

HPG Report

Localising protection responses in conflicts

Challenges and opportunities

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Acronyms

AOR	Areas of Responsibility
CAR	Central African Republic
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CIVIC	Centre for Civilians in Conflict
CBO	community-based organisations
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECOWEB	Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits, Inc.
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator
FRC	Finnish Refugee Council
GPC	Global Protection Cluster
GTS	Ground Truth Solutions
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	internally displaced person
IHRL	international human rights law
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IRRC	IDP and Refugee Relief Committee
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer
LPRR	Linking Preparedness Response and Resilience
NGO	non-governmental organisation

NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RCRCM	Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
SCLR	Survivor and Community-led Response
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNMAS	United Nations Mine Action Service
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

Executive summary

In conflict situations around the world, civilians are providing their own frontline ‘protection services’, adopting a variety of strategies and utilising various capacities and capabilities to try to prevent and mitigate the impact of conflict-related violence and abuse, and repair the damage done to their lives and livelihoods. On the ground, however, international humanitarian organisations are still failing to fully understand and systematically integrate these local and self-protection efforts in their own response strategies.

This report considers in detail the role of local populations in their own protection; the role of local non-state actors in enhancing those efforts; and the relationship between these and the strategies adopted by international ‘humanitarian protection’ actors. The paper further seeks to explore the tensions, challenges and opportunities inherent in a more localised approach to protection.

Emerging themes in local and self-protection in armed conflict

Research undertaken as part of this project largely reaffirms a number of conclusions previously reached in academic research. For example, civilians employ a range of tactics to reduce immediate risks to their own survival, but this often means making complex decisions that lead to further risk. Although local actors may sometimes be a source of protection, they can also be a source of threats. And civilians and other local actors can have greater access to and influence over conflict parties; however, this engagement may expose them to significant risk.

The research also provided additional insight into a number of areas. In particular, the research clearly highlighted how protection threats affect different populations/individuals differently and that vulnerabilities are highly dynamic, fluctuating over time particularly in protracted conflict situations; that crossing international or subnational borders is a primary strategy of self-protection but it is rarely entirely effective – it can expose individuals to new or different threats and, particularly given the reach of modern communications technology, threats can

readily cross borders; and that displaced populations in protracted conflicts learn to adapt their behaviour and political, social or other allegiances in order to enhance their own protection but this can have a negative impact on their access to services and protection. The research also emphasised that social capital, in its myriad forms, can play a crucial role in enhancing protection outcomes for conflict-affected people but that it cannot protect against all risks, may present supplementary risks and it may also begin to wane over time. The research also indicated that these points are still too rarely taken into account by international humanitarian organisations in their protection work.

Supporting local and self-protection: challenges and opportunities

Since the early 2000s, there has been much policy debate and specific commitments made by the international humanitarian community on supporting local and/or self-protection efforts. But evidence collated through this research suggests that in terms of operational practice little has changed, with no major system-wide shift towards more ‘localised’ protection responses.

First, international humanitarian organisations have still not fully operationalised or ensured the systematic application of their long-standing policy commitments on participatory approaches. Despite a plethora of inter-agency and institutional policy and guidance, operationalising and maintaining more localised protection has remained a challenge. Second, international humanitarian organisations are still failing to understand or assess the capacities, assets and behaviours of affected populations and are consequently failing to take these into account when designing and implementing protection responses.

Third, many international humanitarian organisations are still not working strategically with local civil society organisations and human rights groups to address protection threats. There is a continuing tendency to assume that only international or external actors have the capacity and understanding to

deliver protection services in a neutral, impartial and professional manner. Broad assumptions about the capacities of local actors are too often inaccurate and unhelpful – instead, investing in formal assessments would enable identification of actual capacity gaps and facilitate efforts to address them.

Fourth, despite working with multiple local partners, international humanitarian organisations are often failing to publicly acknowledge, give voice to or otherwise provide capacity-building support to those partners at the forefront of protection responses who bear the greatest risks to protect conflict-affected communities (HPG interviews, 2018 and 2019; Easton-Calabria, 2016; Betts et al., 2018). Finally, some international organisations are still falling back on the ‘standardised’, ‘projectised’ approach to protection programming and seem unable to adapt to a given context or population.

