

# OXFAM AND PROTECTION

## A guidance note



Personal clothing and items left behind by migrants. Photo: Alessandro Rota/Oxfam

**This guidance note outlines Oxfam’s understanding of protection within humanitarian responses, and the framework it uses for field-based protection work. It goes on to describe the main modes of action Oxfam uses in its work to bring about greater protection for civilians in conflict and disasters, including community-based field activities, advocacy and campaigning work.**

# THE GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE FOR PROTECTION

In April 2016, Oxfam publicly committed to the centrality of protection in all its humanitarian action: to act proactively to reduce violence, coercion and abuse (including all forms of gender-based violence, or GBV) against civilian populations, and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law.<sup>1</sup> Oxfam's Commitment to Change includes: pledges to campaign for improved compliance with international humanitarian law; training all Oxfam Humanitarian staff on protection; increased investment in community-based protection programmes; and carrying out ongoing protection analysis and acting to prevent and respond to violence and abuses, including GBV.

The state has the primary responsibility to protect people under its jurisdiction. Some governments strive to meet these protection obligations in good faith, and draw on the resources of non-state actors and other states as necessary to fulfil their responsibilities. Others choose to offer protection selectively or not at all, or even become the primary perpetrators, 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.<sup>2</sup> However, it takes more than a political response to ensure effective protection. A number of international actors, such as the ICRC, UNHCR, OHCHR and UNICEF,<sup>3</sup> have formal and/or legal obligations in relation to protection. It is now widely recognized that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also must play a role in protection, complementing the work of mandated actors. 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, calling for a strategic, comprehensive and collective approach to protection in humanitarian responses.<sup>4</sup>

NGOs work to reduce the threats to and vulnerabilities of affected populations, and increase their capacity and resilience to withstand shocks such as civil unrest, armed conflict and disasters. 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.

## DEFINING PROTECTION

In 1999, humanitarian organizations including the ICRC, UN agencies, and NGOs (including Oxfam) agreed on the following broad definition of protection as:

*'...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 work, and frames it within the key international treaties that determine the protection that should be afforded to people in times of conflict and crisis. In practical terms, the breadth of this definition – which includes *all* human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, and in all situations – has enabled its adoption by a wide range of actors, but has been problematic in its lack of precision, leading to diverse interpretations and consequent challenges for effective dialogue and coordination between protection actors.

In Oxfam's humanitarian fieldwork, advocacy and campaigning, protection activities have primarily been implemented in conflict-related crises, but are increasingly being integrated into

disaster responses where many of the same issues, such as large-scale displacement or GBV, arise. The coherence between Oxfam’s humanitarian and development work is increasingly important in the context of fragile and conflict-affected countries, and in areas with high rates of armed violence outside of traditional conflict settings.<sup>5</sup> Protection work involves understanding and responding to specific kinds of widespread and systematic threats: **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) – and building a more protective environment both in the short and longer-term.

## OXFAM’S APPROACH

Within the humanitarian sector, two distinct practices are emerging among non-mandated protection actors: protection as an approach, which is something all humanitarian actors should ensure; and protection as a sector, with some organizations such as Oxfam going further by setting specific protection objectives and carrying out dedicated protection projects and programmes to achieve those objectives. Within Oxfam all humanitarian programmes, whether implemented directly or with partners, are expected to use protection as an approach in order to avoid inadvertently causing harm and to ensure conflict sensitivity. This is referred to as ‘safe programming.’<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, Oxfam also carries out specific protection activities, projects or programmes, using the ‘sector’ approach:

Protection as an approach	Protection as a sector	
<p><b>Safe programming</b></p> <p>All Oxfam humanitarian programmes are ‘safe programmes’ that take proactive measures to avoid causing inadvertent harm and be conflict sensitive.</p> <p><i>This is the responsibility of all humanitarian staff.</i></p>	<p><b>Integrated protection</b></p> <p>Specific protection projects and objectives within an integrated humanitarian response alongside Oxfam’s core humanitarian areas of WaSH and EFSVL.</p> <p><i>Increasingly this includes protection objectives and activities in the first phase of a humanitarian response.</i></p>	<p><b>Standalone protection<sup>7</sup></b></p> <p>Programmes that have specific protection objectives and are of a sufficient scale and scope to be considered standalone.</p> <p><i>These are often multi-year programmes in protracted crises such as the DRC Protection Programme.</i></p>

