# Keeping protection paramount amidst a 'humanitarian reset'

## The need for proactive protection action to reduce civilian harm

Gemma Davies, Felicity Gray and Veronique Barbelet[ID]

**HPG**
Humanitarian
Policy Group

ODI Global

## Key messages

**A key priority for affected civilians is safety from violence.** However, there is a significant disparity between people's experiences of conflict and the humanitarian sector's claims to protect civilians. Humanitarians must listen to, and act on, the views, perceptions and strategies of conflict-affected civilians.

**Humanitarian actors and donors must not allow the humanitarian reset to lead to a backslide in effective protection action.** Humanitarians must reprioritise and refocus to demonstrate how they strengthen civilian safety in line with the stated needs and priorities of affected people.

**Protection is essential to upholding the fundamental principle of humanity.** But humanitarians must go beyond mere commitments. They must utilise increasingly limited resources through a balanced approach to reducing risks of violence – including a strengthened focus on preventive action to interrupt violence and reduce imminent civilian harms.

**This is not only the right thing to do, it is more efficient: the most challenging humanitarian crises result from widespread abuses against civilians.** Without seeking to reduce the harms civilians face, there will be no overall reduction of humanitarian risks and needs.

**To enable this requires overcoming barriers within the humanitarian business model**, including the obsession with 'numbers reached' (regardless of little to no impact), rigid programme design norms, and high levels of risk aversion.

**This requires collective, multipartial approaches** to prioritise, implement, fund and provide diplomatic support for such efforts, bringing political and technical solutions together.

# Acknowledgements

## About the authors

**Gemma Davies** is a Senior Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI Global.

**Felicity Gray** is the Global Head of Policy and Advocacy for Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP).

**Veronique Barbelet**[ID] is a Research Associate with HPG at ODI.

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Foreign Trade and
Development Cooperation**

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# Introduction

> We want peace and we want security. We want our children not to be afraid and not to grow up hearing the sound of gunfire every day. (Rasha, South Darfur, Sudan, in GTS, 2025: 11).

Peace, security and protection remain key priorities for conflict-affected civilians: 'the first and clearest message from people we spoke to in situations of violence was that the international community should do more to bring an end to conflicts and ensure people are protected' (ibid.). Humanitarian actors have long asserted their commitment to protection as core to humanitarian action, while their cited protective role is central to their legitimacy (IASC, 2013; 2016; Kirk et al., 2024).

> Many contemporary humanitarian organisations derive their legitimacy from their claims to protect civilians. Yet, what these organisations do in its name includes a diverse and contested range of activities that are often far from what global publics and affected populations understand as constituting protection. As others have argued, this detracts from honest discussions about when and how humanitarians are well placed to keep civilians safe from violence and threats (Kirk et al., 2024: 69).

There remains a significant disparity between people's experiences of and their priorities and needs in conflict on the one hand, and the humanitarian sector's claims to protect civilians on the other. Even in best-case scenarios, humanitarian actors struggle to demonstrate the specific impact of their protective actions. At worst, humanitarians demonstrate a lack of coherent action in the face of widespread abuses and atrocity crimes. Too often, this leaves civilians alone to look after themselves with little to no humanitarian support (see, for example, DuBois, 2009; Petrie, 2012; Gorur, 2013; Niland et al., 2015; Rosenthal, 2019; Cocking et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2024b; Kirk et al., 2024).

Even before recent drastic funding cuts, the humanitarian system was at breaking point. The proliferation of protracted conflicts and polycrises, an increasingly complex and costly aid architecture, along with a crisis of legitimacy – including that humanitarian responses have been increasingly out of touch with the civilians they claim to support – have led to increasing claims that the system was no longer fit for purpose (GTS, 2025; Poole, 2025).

The ongoing push for prioritisation risks going 'back to basics' with a reversion to simplistic approaches focused on top-down, narrow, and often inaccurate notions of 'life-saving' assistance, and further deprioritisation of protection. These risks are now significantly exacerbated due to the level of uncertainty in the humanitarian sector and calls for a 'humanitarian reset'.

However, could the current crisis in the sector be a wake-up call? Current shocks should force the humanitarian sector to do things differently. If necessary changes are to be for the better, coherent and coordinated action will be required, with a recognition that protection is core to humanitarian action. In a context of significantly fewer available resources and calls for reform, there is an urgency to:

- reprioritise and refocus humanitarian protection action, to ensure it is proactively focused on reducing civilian harm;
- demonstrate the impact of limited resources for preventing abuses on reducing civilian harm and need;
- focus on the most relevant actions that communities are requesting to improve their safety and security.

