

RECOMMITTING TO RIGHTS-BASED PROTECTION WHEN HUMAN RIGHTS ARE UNDER SIEGE

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May 23, 2019

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here with you today. In starting, I would like to acknowledge all of you who are in the room, people who are performing the work right at the frontlines that the global public imagines when it hears the words “humanitarian action.” Whether you are a coordinator who is working flat-out to ensure that protection actors are collaborating to make the best use of overstretched resources, or whether you are a representative of a local or national civil society organization or government, or whether you are a representative of the global humanitarian architecture, I salute you and I honor the knowledge, the courage, and the conviction that you are bringing to share with us and with each other.

Forgive me in advance if I speak too much about child protection. I am proud of the work that my own sector has produced, including many of you in the room, and this area of work is what I know the best. But I do want to learn from all of you and welcome the Global Protection Cluster’s relatively new tradition of hosting all of the areas of responsibility in a joint annual meeting.

Those of us in the room represent a single community. We are one. As a community of protection activists, we have made significant strides in ensuring that the protection of human life, human safety, and human dignity are recognized as key goals of humanitarian action. The centrality of protection is not a theory, an ideal, or a strategy. It is a moral fact. We undertake humanitarian action in order to protect the safety and dignity of human life, and disassociating ourselves or depoliticizing our work from this existential mission risks undermining the entire endeavor. By adopting at least the *language* of the centrality of protection, the broader humanitarian system is finally catching up to those of us who have always understood this concept viscerally.

The recognition of centrality of protection to all humanitarian efforts is a hopeful harbinger for our work. But the past several decades have also seen important advances in protection. Allow me to give a few examples:

- Today, there is widespread acceptance that efforts to combat gender-based violence must be a part of all humanitarian efforts. We could not have made this same assertion twenty years ago, when advocates for gender equality were still fighting for their place at the humanitarian decision-making table.
- I can speak personally about advances made to protect children affected by armed conflict, especially children associated with armed forces and groups. The past few decades have seen us move from the Graça Machel report, which seemed to arrive like a lightning bolt, to the development of the Paris Principles to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1612, which happened in 2005. Although 14 years may seem like an eternity in humanitarian years, it is extraordinary to think of the programming and the policy advances that have emerged in the wake of that Security Council resolution. We must remind ourselves that, some 20 years ago, working together, the child protection sector was able to influence public perception of “child soldiers” to demonstrate how they were victims of conflict and not proponents of war.
- More generally, we no longer think of ourselves as “humanitarian aid workers” who arrive via parachute. We are embarrassed by the notion of parachuting and realize that rather than making parachutes, we should use all of that fabric to work with actors from the development and peacebuilding worlds in sewing the societal quilt. The nexus with development and peacebuilding is explicit now, and although we will need specific approaches for protection, we consciously consider transition processes with governments when possible. We consciously attempt to bolster community-based protection mechanisms with longer term funding support – also connecting them with government where possible.

All of these are positive changes, and we can rightly be proud of that progress. It happened because of our collective action and that of those who came before us. But we cannot, like ostriches, stick our heads in the sand and pretend that the world we live in is not changing dramatically. The world feels volatile, and the turbulence that increasingly engulfs us is putting protection rights under siege more than ever before in our lifetimes. I am not saying that to be dramatic; I say that with genuine fear. What are the things that keep me awake at night?

- For starters, we all know that forced migration is at its highest levels in recorded history. It was the very lead of the Global Protection Cluster, UNHCR, that gave us the data to know this. Beyond the sheer scale of the problem, we are watching nationalist

governments rise to power in country after country around the world, trafficking in xenophobia and often-racist nationalism to whip their populations into fear.

- The conflicts causing migrants to flee are protection nightmares. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere represent a major setback for civilian protection writ large. For those of us working in child protection, the resurgence of children associated with armed forces and groups reminds us how much work remains to do in the global security arena, which defines these children as potential terrorists rather than as victims of war. The anti-terrorism agenda is threatening the erosion of international humanitarian and human rights law, shrinking humanitarian access and space. As my friend and colleague, Katharine Williamson of Save the Children said so eloquently recently: “Countering violent extremism is demonstrably undermining norms established to protect children in conflict by re-casting these children as security threats, playing in to the hands of right-wing populist movements. Today, even *babies* born into association with armed groups are perceived as guilty of the crimes committed by those groups, and those who defend their rights are subjected to threats and abuse. The contrast [between previous gains in child protection and current trends to undermine international humanitarian and human rights law] has never been starker.”
- There has also been an increase in mines and unexploded ordinance killing children. In Syria last year, for example, this was the most common cause of death for children.

Despite some advances, then, it seems that our protection approaches are not yet fit to purpose. Our scaffolding is showing its creaky bones. The world remains turbulent, and we must demonstrate creativity, nimbleness, and agility in adapting to meet changing needs. How can we do so?

I humbly submit three ideas to you. I hope that they will provide you with food for thought and fodder for conversation in the coming two days. They are, to my mind, three fundamental components of whatever strategies or processes we derive to realize our efforts to make protection central to humanitarian action. Naturally, I may well be wrong about all of them!

First, we must all recommit to human rights. We must own that our actions are aligned with, in support of, and complementary to the actions of human rights defenders—including women’s rights and children’s rights activists. In doing so, we will also own that our work is inherently political, recognizing that in areas affected by armed conflict, the choice to strive for neutrality and impartiality is itself a political choice. Seeking peace is political and, in some or maybe even most settings, a dangerous stance to promote and to defend. We should be proud of ourselves for being pro-peace.

