with parties responsible for harm to civilians. These also require investment in engaging actors outside humanitarian response who share a common objective in the protection of civilians, including the diplomatic community, peace operations, and development actors. In addition,

¹ These broad recommendations for further discussion come from the co-organisers based on the discussion during the event and were not discussed during the event itself.

community-based and grassroots self-protection mechanisms should be at the core of protection of civilians' strategies. Local actors and communities play a critical role notably in preventative action to resolve community conflicts before they escalate into protection of civilians' concerns, and in driving priorities and dialogue with conflict parties, identifying protection incidents and making referrals to protection actors.

- **Additional headquarters support to field Protection Clusters to strengthen their work on enhancing the protection of civilians in armed conflict.** This can include convening further discussions to identify opportunities, exchange successes and lessons learned, and problem solve on specific challenges faced by field Protection Clusters, particularly with regard to:
 - more responsive operational planning and concrete programming to address protection of civilian issues;
 - approaches to influence the behaviour of conflict parties/duty bearers;
 - strengthening and building on good practice in terms of local and community self-protection;
 - equipping Protection Clusters to navigate engagement with UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions, such as by creating a peer group of Protection Cluster Coordinators working in mission contexts to facilitate sharing of experiences and good practice, and dissemination of the GPC Diagnostic Tool.

Relevant tools, guidance, and recommendations from UNHCR, InterAction, ICRC, OCHA and others can form a useful basis to inform these exchanges.

5. Select resources

- [Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict](#) (2020)
- [Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict](#) (2018) outlining key elements for national PoC policy frameworks
- InterAction, [Civil Society Guidance for a Model Policy: DoD Policy on Civilian Harm](#)
- InterAction, [Building the Evidence Base: Addressing the Reverberating Effects of Military Operations on Civilian Life](#)
- ICRC, [The Roots of Restraint in War](#)
- ICRC et al, [Professional Standards for Protection Work](#)
- OCHA, [Protection of Civilians Aide Memoire](#)
- GPC, [Diagnostic Tool on the Interaction between field Protection Clusters and UN Missions](#)
- GPC, [Civil-military Coordination for Protection Outcomes Roundtable Report](#)

The full recording of the event is available [here](#).

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