Notwithstanding the above, the research also indicated that some international humanitarian organisations are investing in these approaches and with some success. Working in partnership with local NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs), members of the ACT Alliance, Oxfam for example, have helped communities assess their own vulnerabilities, risks and priorities, develop their own plans of action and implement their own responses to protection-related threats, risks and challenges. But they have faced major challenges. Even some of the most liberal of donor countries are seemingly uninterested, unwilling or unable to fund the kind of long-term, adaptive, flexible and timely programming approaches – with all the inherent risks – that are required to support local and self-protection efforts (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019). In addition, this approach requires a major change in institutional cultures – a shift that needs time, investment in technical and other capacities and strong and consistent leadership.

The research also highlighted the many ethical dilemmas that working in a more localised way can sometimes pose. The more ‘local’ a protection response strategy, the more complex it may become, with risks relating to adherence to humanitarian principles, safety and security, and legitimacy of the international response (Fast and Sutton, 2018; HPG interviews, 2019). Some local organisations might not consider themselves as neutral or impartial in a conflict, posing attendant physical, programmatic and reputational risks for international humanitarian organisations. However, the research suggests that this problem is not particularly widespread, nor is it insurmountable with appropriate engagement.

Strategies and tactics adopted by local populations to improve their protection may also pose ethical dilemmas for international organisations. Responding to such dilemmas is profoundly difficult and there are no easy answers.

Power dynamics also play a major role in the operationalisation of localising humanitarian response, with many international organisations concerned at what they see as a threat to their current power, status, and share of the vast global humanitarian funding pool (Bennett and Foley, 2016; Collinson, 2016; Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Featherstone, 2017; Barbelet, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). Finding the necessary incentives for the strategic, financial, administrative and operational changes required to bring about a system-wide shift to more localised protection responses is perhaps the greatest challenge. Supporting self-protection strategies is in effect a realisation of the core principle of humanity: giving people a voice, giving them back some control over their own lives, helping to give them a sense of dignity. But such ‘moral’ incentives have not thus far proved sufficient to spur a whole of system shift towards more support for local and self-protection responses.

Context and comparative advantage are key

The research clearly indicates that context is the key determinant of how ‘local’ a protection response can be. In essence, localising protection should be seen as a broad spectrum, with the most appropriate approach necessarily determined by each individual context, noting that it will also likely need to adjust over time. In some contexts there may be only limited opportunities to support local or self-protection efforts, while in others communities may have the capacity, motivation and the skills to lead or at least take a significant role in their own protection. In these instances, far greater investments should be made to empower rather than subvert their strategies. For many international humanitarian organisations, adopting a truly context-driven approach is challenging for practical reasons – such as availability of appropriate funding – and for institutional reasons, including a fear of loss of control or even their market share.

However, any fears that localisation will mean a reduction in the role or value of international humanitarian organisations engaged in protection work are arguably unfounded. Their role may need

to shift but will continue to be critical. Today's protection crises are highly complex and a range of complementary tactics and actions from a diversity of actors is thus required to remove or mitigate threats to civilians, repair the damage done and support recovery. The comparative advantages of each of these actors will vary over time. But whatever the context, a number of facts hold true: international humanitarian organisations can enable access to (direct) funding to support local protection efforts – a fundamental problem for many local organisations and communities. Through targeted long-term mentoring and other practical support, they can also strengthen the local skills base on protection, ensuring that national and local actors and affected communities have the requisite technical capacities and tools, as well as contextual knowledge, to mitigate the threats civilians face. Crucially, international organisations also have access to global decision-makers and can use their global credibility, resources and presence to amplify the voices of affected people, to raise

protection concerns at the highest levels and try to bring pressure to bear on conflict parties to improve their respect for international humanitarian, human rights, refugee and other relevant laws.

The effort required to make the system-wide shift to a context-driven approach, which exploits the comparative advantages of both local and international protection actors to secure better protection outcomes for conflict-affected people, should not be underestimated. It will require a major strategic overhaul of partnerships, funding, assessments and engagement with affected populations. There are strong moral, ethical, financial and effectiveness arguments to be made for a more localised approach to protection and the vast majority of international humanitarian organisations have already made clear commitments to making the necessary changes. The real challenge is finding the incentives necessary to ensure that they deliver on their commitments.

1 Introduction

For more than two billion people caught up in brutal conflicts and generalised violence around the world today, the twenty-first century may be proving at least as deadly as the last. According to the World Bank, 2019 has seen the highest levels of violent armed conflict in three decades and the number of those forcibly displaced as a result has doubled in 20 years to more than 70 million people (Bousquet, 2019). The world's most deadly humanitarian crisis today, Yemen, has seen more than 80% of the country's total population (24 million civilians) directly affected by armed conflict (OCHA, 2018). These crises are becoming increasingly protracted, with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimating in 2017 that crises were lasting on average nine years or more (OCHA, 2018).

