POLICY BRIEF

Refocusing protection on reducing risks of violence

Prioritising civilian safety in humanitarian action

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Key messages

Humanitarian actors need to acknowledge that safety is a priority of violence-affected communities, and therefore protection from violence is core to life-saving humanitarian action and should be prioritised at all phases in a response.

Protection must begin with the communities themselves – their priorities to support their safety, and the actions that reduce their threats and vulnerabilities while increasing their capacities in order to reduce the risks they face. Humanitarians should work with them to identify the most relevant actions that address these three areas, ensuring that actions are interconnected and complement one another to reduce the overarching risks people face.

Humanitarian actors and those they work with have a role to play in helping connect, facilitate and support community-led efforts, strengthening networks across multiple layers as a central element of effective protection action.

To truly strengthen protection requires engaging politically, including through humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy, bringing political and technical solutions together.

Ultimately, protection cannot be reduced to a 'nice to have' or achieved as a by-product of humanitarian action: all humanitarian action should intentionally focus on reducing risks and civilian harm, while demonstrating the outcomes of protective action. Evidence, learning and peer support are urgently needed to strengthen practice.

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Introduction

Safety and security are among the key priorities for civilians caught in the midst of conflict (GTS, 2025). Recent years have seen some momentum towards strengthening efforts to reduce risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation, but humanitarian actors struggle to reduce civilian harm and reduce, prevent, or interrupt violence. None of this is new. We've known for years that the humanitarian sector continues to fail to meet the calls of civilians to help them stay safe (see, for example, DuBois, 2009; Petrie, 2012; Gorur, 2013; Niland et al., 2015; Rosenthal, 2019; Cocking et al., 2022; Kirk et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2025). So why do humanitarian actors still struggle to strengthen the safety of civilians?

It is because, ultimately, comprehensive approaches to reducing civilian harm require going beyond a focus on vulnerabilities to directly addressing threats – which means engaging with violent actors and those that have influence over them. This is extremely challenging, inherently political, and tests the boundaries, both of the risk appetite of a highly risk-averse humanitarian sector and of humanitarian neutrality, in ways that can be uncomfortable. So the balance of 'protective action' in the humanitarian sector predominantly remains on responding to the consequences of violence, with activities that can be planned, monitored and measured according to the business model of the humanitarian sector (see Davies et al., 2024a; 2024b). But this misses what is core to protection – the safety of civilians. It fails to meet communities on their terms, and ultimately puts the legitimacy of humanitarian action at risk.

The international community is at a crossroads. With huge pressures on the humanitarian and multilateral system to do things differently, there can be no more business as usual. The pressures to find efficiencies in resource-constrained humanitarian action should force humanitarian actors, and those they work alongside, to be more effective in their approaches. We need to remind ourselves that all (protracted) humanitarian crises result from widespread violence and abuses against civilians. Without seeking to reduce the risks civilians face, there will be no long-term reduction of harms and needs (InterAction, 2025).

There is a need to ensure that longstanding commitments translate into practice. Protective efforts need to reprioritise and refocus, to ensure all actions – and the increasingly limited resources used to carry them out – contribute to reducing civilian harm (Gray, 2025). This and related research has consistently heard calls for more evidence: of the range of actions to reduce risks of violence and civilian harm, of good practice, and of the outcomes of such approaches. While it is beyond the scope of this research to respond to all of these calls, we seek here to contribute to the evidence gap.

This policy brief brings together research that has sought to set out more comprehensive approaches to protection. It outlines current practices and suggests a framing to clearly set out the range of actions available to humanitarian actors to comprehensively reduce risks of violence and civilian harm. It examines the barriers to more systematically delivering this, and entry points for more systematic approaches, while recommending actions that would support more systematic practice.

A range of practice exists, but lacks coherence

The effort to and investment in adopting protection risk analysis have, in some respects, shifted how protection is understood, from broad definitions to focusing on reducing the risks people face in crisis, including through preventive action (InterAction, n.d.a; n.d.b).[1] Indeed, the Global Protection Cluster has adopted a risk focus to its protection analysis.

Focusing on approaches to reduce risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation has helped set out what a comprehensive risk to protection entails. As InterAction outlines, to be effective the determined set of actions should aim to reduce risks across the protection risk equation: that is, to reduce threats, reduce vulnerabilities and increase capacities (InterAction, n.d.a). Unless all three elements are addressed, there will be no overarching reduction in the risks civilians face (ibid.; see also Davies et al., 2025). Multiple pathways and multidisciplinary approaches are needed to achieve this. However, in practice, approaches to reduce risks across all three elements are not yet systematically implemented. Where approaches have been strengthened, they often lack coherence in delivering a comprehensive package of activities that intentionally seek to reduce harm across the spectrum of risks. Instead, such approaches are generally limited to a subset of protection-of-civilian actors. Building evidence on the range of actions that can and are being implemented helps set out the range of actions that deliver concrete results.