## PROTECTION AS AN APPROACH: SAFE PROGRAMMING

Safe programming is fundamental to all good-quality humanitarian work.<sup>8</sup> It requires humanitarian actors to take proactive measures to ensure that they do not put affected populations in further danger, do not create or exacerbate conflict, and where possible enhance civilian safety, including mitigating the risks of GBV. It focuses on implementing existing humanitarian programmes well, and in line with the relevant standards and humanitarian principles. It is these actions that make humanitarian agencies more appropriate organizations to deliver services to vulnerable people than say, military actors or big engineering and construction companies. It is the fact that humanitarians recognize the vulnerability and capacity of people going through life-changing and distressing experiences, and the importance of treating people with dignity that makes them humanitarians. In practice this might include consulting with women and girls about the safest location to build latrines; monitoring the safety of women using Oxfam water points; and making sure that humanitarian activities don’t exacerbate tensions between two rival groups, or undermine people’s rights.

Safe programming is an important element of humanitarian work and a prerequisite for developing protection programming. Oxfam's Strategic Plan and 2020 Humanitarian Strategy underlines the commitment to safe programming by requiring that **'all humanitarian programmes, whether implemented directly or with partners, must be "safe programmes" that avoid causing inadvertent harm and are conflict sensitive'**.

Oxfam uses a risk-reduction approach to safe programming by taking actions that prevent and respond to immediate protection vulnerabilities and threats while taking into consideration the communities' local capacities. At the same time, Oxfam commits to incorporating protection principles and promoting meaningful access, safety and dignity in humanitarian aid.<sup>9</sup> Effective safe programming sometimes requires dedicated support, especially in rapid-onset emergencies, and often it is a protection specialist who is best-placed to initially provide this support. However, it is managers and leaders who are responsible for ensuring Safe Programming, bringing in expert technical support as and when required.

## PROTECTION AS A SECTOR

Protection projects and programmes – i.e. specific activities that aim to achieve a protection objective or goal – have long been carried out by mandated actors, and in the last 15 years Oxfam has built up a body of field activities and projects that have specific protection objectives. The most common approach in Oxfam is the inclusion of protection projects or programmes in an integrated response alongside WaSH and EFSVL programmes. Less commonly, Oxfam has some standalone protection programmes, often multi-year programmes in protracted crises, such as in eastern DRC, Haiti and, historically, in Colombia and Indonesia.

Specialized protection programming requires dedicated protection expertise. Programmes developed in first-phase emergency responses may evolve into multi-year standalone programmes, and continue during stabilization and transition phases. Oxfam uses a risk-reduction approach to protection, taking actions that prevent and respond to immediate protection vulnerabilities and threats, and build on community and partner capacity, as well as longer-term work to build a protective environment.

Oxfam aims simultaneously to reduce threats by holding the relevant authorities to account for protection through **international advocacy and campaigning** (particularly through the Rights in Crisis Campaign); **local and national advocacy and negotiation**, and building the authorities' **capacity for protection** where appropriate. Some advocacy and negotiation may achieve immediate effects, while work to build a more protective global environment is a longer-term project.

In order to reduce people's vulnerability to protection threats and help them cope with the consequences of violence and abuse, Oxfam supports their **capacity for self-protection** (e.g. through developing community protection plans, protection committees, working with focal points, etc.). It also **helps them deal with the consequences of violence and abuse** (e.g. by facilitating their access to emergency and protection services such as emergency medical care, family tracing, and legal assistance run by local authorities and partner agencies). Furthermore, it provides specific **humanitarian goods and services** to help make people safer (such as solar lights, fuel-efficient stoves, etc.). While the role of Oxfam in protection work is limited in comparison to mandated actors, its actions can have a significant impact on civilian safety.

## PROTECTION PROJECTS OR PROGRAMMES

In every humanitarian response, Oxfam carries out a **protection analysis** of the main threats to civilians, their self-protective capacity, and conflict dynamics and actors. This always includes a

strong gender analysis, including a specific focus on gender-based violence (GBV). From this a **protection strategy** is developed, outlining the target areas and populations, objectives and activities, and the resources and collaborations required to achieve those objectives. Because the contexts where people face protection threats are very dynamic and unpredictable, the protection analysis is an ongoing process, and activities must be continually adapted as necessary. While the actual objectives and activities must respond to each specific context, Oxfam has invested in piloting and developing some specific areas of expertise that usually form part of an Oxfam protection response.