In response to these startling statistics, the international humanitarian community has sought to improve its efforts to protect people from the effects of violence and war. However, despite significant investment, there remain serious questions as to how effective international humanitarian protection efforts are in improving protection outcomes for conflict-affected people and whether the current strategies, programme design, implementation and review processes they use are even appropriate.

In conflict situations, violence-affected people – their communities, their civil society organisations, their activists, their political parties, their local state and non-state armed actors – have provided frontline 'protection services', adopting a variety of strategies and utilising various capacities and capabilities to try to prevent and mitigate the impact of conflict-related violence and abuse, and repair the damage done. This fact has been well-explored in research over the last decade, reflecting a broader recognition of the importance of localised humanitarian response in general, as well as in relation to protection (South et al., 2012; Couldrey and Herson, 2016; Gorur and Carstensen, 2016; Barbelet, 2018; ICRC and HHI, 2018). However, 'localising' protection responses also poses difficult practical and ethical questions. Affected populations often make trade-offs that seem unpalatable to international humanitarian organisations, posing dilemmas as to how to support them in a way that still respects humanitarian

principles. Efforts by local actors may also be motivated by political agendas rather than the needs of communities at risk, thus heightening rather than reducing the dangers they face.

Challenges notwithstanding, international humanitarian organisations – the United Nations (UN), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RCRCM) – are still failing to fully understand and/or systematically integrate individuals' or local organisations' efforts in their own response strategies (see for example Niland et al., 2015). As a result, international protection response is missing opportunities to enable more comprehensive, more sustainable and more effective responses to the myriad protection threats and risks that conflict-affected civilians face.

1.1 Background

This synthesis report represents the culmination of a two-year research project by HPG. The project originally aimed to explore the role of informal non-state actors in protection; how they define it and provide it (or not); how affected communities see their impact on protection; and the extent to which affected communities distinguish between formal and informal actors in terms of actual protection outcomes on the ground. It also considered the relevance of physical, conceptual and cultural boundaries in protection needs and responses. As the research evolved it became increasingly clear that separating local from self-protection strategies (as defined below) was both unhelpful and impractical. In practice, the two concepts are inherently linked and the dividing line between a 'local actor' and affected communities, families and individuals is very often blurred. Consequently, this paper adopts a more holistic approach. It considers in more detail the role of local populations in their own protection; the role of local non-state actors in enhancing their efforts; and the relationship between these efforts and those of international 'humanitarian protection' actors, namely the protection mandated agencies of the UN and the RCRCM, as well as international non-governmental organisations that define themselves as

‘protection actors’. The paper further seeks to explore the tensions, challenges and opportunities inherent in a localised approach to protection.

This analysis builds upon an extensive programme of research conducted by HPG over several decades on the protection of civilians affected by conflict and other crises. This has included work on a range of issues including bridging the gap between law and the reality of protecting civilians, protection advocacy, forced displacement, responding to gender-based violence, and protection of civilians and civil military coordination.

1.2 Methodology, terminology and caveats

This synthesis report draws heavily on the other outputs from this project, namely:

- an in-depth review of available literature on the strengths and challenges of local protection and the intersections between different actors and approaches (Fast, 2018);
- field-based research on the self-protection efforts of Kachin communities displaced in northern Myanmar (South, 2018) and Libyans displaced internally and across the border into Tunisia (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019) and how local and international organisations have sought to support such efforts;
- a discussion paper on protection in local response to disasters in the Pacific region (Fast and Sutton, 2018);
- a further internal review of available literature; and
- select interviews and consultations with key experts in this field.

This report refers to protection activities as per the definition articulated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), namely: ‘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, 1999: 4).

This definition is in turn based on a series of consultations led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the 1990s on protection in humanitarian action. There is no formal definition of ‘self-protection’ or ‘local’ protection. For the purposes of this report, self-protection is understood as any activities undertaken or strategies adopted by individuals, families or communities in order to mitigate risks to their own physical, legal and material safety that emanate from armed conflict or situations of generalised violence. Local protection is here understood as any activities undertaken or strategies adopted by civil society, other non-state or state entities to mitigate the risks that conflict- and violence-affected people face.

Protection is inherently complex and the research conducted for this project faced a number of challenges. The field research in particular was hampered by limited access to conflict-affected civilians in some areas, by the complex nature of threats and risks that the civilians consulted face, by the different ways in which affected people experience threats and the choices they make in response, as well as by the different understandings of protection as a normative concept, strategy, practice or service. These issues are explored in the sections below.