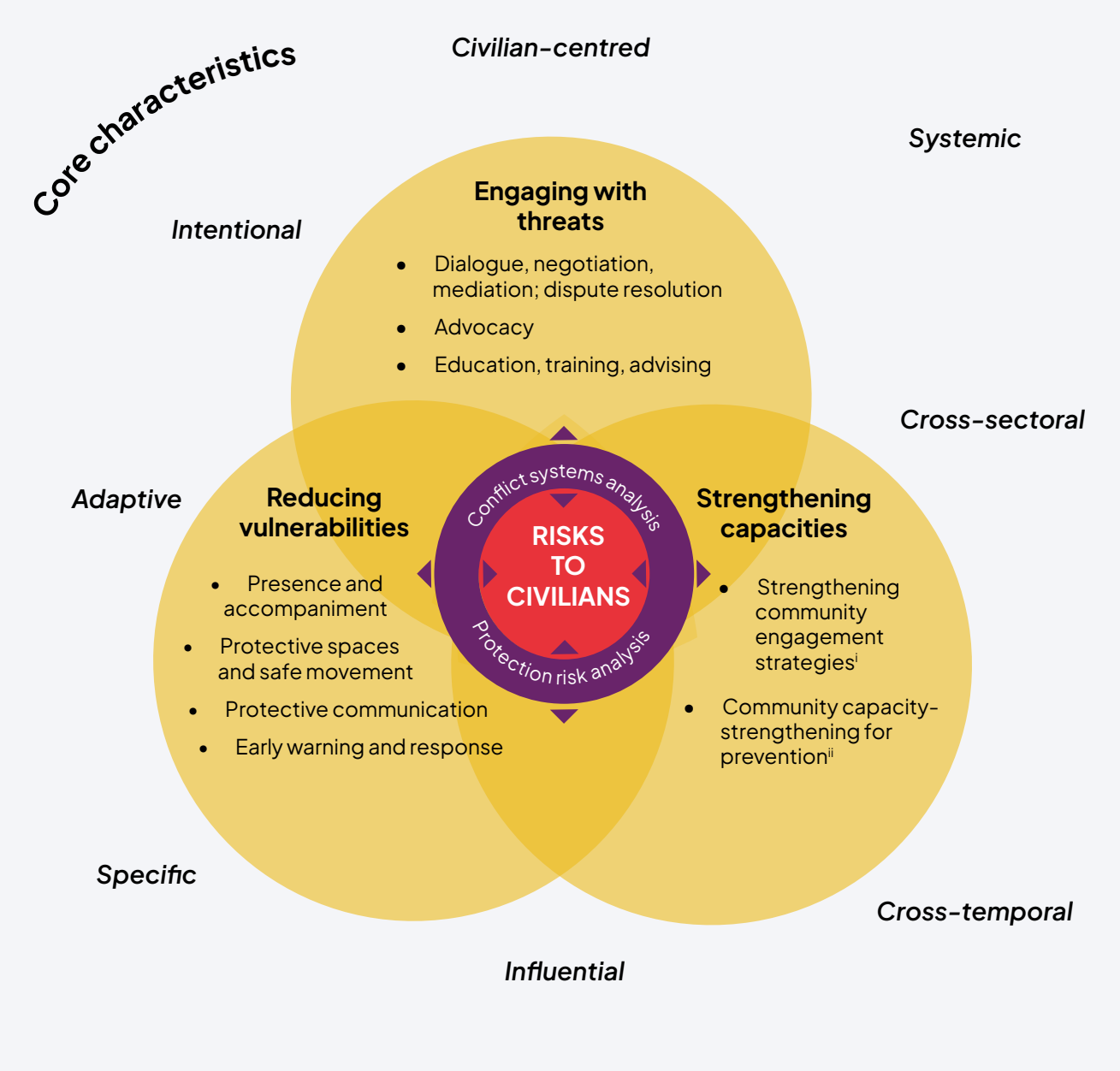
Organisations that have a clearly defined protection focus, with clear objectives that intentionally seek to reduce risks of violence and civilian harm and have protection as core to their identity, tend to have consistent practice of comprehensive approaches: that is, approaches that undertake a range of actions that seek to reduce and engage with threats (e.g. violent actors) while reducing vulnerabilities and increasing capacities.