# 'Humanitarian protection': a stocktake

So why is there such disparity between humanitarians' stated claims to provide protection, and civilians' priorities, experiences and perceptions?

Firstly, there is a significant imbalance in which modes of action are implemented as part of humanitarian protection. International humanitarian practices that are labelled 'protection' overwhelmingly focus on responding to the consequences of violence,[1] falling far short of systematic efforts seeking to reduce violence and mitigate its worst consequences (Gorur, 2013; Cocking et al., 2022; Kirk et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2024a). Protection mainstreaming – actions that mitigate the potential harms of humanitarian action and increase its protective benefits – is also reported as a core activity of international humanitarian protection action. But it has come to dominate the notion, space and resources of the humanitarian protection landscape, rather than being named for what it is – safe and quality programming (DuBois, 2009; Kirk et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2024a; 2024b).

Secondly, international humanitarian actors generally fall short of proactive efforts to prevent violence and reduce threats, particularly when it comes to directly engaging with instigators of violence. Reasons include assumptions that this is a high-risk endeavour for a highly risk-averse humanitarian sector, and that engaging perpetrators compromises the principle of neutrality or risks legitimising perpetrators. Some humanitarians question whether reducing violence and engaging with perpetrators is their role – as do some donors. But such notions are increasingly challenged, starkly contradicting how communities understand protection and failing to meet their calls for help to remain safe (see Kirk et al., 2024; Davies et al 2024a; 2024b; GTS, 2025; Gray et al., forthcoming).

Thirdly, humanitarian action has an overwhelming bias towards the vulnerability of civilians. As a result, the capacities of civilians and the strategies they put in place are too often ignored and at times undermined by humanitarian actors – including in their protection work (Davies et al., 2024b). While recent years have seen an increased focus on the agency and capacities of civilians,[2] support for civilian-led approaches is not yet systematic (Jose and Medie, 2015; Baines and Paddon, 2012).

Recent years have seen some momentum towards strengthening efforts to reduce risks of violence (InterAction, n.d.b), and an increasing number of donors are supportive of, and trying to incentivise, such efforts. But they are found among a limited subset of actors, such as protection-of-civilian and some protection-specialised actors. In recent years, other large-scale humanitarian organisations have sought to join such efforts, though they often struggle in practice. However, in the humanitarian sector writ large, action to strengthen protection has been limited, tacit, and painfully slow.

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1    So-called remedial and environment-building spheres of action, as set out in the 'protection egg model' introduced by Slim and Bonwick (2005).

2    For example, through the focus on community-based protection and community-led protection interventions (Oxfam, 2021; ICRC, 2022).

Humanitarian protection action must therefore refocus on what civilians themselves define as protection: safety from violence. This requires:

- a greater focus on preventive action;
- challenging the idea that actions such as analysis, monitoring and assistance constitute protection;
- going beyond narrow interpretations of the law and its applicability.

Importantly, there is a need to reunite around common principles, and to reinforce commitments to intentional approaches to reducing risks to civilian safety, so that they remain central to humanitarian action, with balanced approaches that seek to prevent, reduce and respond to the worst consequences of violence. Litigating language, with ongoing debates on terminology, is a misdirected use of time and energy, and will not support building greater coherence (see also Gray et al, forthcoming).

The sections below set out recommended focus areas to strengthen how humanitarians can seek to strengthen the safety of civilians, while addressing barriers to change.

## Focus area 1: Strengthening preventive action

Preventive action – to prevent, reduce and mitigate violence and its worst consequences – has long been identified as part of the toolbox of humanitarian protection action (Slim and Bonwick, 2005).[3] However, there is a need to build coherence on what is meant to prevent civilian harms and mitigate their worst consequences, identify actions which intentionally seek to do so, and consider what it would take to do so (see Box 1).

It goes without saying that preventive actions are most effective when packaged with complementary actions, all of which should be based on context specific risk analysis (see Box 2). These could be related to building trust and laying the ground for longer-term conflict resolution (e.g., through identification of the missing and the dead, as well as prisoner or body exchanges) (see Steets et al., 2024). Complementary actions can also change individuals' calculations (weighing up the pros and cons) away from the use of violence, including through the provision of so-called peace dividends. For example, this can be through support to livelihoods, such as the provision of targeted services and assistance to reduce risks. Ultimately, humanitarian actors must consider using their full toolbox to reduce violence and promote protection (Davies et al., 2024b).

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3    This relates to 'responsive action' as set out in the 'protection egg model' introduced by Slim and Bonwick in 2005, which has widely informed humanitarian protection approaches: 'The most immediate sphere of action is closest to the victims and the pattern of abuse to which they are subjected. This sphere demands a range of **responsive action** that aims to stop, prevent or alleviate the worst effects of the abuses.' (Slim and Bonwick, 2005: 42).