Section 2 of this report summarises what we already know about how conflict-affected populations respond to the risks they face, the strategies, tactics and capacities they deploy to mitigate or address them and the challenges they encounter in doing so. It also looks at the role of other local actors in supporting these efforts. Section 3 focuses on the role of international humanitarian organisations in supporting local and self-protection efforts, including related challenges and opportunities. It briefly considers the evolution of ‘localised’ approaches by international humanitarian actors and draws some comparisons between the conclusions of previous research and HPG’s more recent findings. It also offers illustrative examples of how some international humanitarian organisations have instituted more localised protection responses. Section 4 provides overall conclusions and offers some practical suggestions for incentivising a more localised approach to protection by international humanitarian organisations.

2 Local and self-protection response strategies

2.1 The existing knowledge base

The risks faced by civilians in situations of armed conflict and generalised violence around the world are myriad and well-documented. From killings and injuries, sexual violence and abuse, to forced displacement and denial of access to assistance, more than two billion civilians are affected by conflict-related violence today. Current armed conflicts pose additional complexities (including the impact of climate disasters in conflict areas, health emergencies, use of social media and new technologies and the transnational nature of some non-state military forces), but fundamentally there is little new about the nature and scope of violence and abuse perpetrated against civilians (MacFarlane and Khong, 2006; McGoldrick, 2015). However, such suffering is believed to be more widespread and prolonged, with conflicts and other crises lasting on average for nine years or more (OCHA, 2018). According to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), ‘there are more crises affecting more people and lasting longer today than a decade ago’ (OCHA, 2018: 12).

That conflict-affected populations play a role in securing their own protection from such violence and abuse is widely acknowledged and covered in broader academic research: ‘as long as civilians have suffered during war, they have also engaged in self-protection’ (Jose and Medie, 2016: 6). However, it has only become a key area of policy and research by international humanitarian organisations in the last decade or so. The Local to Global Protection initiative, for example, established in 2009, has published a series of research findings on local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises including Sudan, South Sudan, Palestine/occupied Palestinian territories and Myanmar. The ICRC, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Oxfam, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international humanitarian organisations have also been practising a ‘community-based approach’ to protection for the last decade or more (see for example Cotroneo and Pawlak, 2016). At the core

of this knowledge and experience is that civilians are invariably the principal agents of their own protection. As articulated by the Executive Director of the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) at a recent Security Council Open Session on the subject, ‘Civilians are not just victims in armed conflict. They are often the best stewards of their own protection’ (CIVIC, 2019; see also South et al., 2012; Gorur, 2013; Kaplan, 2013; Carstensen, 2016; Jose and Medie, 2016). Building upon this, recent policy discussion, research and operational experiences by international humanitarian organisations indicate a number of key themes.

Civilians take a range of actions to reduce the immediate risks to their own survival or that of their communities but rarely, if ever, have the capacity to entirely eliminate these risks (see for example Ferris, 2011; Carstensen, 2016; Jose and Medie, 2016). Bonwick (2006) categorised the various tactics adopted by civilian populations into avoidance, containment and confrontation. ‘Avoidance’ meaning to escape or move away from the threat; ‘containment’ meaning to manage the threat in situ, such as through paying taxes, engaging in direct negotiations with local power holders, etc; and ‘confrontation’ meaning to align with one or other conflict party or form local armed resistance groups. Reflecting on more recent experiences and knowledge, this remains a useful categorisation in contexts around the world today. The range of actions that civilians take is extraordinarily broad – from instituting community early warning systems to alert neighbours of imminent raids by armed actors (Harragin, 2011), to paying taxes to armed groups to enable free movement or to obtain ‘protection’ from violence (South et al., 2010), to refugee health professionals providing services to host communities to support social cohesion (Easton-Calabria, 2016), to establishing community programmes to counter the risks of radicalisation in refugee camps (Betts et al., 2018). Whatever their actions, the fundamental element in self-protection is that it is rarely entirely effective. The fate of civilians is still largely determined by the motivations, agendas and consequent behaviours of others, principally the

conflict parties. As local council members in Syria explained, if an armed actor refuses to hear their concerns, then ‘there’s nothing we can do’ (Haddad and Svoboda, 2017: 17).