Figure 1 provides headline, non-exhaustive, actions that reduce the risks that people face. This list should not be seen as reductive, or undermine creative, iterative approaches, but as examples of actions that can be taken (for more illustrative examples, see Box 1). Engaging with threats specifically refers to engaging the broad range of armed actors that have the potential to carry out violent attacks. Engaging violent actors will explicitly require accompanying actions such as direct and/or indirect humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy by those with influence over them (see Davies and Kramer, 2025

1 The IASC definition of protection, refers to '[...] all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee law (IRL))' (IASC, 2016). However, this is a very broad definition, which led to confusion as to what falls within and outside of its scope with respect to humanitarian action. It therefore gave little direction for how to translate the vision of the policy into concrete actions (see Cocking et al., 2022).

for more on armed actor engagement). As Figure 1 demonstrates, the boundaries between reducing the different risk components can be blurred – particularly when it comes to reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening capacities.

Figure 1 Examples of actions that reduce risks



[i] Note that not all capacity-strengthening approaches fall within this category. Rather, an approach only falls within this set of actions when capacity-strengthening is explicitly linked to reducing risks and preventive measures.

ii Specific to direct/indirect engagement with actors of influence including potential violent actors, authorities, and those with influence over them.

Inherently, different actions are interconnected. They should build out from and complement one another based on the specifics of any given context and the communities they are intended to support. Where humanitarian and protection actors support, for example, the negotiation of protected or safe zones,[2] they can also support the implementation of arrangements after the agreement has been reached (e.g. support evacuations or strengthen physical safety and security measures) while supporting communities to prepare for potential attacks and evacuations. For example, the range of actions that fall within early warning and early response (EWER) to violence for protection can include reducing vulnerabilities through contingency planning and building early alerts and networks, while strengthening the capacities of communities to identify risks and act ahead of them, as well as engaging with armed actors to support potential evacuations (see Barbelet and Mayhew, 2025). As discussed, the range of actions should aim to address all components of risks.

Beyond this range of actions, humanitarian actors must also consider the approaches required to ensure that protection actions are effective. That is, the 'how' is as important as the 'what'. Figure 1 sets out the core characteristics humanitarian actors need to consider,[3] which should underpin all protective actions, as defined by Gray et al. (forthcoming). This requires consideration of the social and relational attributes required to effectively carry out such actions. For example, it is critical that the range of actions are intentionally implemented to reduce civilian harm, rather than this simply being a by-product of humanitarian action. To be effective, it is critical that the range of approaches are civilian-centred, reinforcing the protective actions that communities are taking or identify themselves. All planned actions should retain the flexibility to adapt and pivot according to changes in context, behaviours and policies. Focusing on the core characteristics can raise critical questions that humanitarian actors, and the donors that support them, should seek to answer when considering the actions they will take, and the approaches required to effectively do so (Gray, 2023; Gray et al., forthcoming; see also Davies et al., 2025).

Reducing immediate risks and the likelihood of them reoccurring in the future best results from multidisciplinary actions being deployed, with a clearly focused protection objective integrated as part of a larger response. For example, one humanitarian actor spoke to an example of addressing the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. While they engaged armed actors on their behaviours and policies of child recruitment, they sought to avoid re-recruitment by supporting children to return to education, as well as providing families with livelihood support to help address the economic drivers of recruitment. While positive examples such as this exist, they often face issues of scaling up, even within multi-mandate organisations. However, there are questions over whether scaling

2 This can be at the international level (humanitarian pauses/corridors) national level (weapons-free areas, protected zones) or local level (negotiate designated weapons-free-zones schools, hospitals, marketplaces, etc.).

3 While this policy brief specifically focuses on humanitarian actors as an audience, these core characteristics should be considered by any actors (e.g. peacebuilding and human rights) who aim to reduce risks of violence and mitigate civilian harm.

up should be the aim when it comes to strengthening the protection of civilians, or whether 'scaling out' – that is, deepening rather than widening impact by strengthening networks – would achieve stronger outcomes in reducing civilian harm.[4]

Box 1 Examples of actions to reduce risks

Engaging with threats

- **Mediation, dialogue, negotiation:** including multi-layer/multi-track dialogue; humanitarian negotiations; humanitarian mediation (e.g. community-led/-based; direct/third-party) civil–military dialogue/coordination; dispute resolution.
- **Advocacy:** public, private, and third-party through persuasion, denunciation or mobilisation.
- **Education, training, advising on potential threats:** for example humanitarian/military training, advisory support, and civilian harm mitigation (planning, implementation).

Reducing vulnerabilities

- **Protective presence:** accompaniment, interpositioning.
- **Protective spaces and safe movement:** safe zones, evacuations, relocations, physical safety and security measures (e.g. shelters, protective infrastructures).
- **Protective communication:** rumour management; mis/disinformation and hate speech management; risk communication.
- **EWER:** early alerts/networks; conflict preparedness and contingency planning; community safety planning; weapon contamination early response.

Strengthening capacities

- **Strengthening community engagement strategies:**[i] to defuse threats, resist violence/coercion.
- **Community capacity-strengthening for prevention:**[ii] e.g. through supporting community patrols, safer population movement.