## Box 1    Examples of preventive actions

Below are examples of actions to reduce harms civilians may face. These are not exhaustive, and should not undermine creative, iterative approaches. However, they serve as some examples of the range of approaches that can be used. The first set of actions are those related to engaging with threats through engagement with duty bearers, armed actors and instigators of violence. This can be carried out by a wide array of actors including communities themselves. These actions are inherently complementary to conflict-transformation approaches carried out by peacebuilding actors. The second set of actions are those that support civilians' capacities and reduce their vulnerabilities.

**Engaging with threats to strengthen protection[i]**

**Mediation, dialogue, negotiation**
Including multi-track dialogue, protection dialogue, community-led dialogue/negotiation, humanitarian negotiations, direct/third-party mediation, civil–military dialogue/coordination, dispute resolution

**Advocacy**
Public, private, third party through persuasion, denunciation or mobilisation

**Education, training, advising**

**Supporting capacities, reducing vulnerabilities**

**Early warning and response**
Contingency planning/conflict preparedness, evacuation planning, community safety planning

**Notifications, protected/safe zones, evacuations/relocations, travel, temporary safe housing**

**Information management**
Social behaviour-change communication, rumour manage-ment, mis- and disinformation and hate speech management

**Community structure and capacity–strengthening for prevention[ii]**
e.g. to defuse threats and resist coercion, support community organising for community patrols, safer population movement, protecting the most vulnerable, etc.

i    These sets of actions are inherently linked to conflict- transformation approaches carried out by peacebuilding actors, including dispute resolution.
ii    Note that not all capacity-building/capacity-strengthening approaches fall within this category. Rather, an approach only falls within this set of actions when capacity-strengthening is explicitly linked to prevention.

## Box 2   The protection risk equation and protection risk analysis

The starting point for any action is context-specific analysis of the risks of violence that civilians face (see InterAction, n.d.b; GPC, 2021). Protection risk analysis seeks to assess the vulnerabilities and threats civilians face, and their capacities to withstand them.

Over the years, InterAction has developed an approach to set out a theory of change based on risk analysis, to determine the range of actions that can contribute to reducing risks. To be effective, the determined set of actions should aim to reduce vulnerability, reduce threats and increase capacities. Unless all three elements are addressed, there will no overarching reduction in the risks civilians face (InterAction, n.d.a). Multiple pathways and multi-disciplinary approaches are needed to achieve this.

$$\text{To reduce RISK} = \text{Reduce the THREAT} \times \frac{\text{Reduce VULNERABILITY related to the threat}}{\text{Increase CAPACITY related to the threat}}$$

Adapted from InterAction's protection risk equation (GPC, 2021)

In order to identify the risks people face, humanitarian actors can ask specific questions, as set out by InterAction (2025).

- What threats are affected people facing or may face, and where do these threats come from?
- Which people are or will be particularly vulnerable to or impacted by these threats and why?
- What capacities exist among affected people to resist and rebound from the given threat?

In clarifying what preventive action is, it is equally important to clarify what it is not. Assistance, service provision, and actions to restore dignity and adequate living conditions do not constitute preventive action.[4] Nor do 'protection mainstreaming' approaches, which seek to 'do no harm' via the strengthening of safe and quality programming. Actions that foster a political, sociocultural, institutional and legislative environment that encourages respect of rights may contribute to a reduction of abuses in the longer term, but will not interrupt violence or reduce civilian harms in the immediate term.[5]

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4   These are so-called remedial actions, according to the protection egg model.

5   These are so-called environment-building actions, according to the protection egg model.

## Focus area 2: Reaffirming core characteristics

While preventive modes of action set out the range of approaches to prevent and reduce violence, they require specific approaches to effectively carry them out. The 'how' is as important as the 'what'. In a forthcoming paper, Gray et al. set out key characteristics humanitarian actors need to consider, which should underpin all protective actions. Importantly, this includes 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.

The realities of violent conflict are such that no one organisation or institution necessarily has the systems and structures to uphold all characteristics, at all times. These characteristics and questions are a guide towards action that is more strategic and proactive. They also help identify areas of organisational and sectoral systems that need adaptation. For example, it is known that the adaptive and flexible approaches required to respond to often rapid changes in conflict dynamics are too frequently undermined by rigid design and monitoring of programmes according to time-bound outputs and activities. How can programme design norms be adapted in support of more effective and preventive protection action?

