



OXFAM GUIDELINES

June 2022

OXFAM AND PROTECTION

A guidance note



OXFAM

Overview

This paper outlines Oxfam’s understanding of protection within humanitarian responses, and the framework it uses. It describes Oxfam’s main modes of action to bring about greater protection for civilians in crises, support survivors of violence, exploitation and abuse, and conduct advocacy.

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A young woman follows a literacy class at the Women’s Home in Bria, in the heart of the Central African Republic. Photo: Aurélie Godet / Oxfam



The centrality of protection

States have the primary responsibility to protect people under their jurisdiction. Some strive to meet this obligation in good faith; if they are unable to fulfil it, they draw on the resources and support of others. Others choose to offer protection selectively or not at all, or even become the primary perpetrators of harm, deliberately sponsoring violence, coercing sections of the population, and/or depriving people of their basic rights.

When a state is clearly unwilling or unable to provide protection, the international community may take action to support, encourage or pressurize a state to fulfil its duty. This includes advocating with those who can exert influence over political leaders and decision makers.

Humanitarian responses often deal with the impacts of a lack of protection, and the ongoing needs that arise from conflict, displacement and attacks on civilians. Such responses must be more than a set of technical activities. Simply providing aid is not enough. All parts of the humanitarian system need to work together for the greater protection of civilians, using all the resources and channels available.

Protection must be a strategic priority in every humanitarian response.

However, the centrality of protection is primarily about collective action – no single humanitarian organization can achieve this strategic goal, instead all humanitarian actors need to work together in a complementary manner. **In 2016, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) issued a Protection Policy affirming that all humanitarian actors have a responsibility to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action, and calling for a strategic, comprehensive and collective approach to protection in humanitarian responses.**¹ A number of international actors – such as the ICRC, UNHCR, OHCHR and UNICEF – have formal and/or legal obligations on protection, while many NGOs implement protection activities complementing the work of mandated actors.

In April 2016, Oxfam publicly committed to supporting the ‘centrality of protection’ in humanitarian action. This included:



- a pledge to advocate for improved compliance with international humanitarian law;
- increased investment in community-based protection (CBP) programmes;
- acting to prevent and respond to violence and abuse, including gender-based violence.

CHALLENGES WITHIN THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

The rhetoric of the centrality of protection to humanitarian responses has not been matched by adequate action. In a UN-led system, humanitarian leaders are becoming more cautious about challenging parties to conflict and state actors to fulfil their responsibility to protect civilians.² The systemic failures of the UN in protection in Sri Lanka in 2009 prompted the development of the centrality of protection concept. Five years later, an independent report³ found the same 'systemic and structural failures' in the

UN-led response in Myanmar. In 2020 – in response to these challenges – the UN Secretary General launched a 'Call to Action for Human Rights', including a commitment to develop an Agenda for Protection. The humanitarian community recognizes the benefits of diverse humanitarian actors working together on protection, and that it must be a 'shared responsibility' and an imperative for all humanitarian actors. However, national, local and community actors have been constrained by a culture that struggles to recognize, support, and include their work within a collective protection response.

Teams of refugees and host community members monitor the conditions in the camp for safety and security, as well as access to protection services in both communities. The group pictured has now been working together for more than a year. They are modest about their impact, but their situation is unusual: it's not typical for men and women, refugees and host community members, to work closely in a group together. Photo: Salahuddin Ahmed



What is 'protection'?

The concept of 'being protected' – to be safe from violence, exploitation and abuse – is not complex, yet there is confusion within the humanitarian community as to what 'protection' means in concrete terms, because it is both a goal and a set of technical activities.⁴

In 1999, a group of large humanitarian organizations (including Oxfam) agreed on the following broad definition of protection:



'...all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law.'

This definition asserts the rights-based nature of protection and frames it within key international treaties. In practical terms, the breadth of this definition has enabled its adoption by a wide range of actors, but has also been problematic because of its lack of precision. Diverse interpretations have led to challenges for effective and cohesive protection action.

Oxfam focuses its protection responses on widespread and systematic protection violations of civilians in situations of armed conflict, large-scale displacement and human rights abuses. It involves understanding and responding to:

- violence, e.g. arbitrary killing, torture and rape;
- coercion, e.g. forced recruitment and sexual exploitation; and
- deliberate deprivation, e.g. blocking access to basic supplies and appropriation of land.

It undertakes immediate responses and actions to build a more protective environment, in the short and longer terms.

Oxfam's protection approach

In line with the centrality of protection, Oxfam is committed to carrying out a protection analysis in all its humanitarian responses. These cover the main threats to civilians and their self-protective capacities, as well as conflict dynamics and actors. This always includes a strong gender analysis, including a specific focus on gender-based violence (see page 9).