Civilians have varying capacities/assets that they use to mitigate these risks. Assets include physical assets such as savings or valuables that can be used to sustain themselves or pay for ‘protection services’ from armed actors. They also include social capital, ‘the resources that are embedded’ in social, political, cultural or ethnic networks, or ties/affiliations that civilians draw upon in a crisis to reduce imminent or longer-term risks (Uzelac et al., 2018: 28; see also Maxwell et al., 2017). Perhaps the most common manifestation of this is the infinite number of acts of solidarity and humanity that conflict-affected and host communities perform in sharing their (often already meagre) resources with those even more vulnerable than themselves. Specific examples of using social capital to enhance protection outcomes include conflict-affected communities in Somalia receiving political or financial support from the diaspora for conflict resolution and conflict reduction activities (Hammond et al., 2011); vulnerable Zimbabwean communities engaging a local politician or political group who can advocate for their rights on their behalf (Horsey, 2011); and Sunni Syrian refugees seeking shelter with a Sunni Lebanese community in southern Lebanon (Uzelac et al., 2018).

Capacities can be the personal skills and resourcefulness that enable individuals to navigate risks and protect themselves and their families. As evidenced in the literature, this includes strategic thinking, negotiating skills, creativity, entrepreneurship and technical skills (e.g. self-trained civilian engineers neutralising unexploded ordnance in Syria – Carstensen, 2016). Capacities also very often include extraordinary displays of personal courage, with individuals standing up for themselves and their families in the most terrifying of situations. In Syria for example, communities have stood up to local armed groups, demanding they withdraw restrictions on provision of schooling for their children and reopen women’s centres that they had shut down (Haddad and Svoboda, 2017).

The decisions and trade-offs that conflict-affected civilians make to protect themselves are highly complex and often risky. An individual, family or community may take action to mitigate a particular risk in the short term, but in doing so expose themselves to different risks in the short-, medium- or long-term. In countless conflicts, including in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), women and girls have had sex with or become

‘wives’ of combatants in exchange for protection for themselves or their children (see for example Birch, 2008). The high rates of early, forced marriage in South Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Somalia and Yemen reflect a strategy often adopted by families to protect themselves or their children from violence and to mitigate the impact of conflict-related poverty and food insecurity (UN, 2018; Oxfam, 2019). While these and other actions may at times seem extraordinary to international humanitarian organisations, they are ‘decisions’ taken by affected individuals or families based on a calculation of the range of risks faced and a trade-off against those risks they consider to be graver or more immediate (South, 2012; HPG interviews, 2019).

Local actors (both state and non-state) can be both a source of protection and a source of threats to civilians – often simultaneously. In northern Nigeria for example, militia originally formed by communities (such as the Yan Gora in Borno state) to protect themselves from government or other forces have perpetrated abuses against their own or other communities, including extrajudicial executions, intimidation, restricting freedom of movement and sexual violence and abuse (CIVIC, 2018). In Syria, in non-government-held territory, different opposition authorities have created their own systems for issuing identity documentation, thereby increasing risks pertaining to access to services, land and property and to statelessness (HPG interviews, 2019; Clutterbuck et al., 2018). And in CAR, the anti-Balaka began as a community-based self-defence militia but gradually became a more ‘predatory constellation of groups’ (Barbelet, 2015: 8). Very often civilians have transactional relationships with local armed actors (whether from the same ethnic/ideological/religious group or not) in which they pay for protection services, with failure to continue such payments having clear consequences for their safety (South et al., 2010).

Local actors and/or civilian populations have greater access to and, in some cases, influence over conflict parties (compared to international actors), but this engagement may also pose significant risks. By nature of their physical, cultural and linguistic proximity, civilian populations are closer to conflict parties than international humanitarian organisations and therefore may at times be in a better position to engage with belligerents to enhance their own safety (Kaplan, 2013). They may do so through direct negotiations, through ‘nudging’, or through ‘collective protest’ as has been the case in Colombia and Syria for example (CIVIC, 2012; Kaplan, 2013). However,

though engagement with local non-state armed groups may be more feasible in some contexts than with government forces (Kaplan 2013), these actors are also usually quite volatile and the outcomes of such efforts are therefore unpredictable.

2.2 Local and self-protection in Myanmar and Libya/Tunisia

Research undertaken since 2017 as part of this project reaffirms the findings discussed above. It also provides additional insight into how civilians protect themselves in today's armed conflicts and the implications for international humanitarian organisations. A number of themes have emerged in this respect, which warrant further discussion in relation to how international humanitarian organisations seek to support local and self-protection efforts.

