



ICRC Workshop on Protection Standards

Geneva, 20 November 2009



Sequence of events

On 20 November 2009, the ICRC organized a workshop for presentation and discussion of the document "**Professional standards for protection work carried out by humanitarian and human rights actors in armed conflict and other situations of violence.**" This text is the result of a two-year initiative led by the ICRC in collaboration with protection experts and practitioners from both humanitarian and human rights organizations.

The workshop, a one-day event that brought together some of the leading actors in the protection field, was also an opportunity to discuss the main challenges related to these standards and to identify the next steps to be taken in the months ahead, especially in terms of implementation at the field level.

Dr Hugo Slim opened the workshop with an overview of the evolution of efforts to protect civilians. In his keynote address, Hugo Slim reminded the participants of the past and present suffering of civilians and persons who are *hors de combat* in times of war. Describing the concept of a non-combatant as "a fragile and resilient idea," he pointed out the main anti-civilian ideologies motivating those who were responsible for massacres and other grave breaches of international law designed to protect civilians. Against this sober backdrop, he gave an overview of past and present efforts to protect civilians and concluded by showing how the proposed standards were part of a long and important tradition of principled approaches to ethical endeavours.

After a short presentation of the project, outlining the main steps in the process, two panels were organized.

In the morning session, panellists were asked to examine the pertinence and applicability of the overarching principles of protection work enumerated in chapters 1 and 2 of the document. The presence of both human rights and humanitarian organizations allowed for comparison of different approaches and concerns faced at the operational level. Some differences were highlighted with regard to maintaining proximity and access to victims versus promoting advocacy, but these differences in approaches did not undermine the common standards presented in the document.

The afternoon panel was aimed at tackling the technical issues outlined in chapters 3 to 6 of the document. Issues such as professional capacity and evaluation were discussed, in particular when the panellists explained how the proposed standards were likely to influence their work at the organizational level. They were also asked to reflect on the relevance of the standards and to evaluate whether the standards could stand alone or if they needed to be integrated into existing internal guidelines. The participants agreed that each organization will have to decide how to use and integrate the standards in a way that makes sense from its own organizational perspective. The implications and challenges for management were consequently debated.



Main issues discussed

Agreement on the project's achievements

The need for standards to enhance professionalism among all those involved in protection work was widely agreed upon. The panellists welcomed the ICRC's initiative in establishing protection standards and the resulting publication.

Successive comments by participants confirmed this general agreement among the audience. Some of the key concepts on which the standards are based were repeatedly mentioned during the workshop, showing that there is a broad consensus on them.

Participants reiterated the importance of understanding and respecting the role of duty bearers. The recognition that the State and parties to a conflict have the primary responsibility for protecting people at risk was considered to be a key point for protection programming.

Agreement was also reached on the importance of knowing the legal framework, as mentioned in chapter 3 of the document. The large section devoted to the importance of managing sensitive protection information efficiently and professionally was also welcomed. Lastly, staff training and coaching were mentioned as critical issues, although they remain a major challenge for most organizations.

Recognizing the project's limitations and the challenges ahead

The discussions that followed both panels also outlined areas in which the standards would need further elaboration, as well as complex issues and challenges inherent in protection work.

Complementarity was heavily discussed and appeared to be a critical and sensitive issue. While the standards reflect common ground on which to define complementarities between humanitarian and human rights actors involved in protection, they were seen as weak when it comes to defining relations with other actors who are also involved in protection from another perspective — military, political and judicial.

Special emphasis was also placed on the importance of careful context analysis and awareness of contextual dilemmas as a basis for good programming.

During the workshop the definition of protection was constantly challenged. Although the standards do not seek to reopen the debate on that issue, it seemed clear that there is a need to better define protection work, especially as it relates to environment building / development actors.

Thoughts on the next steps

Different ideas were raised by the participants:

- Encouraging regular exchanges of best practices in integrating the standards into internal policy and guidelines;
- Engaging with local NGOs, in particular those based in conflict areas, about the relevance of these standards to their approaches and activities;
- Setting up a peer review mechanism that would help organizations to implement some of the more challenging standards. This was nevertheless seen as difficult by many participants if indicators are not agreed upon;
- The need to strengthen the "protection voice" in a number of emergencies, including grave situations faced by migrants and other particularly vulnerable groups;
- Using the standards in discussions about the specific nature of humanitarian and human rights organizations with non-humanitarian actors engaged in protection.



Acknowledgements

The ICRC sincerely thanks all participants who attended the workshop. The following organizations were represented:

- Act One
- Action by Churches Together
- Amnesty International
- British Red Cross Society
- Care International
- Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
- Concern Worldwide
- Danish Refugee Council
- Handicap International
- HelpAge International
- Human Rights Watch
- Human Rights Information and Documentation System (Huridocs)
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- International Council of Voluntary Agencies
- International Commission of Jurists
- International Organization for Migration
- Jesuit Refugee Service
- Médecins du Monde
- Médecins sans Frontières
- Norwegian Refugee Council
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- Overseas Development Institute
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- Oxfam Australia
- Oxfam International
- Oxford University
- Terre des Hommes
- United Nations Development Programme
- United Nations Population Fund
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- United Nations Children's Fund
- World Food Programme
- World Vision Australia
- World Vision International