Protection analyses are informed by:

- **protection needs assessments;**
- **regular protection monitoring to track patterns and trends; and**
- **specific studies or field research on specific protection issues or situations.**

Combining analyses from multiple protection actors working in different areas, and with different specialisms and mandates, can provide a comprehensive understanding in which protection priorities can be identified and collectively addressed.

Thus, Oxfam's analyses seek to inform collective system-wide protection actions. Oxfam works within coordination mechanisms, such as Protection Clusters and Working Groups, and contributes to delivering collective protection strategies, working alongside UN agencies, other international and national NGOs, and national and local authorities when appropriate.

Where the international protection architecture is not functioning effectively, Oxfam will take steps to support stronger responses, and will hold the system to account for its failings.

Within its humanitarian responses, protection is one of Oxfam's core areas, along with water, sanitation and hygiene, food and economic security, and gender in emergencies.

Oxfam implements protection programmes alongside advocacy, campaigning and influencing. Increasingly, Oxfam works in partnership with a range of national, local and community protection organizations and groups.

Oxfam aims simultaneously to reduce protection threats and reduce people's vulnerability to these threats, and help them cope with the consequences of violence and abuse. For this, Oxfam combines different modes of action in a single protection response (see next page). Some actions may have immediate effects, while work to build a more protective global environment is a longer-term project.

Oxfam is committed to carrying out a protection analysis in all its humanitarian responses.

MODES OF ACTION FOR PROTECTION PROGRAMMING IN OXFAM

Reducing protection threats

Holding the relevant authorities to account for protection through international advocacy and campaigning (**particularly through its Rights in Crisis Campaign**) 

Local and national advocacy and negotiation 

Building authorities' capacity for protection, where appropriate 

Reducing people's vulnerability, strengthening their capacities and helping them cope

Supporting communities' capacities for self-protection (e.g. through community protection plans, committees, focal points) 

Helping with practical personal responses (e.g. facilitating access to emergency and protection services, such as emergency medical care, family tracing and legal assistance) 

Providing humanitarian goods and services to help make people safer (e.g. solar lights, fuel-efficient stoves) 

Protection programmes must be tailored to each context or situation. However, while there is no 'blueprint' for a protection response, Oxfam has developed some areas of expertise that usually form part of a programme.

Oxfam's greatest strength in protection work is the strategic combination of international advocacy and campaigning with CBP. Increasingly, Oxfam works with national partner organizations to build their capacity as protection actors, and to facilitate referrals that link target communities to specialist protection services run by authorities and local, national and international partners. Oxfam also participates – sometimes leading – in protection coordination mechanisms, ensuring that the perspectives of affected communities are represented.

CORE AREAS OF OXFAM'S PROTECTION WORK

1 **Community-Based Protection (CBP)** 
Supporting community groups and structures.

2 **Access to services** 
Facilitating access to emergency and protection services for survivors of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

3 **Advocacy** 
Advocating for the protection of civilians in conflict and crises.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION

There are different understandings of CBP across the sector. For Oxfam, it involves building the capacity and agency of crisis-affected communities in their own protection.⁵ Protective actions should originate as much as possible from the communities, and be led by them. The role of humanitarian organizations is to support communities to do this.

Oxfam and its partners support community groups and networks in their protection activities, which include:

- conducting protection analyses;
- developing and implementing community protection action plans⁶;
- providing protection information to community members;
- holding community meetings; and
- leading advocacy and negotiation efforts.

The support provided by Oxfam and partners includes:

- mentoring and coaching;
- training;
- joint implementation;
- brokering relationships and facilitating access to duty bearers; as well as
- material and financial support.

PROTECTION ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCING

Protection risks can only be addressed effectively if the threats are mitigated or prevented. It is not enough to build people's capacity for self-protection in the face of violence and abuse without changing the attitudes, behaviours, practices and policies of those who are responsible for protection – formal and informal duty bearers. However, some states do not recognize protection work as 'humanitarian' in nature, especially when they are the targets of advocacy. Therefore, protection advocacy often requires complementary and collective efforts to reduce risks to national protection actors, and ensure it is driven by the needs and priorities of the affected people.

Oxfam advocates for the safety and protection of civilians in conflict, and also for the rights of displaced people and refugees, with a specific focus on women and girls. However, the focus of Oxfam's advocacy has gradually shifted from representing affected communities to providing platforms and supporting national protection actors and leaders to directly access decision makers and spaces of influence. Oxfam aims to see community representatives included in decisions about humanitarian assistance and protection, and processes that affect their lives, such as peace negotiations.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN PROTECTION AND COMPLEMENTARITY WITH GENDER IN EMERGENCIES

Oxfam's protection work requires consistent gender mainstreaming in all aspects of programme planning; delivery and implementation; monitoring, evaluation and learning; and global thought leadership on protection.