[i] Specific to direct/-indirect engagement with actors of influence including potential violent actors, authorities and those with influence over them.

[ii] Note that not all capacity-strengthening approaches fall within this category. Rather, an approach only falls within this set of actions when capacity-strengthening is explicitly linked to reducing risks and preventive measures.

4 Nonviolent Peaceforce operates under the principle of 'scaling out' when applying approaches to unarmed civilian protection. Scaling out is an approach that is locally led and internationally connected. It is about civil society organisations and grassroots initiatives learning from one another and supporting communities that are carrying out similar approaches. Scaling out can mean working with multiple affinity groups rather than within one overarching organisation (see Davies et al., 2024a).

The protective presence of external actors is a key consideration, which can be undertaken by local, national and international actors. Physical presence and accompaniment deter armed actors from attacking civilians; individuals considered to have a 'protected' status – as defined by specific moral, religious, professional or legal values[5] – can bring greater protective presence. This is where international actors can undertake a specific role, when they intentionally use their presence, along with other actions (such as advocacy, strengthening networks, etc.), to reduce civilian harm (Fornai and Knoblauch, forthcoming). However, this must only come after careful consideration that international presence and visibility is not being manipulated by conflict parties to perpetrate further harms and even atrocity crimes. In reality, however, international humanitarian actors rarely intentionally leverage the protective nature of their presence, which lies more in the practice of human rights and peacebuilding organisations, other than organisations that bridge the humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding spheres such as Nonviolent Peaceforce.

5 Note that these are perceptions of people that should be protected according to cultures and norms of armed actors and the communities they operate in, rather than necessarily people legally protected under IHL.

Systematising practice: barriers to progress

Engaging with armed actors is still perceived as too risky

It is well known that humanitarian actors remain reticent to engage with the array of actors that carry out violence due to high levels of perceived risks. This may be due to perceptions that engagement compromises their neutrality, legitimises perpetrators of violence, may do more harm than good, or may compromise access (Davies and Kramer, 2025; Davies et al., 2025; Bongard and CCHN, forthcoming). This risk aversion can also be found among some donors to the humanitarian sector, while mitigating measures are often not taken.

Humanitarian organisations feel that they lack the adequate capacities and skillsets to engage armed actors, though supporting such skillsets is often not prioritised, raising questions as to whether the lack of capacities is the cause or the consequence of a policy of non-engagement (see also Davies and Kramer, 2025). This is with the exception of organisations that have the protection of civilians as core to their identity, who tend to prioritise the capacities and skills to mitigate risks associated with engaging armed actors, and more consistently use engagement to reduce civilian harm.

Protection is not perceived to be life-saving

Because so much protection action within the humanitarian sector has prioritised responding to the consequences of violence, it has come not to be perceived as life-saving and is therefore deprioritised. This is especially true for the early phases of responses, when emergencies become acute, or when funding is under threat. Protection mainstreaming has contributed to the confusion, conflating protection from violence with protecting people from the harmful impacts of humanitarian action.

This is exacerbated by narrow, and often inaccurate, notions of 'life-saving' assistance; a limited appetite to implement or fund activities that reduce immediate risks of violence and civilian harm; and a lack of a common understanding of how reducing risks and harms contributes to saving lives.

Lack of coherence and understanding

Misunderstandings and lack of clarity on what is required to more effectively reduce risks, including through preventive protective actions, undermine a coherent approach by humanitarian actors and those that support them. This is exacerbated by a lack of systematic evidence on the outcomes of risk-reduction efforts.

In spite of initiatives over the past few years to strengthen a coherent narrative, there is still no agreed-upon understanding of protection that aims to prevent, mitigate and reduce risks of violence and civilian harm. There are different perceptions and understandings of what reducing risks of violence entails. While focusing on language is a misdirected use of efforts, unclear and inaccessible language

can undermine a common understanding and framing of protection which, in this case, is about intentional approaches to reducing risks and civilian harm. Focusing on the range of actions is seen as helpful to moving from terminology to practice, as set out in Figure 1.

There is an identified need for clarity to frame what is meant in short, succinct terminology, including for internal advocacy. However, interviews highlighted where proposed language has not been useful. Among some stakeholders, there has been a negative reaction to the terminology of 'proactive protection', with some feeling it repackages existing approaches to protection in further unclear, potentially inaccessible language. While 'preventive' approaches are accepted, some perceive this as having a longer-term focus that can undermine efforts to refocus on responses to prevent, reduce or interrupt imminent risks of violence. There was also caution voiced on using terminology that could appear out of scope and mandate for humanitarian actors such as reducing violence or supporting peace.