Such approaches may be easier for small-scale, non-assistance-focused organisations with a core focus on protective action, which often contrast with institutions designed to deliver at scale and which are often designed around top-down, standardised, replicable approaches. The risk appetite of organisations is also critical. This is not to say that large-scale, assistance-focused organisations should not aim to integrate such approaches, but they should consider the extent to which they can incorporate the characteristics and any possible adaptations to systems, structures and cultures required to effectively reduce the risks civilians face. The critical point is that protection should be inherent at all levels across all modes of action, and the characteristics should underpin all protective actions (Gray et al, forthcoming).

**Table 1**   Key characteristics

| Characteristic | Definition | Question |
|---|---|---|
| Intentional | Designed deliberately with dedicated resources to prevent, interrupt or mitigate civilian harm and instances of violence. | How are protection objectives identified and resourced? |
| Civilian-centred | Led by and grounded in the needs, wishes and agency of conflict-affected civilians. | How are civilians engaged as protection actors themselves? How do civilians influence the intervention design and implementation? |
| Systemic | All actors operating within a conflict are part of a conflict system. These interconnections can be utilised to respond to violence and provide support responsibly. | How are entry points for protection action identified? How are different types of violence interconnected? |
| Cross-sectoral | Practised across the spectrum of civil society actors that are present in a conflict system, including at individual, community, national and international levels; and across humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and human rights modes of action. | How do different actors and sectors work together to meet protection objectives? Who needs to be engaged (and in what capacity) to ensure protection is central to humanitarian action? |

| Characteristic | Definition | Question |
|---|---|---|
| Cross-temporal | Practised throughout different stages of violent conflict, including during early stages to prevent violence and during a crisis to interrupt ongoing violence, and responsive to harm that has already occurred. | How are sustained protection actions integrated at different stages of conflict, including during escalations of conflict? How can direct protection responses be actioned in pre- and post-conflict settings? |
| Influential | Actions can be taken that can inform and restrain armed actor violence against civilians. | How are instigators of harm being engaged with, and relationships built? How are these relations being used to encourage protection of civilians and to prevent violence? |
| Specific | Identified risks are precise, time sensitive, and targeted. They are not generalised. | What protection risk(s) are specific community, groups or individuals facing? Who has influence over those individuals who are creating the risk? Why, when and where do they have this influence? |
| Adaptive | Reflects and responds to changing risks and realities. | Are contextual shifts monitored continually? Do interventions change in response to contextual shifts? |

Sourcess: Gray, 2023; Gray et al., forthcoming

## Evidence of preventive actions and overcoming barriers to their systematic use

Over the years, there has been a growing number of initiatives that have sought to build evidence and learning, including to analyse, design and monitor the impact of approaches to reduce civilian harm (see Box 3). This includes:

- InterAction's approaches to assessing protection risks, developing operational theories of change to reducing risks (InterAction, n.d.a), as well as developing a monitoring and reporting framework to measure outcomes (InterAction, n.d.b).
- Case examples of the effectiveness of such approaches generated by numerous organisations (CIVIC, n.d.; 2023; Geneva Call, n.d.; InterAction, n.d.c; Nonviolent Peaceforce, n.d.; Search for Common Ground, n.d.).
- Community-defined notions of safety, security and peace such as Search for Common Ground's Peace Impact Framework (ConnexUs, n.d.a), its Grounded Accountability Model (ConnexUs, n.d.b), and the Everyday Peace Indicator approach (MacGinty and Firchow, 2014; see also Davies et al., 2024a; 2024b).

## Box 3    What is the evidence of the efficacy of preventive action?

Over the years, research, evidence and learning have documented the profound impact of supporting communities in their own dialogue to reduce violence, and the impact of externally supported mediation, negotiations and dialogue to reduce violence. Such interventions have saved lives through preventing attacks; seen lower levels of civilians harmed and reduced the human impact of violence; prevented displacement; and helped overcome polarisation and division within and between communities (Bongard and Somer, 2012; ICRC, 2018; Grimaud, 2023; Barbelet et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2024b; Steets et al., 2024; Davies, 2025). There is no shortage of evidence on approaches to the strengths, barriers and weaknesses of humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy to strengthen protection (see HPG, n.d.). Similarly, there is ongoing generation of evidence on the impact of:

- early warning and response (Bain and Burke, 2021; Dijcke et al., 2023; Smith, 2023; CIVIC, 2024);
- civilian self-protection (Baines and Paddon, 2012; Jose and Medie, 2015; Davies et al., 2024b);
- protective presence, accompaniment and unarmed civilian protection (Creating Safer Space, n.d.; Nonviolent Peaceforce, n.d.; Gray, 2023);
- notifications, evacuations and protected/safe zones (GPC, 2014; ICRC and InterAction, 2015; Gillard, 2024);
- social behaviour-change communication; rumour management; mis- and disinformation and hate speech management (CIVIC, 2023; ICRC, 2023; Smith, 2023).