Oxfam’s greatest strength in protection work is the strategic combination of international advocacy and campaigning with community-based protection. Increasingly, Oxfam works with national partner organizations to build their capacity as protection actors, and to facilitate referrals that link the target communities to specialist protection services run by authorities, local, national and international partners. Oxfam also participates, and sometimes takes a leadership role, in protection coordination mechanisms, ensuring that the perspectives of affected communities are represented in the participation of national and local partners. The table below outlines the strongly inter-linked and mutually reinforcing actions Oxfam carries out in protection work.

## Protection: modes of action

This table illustrates the types of actions Oxfam combines in a protection response. It is not exhaustive and each response is context-specific.

<p><b>International advocacy and campaigning</b> to convince those in power or with influence to protect people. (Through the Rights in Crisis Campaign.)</p>	<p>Build the <b>self-protection capacity</b> of crisis-affected communities. (Through protection committees and groups, community safety plans, partner capacity-building, etc.)</p>
<p>Carry out and support partners and communities in <b>local and national level advocacy and negotiation</b> for protection.</p>	<p><b>Facilitate safe, timely access</b> to emergency and protection services. (Through referrals to medical or legal assistance, advocacy, cash grants, information and awareness raising, etc.)</p>
<p><b>Capacity-building</b> and support to the relevant authorities to better fulfil their protection role. (Training, secondments, mentoring, practical assistance, etc.)</p>	<p>Provide <b>practical humanitarian assistance</b> to help people stay safer. (E.g. solar lights, fuel-efficient stoves, emergency cash grants, etc.)</p>

Oxfam’s experience has shown that effective protection projects and programmes require dedicated resources and managerial support. This ensures that Oxfam meets the standards outlined in the ICRC Professional Standards for Protection and the Sphere Protection Principles. Small pilot projects can be increased in scale and scope if necessary, or scaled down as the situation improves.

Oxfam’s Global Humanitarian Team (GHT) provides technical support and capacity building for humanitarian responses across the confederation, and has two rapidly deployable Humanitarian Support Personnel. It represents Oxfam in global protection structures and runs global projects on **building the capacity of national protection partners; lighting and safety; cash and protection; and responsible data management.**

## FURTHER GUIDANCE

*Improving the Safety of Civilians: A protection training pack* (Oxfam, 2009)

<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/improving-the-safety-of-civilians-a-protection-training-pack-115396>

*Communication Package on Protection* (Oxfam/Global Protection Cluster, 2016)

<http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/en/tools-and-guidance/protection-cluster-coordination-toolbox/communication-package-on-protection.html>

*Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried Out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence* (ICRC, 2013)

<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p0999.htm>

The Sphere Project: Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response

<http://www.sphereproject.org/>

*Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*

<http://www.alnap.org/resource/5263>

Protection Mainstreaming (Global Protection Cluster)

<http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/en/areas-of-responsibility/protection-mainstreaming.html>

## NOTES

- 1 Oxfam (April 2016). *Commitment to Change: An Oxfam Briefing Note for the World Humanitarian Summit*. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/commitment-to-change-what-world-leaders-must-promise-at-the-world-humanitarian-605275>
- 2 For example, through financial and technical support, diplomatic measures, or more coercive actions such as economic sanctions.
- 3 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR); Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
- 4 IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action.  
[https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/iasc\\_policy\\_on\\_protection\\_in\\_humanitarian\\_action\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/iasc_policy_on_protection_in_humanitarian_action_0.pdf)
- 5 See World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2011*. <http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/> and Geneva Declaration (2011). *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011*.  
<http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/global-burden-of-armed-violence-2011.html>
- 6 Some organizations call this 'protection mainstreaming', a term we avoid in Oxfam as it can create confusion as to who is responsible, and because we believe that protection work should go further and specifically address the worst forms of violence and abuse.
- 7 Most of Oxfam's protection work occurs within an integrated humanitarian response, however, there are a limited number of protection programmes that exist outside of an integrated response and are large scale, generally operating with multi-year funding.
- 8 Sphere 2011 Protection Principle 1: Avoid exposing people to harm. The Code of Conduct for ICRC NGOs in Disaster Relief.
- 9 The Global Protection Cluster Task Team on Protection Mainstreaming identifies the following principles: 1. Prioritize safety and dignity, and avoid causing harm; 2. Meaningful Access; 3. Accountability; 4. Participation and empowerment.

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