There may be utility in clarifying what protective efforts to reduce risks are not about: 'it is not about the protective role of assistance, service provision, restoring dignity and adequate living conditions or a focus on the environment that encourages the respect of rights' (see Davies et al., 2025). Indeed, some interviewees spoke to the need for a terminology that is focused on what the objectives of protection interventions are. 'Protection from violence', 'reducing civilian harm' or 'reducing risks of violence' (e.g. protection risks) are all straightforward, understandable ways that speak to the objectives sought. Importantly, protection should be proactive and civilian-centred. It should be a dynamic set of approaches which reduce threats and vulnerabilities while strengthening the capacities of communities to improve their own safety.

Evidence is patchy and approaches to measuring impact are not fit for purpose

There is systematic demand from donors and protection actors for evidence on approaches to reduce civilian harm and risks of violence, on the outcomes and impact of such approaches, for case examples and analysis on the use of such approaches, and to draw out learning.

However, the challenges of seeking to demonstrate the counterfactual – that violence has not taken place and that risks of violence against civilians have been reduced – are well known (see Davies et al., 2024a). Unsurprisingly, this study found there is still patchy evidence on the outcomes and impact of actions seeking to reduce protection risks.

This and related research has found that the humanitarian sector's focus on quantitative results is not fit for purpose for measuring the outcomes of protective action. There is strong support from donors and protection partners alike to seek alternative approaches, with efforts to learn from other sectors – particularly the peacebuilding sector – which has developed innovative qualitative, participatory and perception-based models focused on lived experiences (see Davies et al., 2024b).

There is strong appetite in the humanitarian sector and among the donors that fund it to revisit how donors incentivise the right practices through developing more fit-for-purpose monitoring of results, including indicators, for donor reporting. However, with the current contraction of funding, there is a danger that the monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) functions are further deprioritised for the benefit of delivering interventions, further risking concentrating MEAL capacities on reporting requirements over measuring outcomes and impact.

For humanitarian actors, there is a need to invest further in demonstrating evidence of the impact of their protective action. Actors interviewed often lacked the technical capacity as well as the time and funding to analyse data on impact. Where data was collected, it was often not analysed or used to demonstrate the impact of interventions.

Resolving the evidence puzzle is critical as is it one of the main barriers to funding, to convincing humanitarian leadership as well as funders to support and prioritise such approaches, and to inform better practice and stimulate learning across the board.

Systematising practice: entry points to refocusing protection

An increased focus on community-led protection and an increasing role for local actors

The increased focus on working with communities and the increasing role of local actors in the protection sector have, to an extent, enabled a greater focus on comprehensive approaches to reducing risks. However, within the humanitarian community, this is often in theory more than in practice (Davies et al., 2024a; 2024b). Communities are already implementing a range of actions to support their safety, whether through, for instance, community-led EWER systems (see Barbelet and Mayhew, 2025) or engaging in dialogue with violent actors (see Davies et al., 2024a). International humanitarian actors must shift their approaches to support community-led efforts if they are to remain relevant to community priorities. The starting point for any effective set of protective actions should be context-specific protection risks and conflict-systems analysis.[6] Communities should be fully involved in order to achieve better analysis grounded in lived realities (Pawlak, forthcoming).

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates that protection efforts are more effective when locally led and adaptive (Dutch MFA, n.d.: 6). This study has found that local actors engaged in protection more often undertake a broad range of actions to achieve their protection goals (see Box 2; see also Barbelet, 2025). Local partners often have greater proximity and pressure to maintain their relevance to the priorities of communities, and are rarely bound by sectoral silos.

However, this study also found that international funding and programming can shape local actors' approach to protection. In contexts where funding comes from organisations with specific approaches to protection, local actors can replicate these approaches regardless of whether they are the priority for communities. It highlights the responsibility of international organisations to listen to local actors and communities, and adapt their approaches in line with their priorities and the risks they face. It also highlights the role of donors to incentivise international organisations to shape the way they approach protection.

6 Systems approaches consider the interconnectedness between conflict factors and stakeholders. They include analysis from micro to macro levels. For more information see CDA (2016).