The humanitarian business model itself is one of the most significant barriers to more effective protective action. The overwhelming focus on the speed and scale of responses with a focus on 'numbers reached' too often comes at the cost of little to no impact on reducing the harms that civilians face (Davies et al., 2024b; GTS, 2025). As a result, the humanitarian sector has overlooked the need to listen to, and act on, the views, perceptions and strategies of conflict-affected civilians. There is an urgent need to refocus on civilian perceptions of safety and security, and the success of humanitarian actions from civilian perspectives, including community indicators of success (see Lemon, 2023; ConnexUs, n.d.a; n.d.b).

High levels of risk aversion towards actions perceived as more challenging, or which do not guarantee quantifiable results, must be overcome. This includes the previously mentioned reluctance to engage with unpredictable actions and actors – including instigators of violence. It requires recognition that prevention is part of the toolbox of humanitarian 'protection' action, which includes demonstrating the efficacy of such approaches. In turn, this should be used to garner the support of humanitarian leadership, decision-makers, policymakers and practitioners – including the donors that support them – for balanced approaches to reducing civilian harm, which can and should be carried out as core to humanitarian action. It requires collective action to prioritise, implement, fund and provide diplomatic support for such efforts, bringing political and technical solutions together. In order to do so, it is critical to address disincentives to more effective approaches driven by institutional self-interest, competition, mandate and resources (Davies et al., 2024a; Steets et al., 2024).

# Conclusion: practical ways to move forward

The humanitarian sector is at a crossroads. Protection issues lie at the heart of the most challenging humanitarian contexts around the world. Humanitarian actors have a potentially rapidly closing window to clarify the responsibilities and tools available to support civilians to stay safe from violence and threats. This requires honest conversations about when they are well placed to support civilian safety, and what partnerships are required to do so. In the absence of this, there are real risks that protection is deprioritised among reform efforts, rather than being understood as core to all humanitarian responses.

There is an urgency to reaffirm that protection is at the core of humanitarian action, for both principled reasons and efficiency. It is necessary to remember that the fundamental humanitarian principle (and goal) of humanitarian action is humanity – to reduce human suffering. All large-scale (protracted) humanitarian crises result from widespread abuses against civilians. So without seeking to reduce the harms civilians face, there will be no long-term reduction of humanitarian risks and needs (InterAction, 2025).

To reduce the harms that civilians face, humanitarian actors need to utilise increasingly limited resources through a balanced approach to protection – including through preventive action. Importantly, all stated protective actions should be required to demonstrate how they contribute to reducing civilian harm – according to civilians – and hold themselves and one another to account in their stated efforts to achieve this (Cocking et al., 2022). This requires meeting civilians on their own terms, recognising that strengthening people's safety and reducing the harms they face is a stated primary priority of affected people outside of, and in addition to, the provision of services and assistance (GTS, 2025). It requires listening to what it would take to reduce the suffering of civilians and be willing to act on it. Without this, there are high risks that the humanitarian sector further loses the trust of and credibility with the civilians it purports to serve.

In order to enact this, humanitarian actors need to go beyond commitments and demonstrate their contributions through practice. It requires getting beyond siloes, noting that strengthening the safety of civilians should not be rescinded to protection, technical or sector responsibility, but requires a collective approach across and beyond humanitarian action.

Humanitarian actors cannot do this alone. There have long been calls for complementary action across the humanitarian, human rights, peacebuilding and development spheres. In a global context of significant cuts, it is now urgent that the self-imposed, delinked siloes of the aid sector are overcome. But this should go further. Actions to strengthen the safety of civilians are evidently more effective when working in coordinated coalitions and networks, leveraging the complementary skills, expertise and areas of work. This means working not only across the range of local, national and international

partnerships, but also using multipartial approaches across horizontal and vertical layers of conflict, inclusive of people from diverse constituencies and interest groups and, importantly, spanning communities and armed actors across the conflict system (Idriss, forthcoming).

Honest self-reflection, listening to affected populations and humility are required to achieve this and to collectively move forward. If the humanitarian sector truly remains committed to protection as a core element of humanitarian action, its actors should ask themselves how far they are willing to go, the risks they are willing to take, and whether they are willing to do as much as they can to improve the safety of civilians. In the absence of this, discussions around a humanitarian reset risk undermining the progress that has been made in the last years, however nominal, leading to a potential failure to uphold the core principle of humanity.

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