If guidance notes or training manuals serve as our proxy indicators, we have, by now, surely noticed that humanitarian protection has become increasingly technical, specialized, and professionalized. That evolution may be necessary to capture sophistication and complexity, but we must also remember that our core work will also be the promotion of human rights and the advancement of human life that can be lived safely and in a dignified manner. We must always recognize human rights activists, no matter their level of technical sophistication, as our comrades *and colleagues* in the struggle.

Arriving to my second point, then, I suggest that we need to be much more proactive and explicit in our efforts to understand the power dynamics inherent in the humanitarian system. Once we have exposed these power dynamics, we must seek to dismantle them. To be able to connect with activists across the spectrum of power, we will need to consider—and to check, when necessary—our *own* power. Chances are that if you are sitting here in this room today, you benefit from some forms of privilege that other crisis-affected community members do not. It is wonderful that we can come together, and global protection meetings are looking increasingly diverse, which is a boon. But the door is not fully open yet. Who are we overlooking? Who is not here with us, and what should be do between now and next year’s annual meeting to pave the way for their participation? Play a little mental game for a moment: if you could invite anyone you wanted to speak at this event, who would it be? Who could share insights or experiences that would truly upend and potentially improve our conventional ways of thinking and operating. Do you have a person in mind? Now commit to inviting that person here next year.

Considering inclusion, I add a note that may seem tangential to you but that I find fundamental: we need to be careful with language. That we must take care to communicate in a plethora of languages should go without saying. But we also need to be careful that in our movement towards professionalization, we are not creating a vocabulary that is so opaque and full of acronyms that it is incomprehensible. In reading the Centrality of Protection review, I had counted 40 acronyms within the first 20 pages. I recall a friend of mine, an expert in child protection and family welfare systems from an indigenous perspective, saying to me as she read humanitarian documents for the first time, “Language like this feels like it is designed to exclude me.” The act of using language is one of way in which we can include or exclude people, intentionally or unintentionally.

Localization is, at its heart, is an attempt to redress power imbalances in the humanitarian system. As important as it is to “push the localization agenda,” as we often hear, I would also caution that localization is not *only* a strategy, an agenda, or a way of working. Localization may include these means, but localization is also the ends that we seek: bringing decision-making as close as possible to human beings affected by crises. Dignity requires localization.

Before turning to my final point, I would like to make one last comment about power dynamics in the humanitarian system: we have only begun to scratch the surface of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated from within the humanitarian system. We have known for decades that individuals and groups working within the humanitarian system are capable of producing the worst forms of sexual exploitation, sometimes in an organized manner. The world's leaders on humanitarian gender-based violence are here in the room with us today, and I look forward to the day when they have a full and unfettered mandate to review and to create safeguards within the humanitarian system itself.

My third and final point about how we can adapt to the changing global landscape is this: we have to work together. It sounds so easy, doesn't it? "Let's work together." "We should collaborate." Ah. Meanwhile, just behind these surely well intentioned offers to collaborate, we find ourselves mired in turf wars and tug-of-wars. But it is not an option for us not to work together: the forces that seek to undermine human rights and topple what we have built are too strong. We must understand that we are all weaving the same net.

Coming together across *sectors* is one way in which we must learn to collaborate, and I would suggest that the only way we will be able to learn how to collaborate is to do it. To that end, I congratulate the joint initiative of the gender-based violence area of responsibility and the child protection area of responsibility in their joint efforts to improve caring for child survivors of gender-based violence. But there are other axes along which we will need to learn new ways of collaborating as well. Working locally will include working with governments across the development-humanitarian nexus. This process will be more complex for protection than it is for other sectors, and we will need our own approach, another laudable effort underway from the Global Protection Cluster. And of course, we will need to learn to collaborate along the power spectrum that I have already alluded to. In reality, that collaboration will mean that more powerful entities will need to cede some of their power. I wish success and courage to those of you who work within powerful organizations in your efforts to bring your organizations along that journey of capacity sharing and equitable collaboration.

In closing, I ask you all to stand and to close their eyes. Now I would like you to think about a specific moment in time: a moment when you knew that you would dedicate your career—or at least a part of your career—to humanitarian protection. Where were you at that moment? Can you remember? Were you already working in the protection sector and had an "aha" moment when you knew that this work's demands, however draining, would provide you with existential sustenance and fulfillment? Or were you younger, perhaps when you yourself a child who had heard about or witnessed or even experienced yourself some grievous violations of human rights that called you to this line of work? Of course, many of you are here with us today because you are coming from areas where protection violations came to find you. You

might feel like you had no choice but to become a protection advocate, but we always have choices. You, all of you in this room, have made laudable choices.

Please open your eyes and take a look at someone whom you do not know. That person, whoever he or she, is a protection advocate and a human rights activist. You all are, and that is why I feel so privileged to be in the room with you today. Make an effort to get to know that person over the coming two days because you share something in common: a commitment to protecting human rights. Your representation of various kinds of agencies and organizations at this meeting—civil society, UN agencies, government bodies, coordination mechanisms, and so forth—is an important factor in our conversations over the next two days. But equally important is that we approach each other as human beings, cognizant of and respecting the very same shared humanity that we have come together to try and protect.

Thank you very much.