Box 2 The protection practice of local and national actors

This study aimed to understand the extent to which local and national actors undertake comprehensive approaches to reduce risks, including by preventive approaches and engaging with armed actors. While there were limitations in doing so, this study found that most local and national actors interviewed indeed adopted a range of approaches to reduce risks. Examples included:

- In Mali, Actions Intégrées pour le Développement Local (AID Local) adopts a community-based approach to protection and engages with community influencers to reduce protection risks faced by communities including through strengthening the capacity of communities to do so themselves. The approach emphasises culturally relevant standards of protection while referring to International Humanitarian Law.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Centre de Développement Intégral de l'Enfant Rural (CEDIER) works with communities to strengthen their capacity to prevent, mitigate and respond to protection risks. CEDIER adopts a range of modes of action including engaging violent actors, EWER systems, protection contingency plans and evacuations.
- In DRC, Groupe d'Associations pour la Défense des droits de l'Homme et de la Paix (GADHOP) works with community-based protection committees and community actors in Butembo and its surroundings to strengthen their capacity to engage armed actors to reduce the use of violence against civilians, as well as the use of illegal roadblocks and taxation.
- In DRC, Centre de Promotion Socio-Sanitaire (CEPROSSAN) works closely with communities to strengthen the capacity of local protection committees to engage authorities on protection issues to reduce protection risks.
- In Myanmar, one national organisation was developing a project to engage local militias that formed as a response of the coup d'état in order to reduce their use of violence against civilians, including through strengthening the mediation and negotiation skills of religious leaders.

By focusing on community-based and locally led approaches, the value of international protection action is clarified: to complement community capacities, and focus on connecting networks, pathways and actors that communities may not be able to reach alone (Davies et al., 2024a: 27). There are numerous examples that effectively demonstrate approaches to connect different layers of influence across the local/national and international levels (see, for example, Search for Common Ground, 2020; Davies and Mayhew, 2024).

In contexts where conflict has broken down the social fabric of communities to the extent that community avenues to strengthen their own protection become limited, international actors can undertake a specific protective role; for example, that of a neutral broker. This was demonstrated in

the Central African Republic where the choice between having a community mediator and having an external mediator to support humanitarian mediation efforts depended on how divided communities were (see Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2024a).

This and related research emphasises the critical role of humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy capacity to maximise the impact of protective action, leveraging further spheres of influence engaging national, regional and international actors where relevant.

The role of donors

There are numerous donors that are proactive in promoting protection, who have in the last few years supported a greater focus on reducing protection risks, including through preventive approaches. The Protection Donor Group has, to an extent, enabled more coordinated positions in pushing for more relevant protection action focused on reducing risks and harm.[7] However, this can be undermined by a gap in convergence on the protection priorities of donors: some donors are hesitant to support more comprehensive approaches to reduce risks of violence, including preventive approaches. Lack of coherence across donors is further complicated by discrepancies between donor capital and country responses, which can be both an opportunity and a challenge.[8] This is further complicated by the fact that donors and protection specialised units can have significantly different priorities to, and limited influence over, political foreign policy agendas – particularly when it comes to trade priorities including arms sales. While this has always been the case, it is further exacerbated by shifts towards more nationalist governments, growing polarisation and a shift in geopolitical dynamics. This undermines both a sustained focus on shaping protection practices and the diplomatic influence of states who have traditionally been considered strong allies of protection.

Protection actors interviewed as part of this study highlighted how donors have increasingly pushed them to consider a greater range of actions. Language specific to reducing risks and harm features in the strategies or policies of a number of donors, including Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland and Norway. However, some donors highlighted the difficult balance between their commitments to unearmarked and flexible funding and their desire to shape protection action.

Even where donors prioritise and promote efforts to reduce risks of violence, humanitarian partners can struggle to demonstrate approaches to do so, or concrete examples. Amidst the vast funding

7 The Protection Donor Group was established in 2023 with the view to have a protection focused donor platform based on a common interest to see protection systematically placed at the centre of humanitarian action. It was established in response to a gap in donor coordination forums to contribute and support protection prevention and response, as well as provide coordinated donor action and advocacy to hold the humanitarian architecture and its leaders to account in delivering 'collective protection outcomes' (Protection Donor Group, 2023).

8 Lack of coherence can be an opportunity when response-level staff are supportive of preventative protective actions and able to fund them, even where there is no support at capital or policy level. However, this is the opposite when donor capital policies and commitments are not reflected at the country level.

cuts, restructures, reprioritisation – and with it the loss of capacities – some donors are reticent to push humanitarian partners towards approaches to reducing threats. But having donors send a clear message on their expectations of protection action is critical to mitigating the self-censorship of humanitarian actors, who limit their own protective actions because they view them as not likely to be funded or as too risky.

However, donor guidance and calls for proposals are not always aligned to reducing risks, and can often continue to focus on assistance and service provision. Indeed, there was consistent agreement from both donors and protection specialists that donors needed greater support to further clarify what they mean by focusing on risk-reduction efforts and how to operationalise this vision.