Gender and protection are distinct but mutually reinforcing areas of work. Many protection responses work with women's rights organizations, and seek to contribute to women's leadership and gender equality. Gender-based violence requires close coordination of Oxfam's gender and protection teams in order to:

- identify gender-based threats and self-protection strategies in collaboration with communities;
- conduct advocacy to reduce those threats;
- provide specific humanitarian goods to reduce threats (e.g. solar lights, fuel-efficient stoves, cash assistance, dignity kits);
- regularly map and communicate relevant services and referral pathways;
- advocate for the availability, access and safety of services;
- establish strategic partnerships with service providers where possible and pertinent; and
- provide cash and vouchers to enable access to protection and emergency services where necessary.

It is important to note that neither the Gender in Emergencies nor the Protection teams in Oxfam work on gender-based violence case management. In specific countries, where no other actors do so, Oxfam has worked with specialized partners who do case management in specific areas to cover gaps in the response.

*Gender and protection
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Using the Safe Programming approach in protection

Aside from work to achieve specific protection objectives and outcomes, many organizations also aim to 'mainstream protection' by:

- prioritizing safety and dignity and avoiding causing harm;
- promoting meaningful access to assistance and services;
- ensuring accountability;
- boosting participation and empowerment.

These goals are important for effective, quality humanitarian responses, but they are not specific to protection work. All humanitarian workers, organizations and technical sectors should be ensuring these quality standards in their work, and it cannot be the sole or primary responsibility of protection teams.

Thus, Oxfam does not use the term 'protection mainstreaming' to describe its actions to achieve these goals. Instead, the Safe Programming approach⁷ – which Oxfam applies to all development, humanitarian and influencing work – is a broad but practical approach. It requires proactive measures to ensure that humanitarian programmes do not inadvertently cause harm to people, nor to the principles, standards and values that underpin our work. Increasingly we are also conscious of the need to avoid causing harm to the environment.

Safe Programming is a collective responsibility of all Oxfam staff and all technical areas of programme work, although managers and leaders have a specific responsibility for it. Protection teams are responsible for ensuring that this approach is applied to all aspects of protection work and that proactive measures are taken to ensure safety and accountability; avoid harm; and respect, include and empower those affected by Oxfam's protection programmes. Safe Programming is one of the four pillars of Oxfam's humanitarian approach alongside community engagement, local humanitarian leadership and a feminist approach.

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FURTHER GUIDANCE

- Global Protection Cluster. (2016). Communication Package on Protection. <http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/en/tools-and-guidance/protection-cluster-coordination-toolbox/communication-package-on-protection.html>
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2020). Professional Standards for Protection Work (third edition). <https://shop.icrc.org/professional-standards-for-protection-work-pdf-en.html>
- The Sphere Project: Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response <http://www.sphereproject.org/>
- H. Slim and A. Bonwick. (2005). Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies. ALNAP. <http://www.alnap.org/resource/5263>
- Global Protection Cluster. Protection Mainstreaming. Guidance and tools. <http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/en/areas-of-responsibility/protection-mainstreaming.html>
- Oxfam. (2021). Resource Pack on Community-Based Protection. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/series/resource-pack-on-community-based-protection/>

NOTES

- 1 IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 14 October, 2016, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-protection-priority-global-protection-cluster/iasc-policy-protection-humanitarian-action-2016>
- 2 M. Bowden V. Metcalfe-Hough. (2020). *Humanitarian diplomacy and protection advocacy in an age of caution*. ODI. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Humanitarian_diplomacy_and_protection_advocacy_in_an_age_of_caution.pdf
- 3 G. Rosenthal. (2019). *A brief and independent inquiry into the involvement of the United Nations in Myanmar from 2010 to 2018*. UN. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3809543?ln=en>
- 4 For some organizations, it is also a mainstreamed or cross-cutting approach; however, Oxfam does not subscribe to 'protection mainstreaming' (see 'Using the Safe Programming approach in protection' chapter for further explanation).
- 5 For examples of Oxfam CBP work, see: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/620504>
- 6 For guidance on Community Protection Action Plans, see: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/developing-a-community-protection-action-plan-tools-and-templates-621228/>
- 7 For guidance on Safe Programming, see: <https://oxfam.app.box.com/s/7tw1a68vo9mda35av4ohycy8wpp3lmkz>



Cover image: Internally displaced women who are members of local protection committees are holding a meeting. The women provide information and advice on protection and access to protection services to other internally displaced people (IDPs) in IDP camps in Somalia/Somaliland. Photo: Petterik Wiggers / Oxfam Novib

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This document is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email Rachel Hastie, Protection Lead, Global Humanitarian Team: rachel.hastie@oxfam.org.

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