A strong example of such collaboration has been the development of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)'s Security and Rule of Law Theory of Change, which funds protection-of-civilian programming. While this funding sits under the Department of Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid of the Dutch MFA, there are efforts for greater integration with the humanitarian team. The approach by the Dutch MFA resulted from consistent engagement by organisations it funds such as CIVIC, Nonviolent Peaceforce and PAX, showcasing how partnerships between specialist organisations and donors can effectively lead to a strong framework for funding. The theory of change integrates enablers required for more effective and comprehensive approaches to strengthen protection, including: a civilian-centred approach to safety as defined by people; flexibility for adaptive programming; a relative tolerance to risk, a recognition that there can be setbacks; a recognition of the concrete results of small-scale specialist interventions with lower budgets; as well as explicit connections across peacebuilding, security, humanitarian, civilian harm reduction and unarmed civilian protection approaches (Dutch MFA, 2023; n.d).

Some donors are trying to strengthen coherence in protective action across departments. There are examples of the Swiss government taking a cross-government approach to protection by combining the efforts of its Peace, Human Rights and Democracy Division with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, leveraging their respective technical expertise, networks and funding portfolios, including by building trust where there is already an operational presence.

However, for many donors, where there are overlaps between departments funding protection action – particularly preventive protection and actions that reduce civilian harm – a lack of joined-up approaches can undermine coherence and therefore common objectives.

Indeed, the same is true for operational organisations, where reducing risks of violence and civilian harm is framed and operationalised across sectors (peacebuilding, protection, protection of civilians, mine action). While there is limited appetite to build yet more bureaucratic, process-driven, costly and time-consuming coordination structures such as are found in the humanitarian sector, there is a recognised need for more joined-up approaches and positioning across the operational, policy and advocacy domains.

The role of states through advocacy and diplomatic action

This research has found that, writ large, the focus of humanitarian donors' diplomatic efforts remain on humanitarian needs rather than reducing risks of violence. Given the level of intractable poly-crises today, humanitarian diplomacy is too often narrowly focused on humanitarian agencies gaining access to areas to deliver humanitarian assistance, overlooking that access is a means to strengthening protection (ICRC, n.d.; Bongard and CCHN, forthcoming).

Despite this, there are strong examples of donors using their diplomatic leverage and available platforms to promote protection, including through intentional approaches to reduce risks. For example, during Belgium's tenure of the European Council Presidency in 2024, it oversaw the agreement of the council conclusions on protection in humanitarian settings, which called for the European Union Commission, European External Action Service and European Union member states to promote protection, including to reduce risks (European Union Council, 2024), which Belgium then mirrored through priorities in strategy and funding. Elected members of the UNSC can use their tenure to take protective action. For example, protection of civilians actors worked with state representatives, including Denmark with its elected seat at the UN Security Council, to give diplomatic visibility to efforts to negotiate evacuations in Ukraine and explore the potential for humanitarian corridors and evacuations in Sudan. However, the priorities and practices of states leveraging their UNSC membership is patchy.

Where states have engaged partners and specialised protection actors to help frame positions, as well as to identify and deliver concrete outcomes, this has led to positive results. While there are numerous such examples, they can often be ad hoc rather than for longer-term policy development focused on specific issues, for example as took place with the Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas Political Declaration, and the Safe Schools Declaration (see Davies and Spencer, 2022).

Humanitarian actors, too, can often struggle to leverage the advocacy or diplomatic role of their donor allies to push beyond a funding relationship. This can be due to the disconnect between programmes, advocacy and diplomacy units within organisations, as well as reactive approaches to deal with immediate issues and actors at the expense of more strategic approaches. There could be opportunities in seeking to mobilise states to leverage diplomatic support towards concrete outcomes where possible and appropriate, while exercising caution against potential negative repercussions given levels of polarisation, particularly at country levels.

In today's polarised world, there is a need for member states and protection experts to think creatively about how they can leverage their influence. Increasingly this will require more diverse alliances and networks.

Training, guidance and good practice exist but are not widely disseminated and socialised

This study explored whether a lack of guidance and good practice on reducing risks, including through engaging with threats, has contributed to the lack of systematic implementation of such actions. It found that in general there is a range of adequate guidance and good practice on the different modes of action outlined above. However, often they are under-documented and remain disparate. This is with the exception of community-based EWER to violence for protection, which has little to no guidance (see Barbelet and Mayhew, 2025).

The challenge with existing guidance is that too often it is not widely known, disseminated, integrated into general guidance or institutionalised within organisations (see Barbelet, 2025; Davies and Kramer, 2025; Bongard and CCHN, forthcoming). Ensuring that existing guidance is known and disseminated would already go a long way to inform better practice (see Jackson, 2014) as well as priorities.[9]

However, respondents highlighted that beyond guidance, there is strong appetite among practitioners for more examples of cases that illustrate good practice, dilemmas and challenges, in order to distil learning, as well as more peer-to-peer learning spaces. Interviewees felt that existing guidance at times fell short of contextualisation, which case studies could help strengthen. Some organisations have created internal repositories of learning for specific issues such as engaging armed actors. This is an approach that could be built on, expanded and made available to broader humanitarian and protection personnel.

Similarly, the lack of platforms for peer-to peer exchange undermines learning, the exchange of good practice, and approaches to manage risks, challenges and dilemmas, as well as what outcomes have been achieved and what enabled them. Interviewees spoke of the utility of trainings and peer exchange to bring a range of humanitarian actors and relevant actors outside the sector around the table. Training and peer support can be a way to break down silos, identify points of convergence and enable the identification of potential solutions.

9 Research has found that where internal guidelines are disseminated and socialised, personnel of organisations were more likely to consistently pursue negotiations in a principled manner (Jackson, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

In a crisis of credibility and legitimacy, and with ongoing calls for finding efficiencies, humanitarian actors need to honestly consider the role and value of international protection action. This has to start with listening to what affected people say they want, including what they need to help them stay safe. The focus must be on the most relevant actions that communities request to improve their safety and security.

Humanitarian actors cannot allow hyper-prioritisation to cause them to lose their focus on protection. Otherwise, it would be difficult to justify the purpose of humanitarian action. Instead, humanitarian actors should go further, and adopt a more comprehensive approach to protection. This requires strengthening the connecting, facilitating and supporting role of international protection action. This means supporting civilian-centred webs of action, actors, networks and pathways to complement community-led efforts to help communities achieve pathways that they cannot achieve alone.
To do this, international actors cannot work alone, but have to forge partnerships and work in complementarity, to strengthen multi-layered and multidisciplinary approaches focused on realising specific protection objectives. This will require a willingness to adapt and get outside comfort zones, as well as finding ways to get around longstanding barriers to change, including internal and sectoral silos.

Importantly, a renewed focus on protection means working more politically. The connecting role should be complemented by advocacy and diplomatic support for efforts to prioritise protection, bringing political and technical solutions together. But it should also bring together diverse constituencies and interest groups, strengthening hybridity. To do this, humanitarian actors have to go beyond the usual networks of stakeholders that they typically engage with, which includes sustained and strategic engagement with political and security actors.

Ultimately, humanitarian actors need to honestly consider whether they're willing to meet the moment, to do what it takes to reduce civilian harm in line with what communities are asking for, even if it means doing things differently and taking risks, while giving up space, funding and power.

Recommendations

Refocus and rebalance investments towards a more comprehensive and political approach to protection

- Rebalance investments towards multilayered approaches that reduce risks of violence. If organisations are not well placed to reduce specific risks – such as reducing threats by engaging violent actors – strengthen partnerships and networks with others that can.

- Ensure the centrality of protection by making certain that it sits at the strategic level in the humanitarian response architecture and within organisations, including within humanitarian reset teams, with support from technical teams, in order to bring political, normative and technical solutions together.
- Strengthen and incentivise stronger networks, partnerships and alliances across multiple (horizontal to vertical) layers, including with sets of actors outside the humanitarian sector, including systematic engagement across humanitarian, protection, human rights, diplomatic and security actors towards specific protection objectives.
- Invest in relevant skillsets – for example in relationship building, dialogue, mediation and negotiations for protection – or ensure these can be deployed from elsewhere. Advocate for investment in these skills, and incentivise this skills-building through funding.
- Devise and test creative approaches to reducing civilian harm. Build in flexibility for adaptations. Consider how to take and/or incentivise no-regrets approaches with timely decision-making.

Enable peer support, good practice and practical guidance, including by utilising existing knowledge

- Establish an interactive platform for peer support. Consider whether existing forums can be leveraged, potentially organised by themes or a range of actions, where repositories of good practice, experiences and learning can be shared.
- Strengthen the dissemination, internalisation and socialisation of existing guidance. Support the operationalisation of guidance and training, ensuring that available guidance is accessible and contextually relevant to the context of operational personnel.
- Translate existing guidance into an operational integrated toolkit for each thematic area to support the identification of potential solutions.
- Strengthen the documentation of case examples and good practice to achieve positive outcomes and learning on what enabled them and how dilemmas, risks and challenges were addressed.

Test new approaches to understand outcomes and impact

- Invest in and test more qualitative participatory approaches to understand outcomes and impact, including approaches used by peacebuilding actors. This could include, for example, community perceptions of safety, outcome harvesting, qualitative impact performance, and/or the more systematic use of open-source evaluations on the outcomes of approaches to reduce risks and harm.
- Donors and intermediary and operational organisations should consider approaches to shift reporting requirements to encourage more qualitative data and analysis on the impact of protective action, and to support the recruitment of MEAL staff with more qualitative skillsets. Systematically fund and seek ways to implement qualitative data collection, analysis and reporting on impact as part of programme funding. Donors, protection actors and relevant specialist actors – such as peacebuilding actors – could collaboratively consider approaches to redefine how outcomes and impact are measured, and align them with reporting.

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