Protection threats affect different populations/ individuals differently and vulnerabilities are not static. The differentiated impact of conflict violence on individuals, families and communities has been well noted in past research (see for example Sorensen, 2001). Factors such as gender and social, political, educational or financial status prior to the conflict all determine how violence and abuse will affect an individual, family or community. But as evidenced in Libya and Myanmar, these differences are still not being systematically taken into account by international humanitarian organisations. Instead, organisations tend to make generalised assumptions about threats, risks and vulnerabilities that are too often inaccurate and unhelpful. Vulnerabilities and needs are generally determined in one-off or annual assessment processes and thus are in effect treated as 'static', while in reality they are constantly shifting.

The situation of Libyans displaced across the border to Tunisia most starkly illustrates how vulnerabilities evolve as a conflict becomes more protracted, more complex, or as different belligerents make and lose gains. Many Libyans arrived in Tunis as wealthy, well-resourced individuals with family and professional connections, savings and other assets with which they could sustain themselves. But eight years on from their first flight across the border, some have entirely depleted their resources, their legal status in Tunisia is precarious, their access to assistance and protection is limited and their vulnerabilities have increased as a result (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019). But there has been a general assumption among some aid organisations in Libya and Tunisia

that this population does not have vulnerabilities that require international interventions (HPG interviews, 2019). Assumptions were also made about this population as a group when in fact many individuals were facing specific protection threats, including targeted persecution by belligerents (HPG interviews, 2018 and 2019).

Affected populations have both protection-related vulnerabilities and capacities, and their own protection response strategies are highly individualised. While past research and experience among humanitarian organisations concluded that conflict-affected people have capacities to draw upon to protect themselves, this has not yet been factored into the way that many international humanitarian organisations design and implement their programmes. As evidenced in the research, internally displaced people (IDPs) from Kachin may not have had significant assets prior to their displacement but they have community and personal capacities and resources, related to extended, clan-based ethnic and religious networks, that they draw upon to sustain themselves and their families during the immediate aftermath of displacement, and later in camps and IDP settlements. These capacities, which include the sometimes life-saving actions and advocacy of local religious leaders, are rarely taken into account by humanitarian programmes (South, 2018).

Pre-existing protection-related assets – including educational levels, financial assets, familial networks, political connections or affiliations, language, and access to services and livelihoods – are all key factors in the strategic choices displaced populations make and the opportunities available to them. Some Kachin IDP families choose to move to government-held areas to access education despite the physical risks of moving across frontlines and the discrimination the children face in government-run schools (South, 2018). Many of the Libyan refugees interviewed for this research explained how they had chosen to flee to Tunisia specifically for cultural and social reasons and/or its geographic proximity to home, with others explaining that they were looking at third-country options specifically in order to access higher-level livelihood opportunities. A key tactic employed by both the Kachin IDPs and Libyan refugees and IDPs was mobility. Individuals from all groups explained how they undertook short-term visits to their places of origin, when feasible (and often at considerable risk), to access or check on their remaining assets, livelihoods (agricultural land, homes, businesses) or family who had stayed behind. They also used these visits to regularly assess the feasibility of returning

home for the long term. It is clear that being able to conduct such visits did not mean they felt it was safe to return in the long term, as erroneously believed by some international organisations and some governments, who argue for a withdrawal of refugee status on the basis of such visits (HPG interviews, 2019).

Crossing international or subnational borders is a primary strategy of self-protection but it is not entirely effective – it can expose individuals to new or different threats, and some threats cross the border. One of the starker findings from the research on displaced Libyans was that too few had found a sense of peace or safety in neighbouring Tunisia. Belligerents had been able to pursue individuals across the border owing to the geographic proximity and relative free movement allowed by the Tunisian government (two key factors in the refugees' own choice of destination). Targeted threats included physical attacks as well as the use of social media and technology, including mobile phones, to continue to issue specific threats against and persecute individuals – much the same as they had done within Libya (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019).

Some members of the Kachin community displaced by the conflict between the government and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) had fled across the border into southern China, often to access livelihoods. But in crossing the border they became vulnerable to exploitation by criminal gangs operating in the border areas, increasing their risk of sexual abuse, forced marriage, forced prostitution, forced labour and trafficking. In both cases, Libyans and Kachin had crossed an international border legally but had overstayed their visas and were therefore also vulnerable to refoulement or other sanctions by the host governments (though the Tunisian authorities have not to date taken action in such cases).

For IDPs in Libya and northern Myanmar, continuing displacement has been an ongoing protection strategy, with many families moving every few months in response to the shifting frontlines of their respective conflicts and/or in order to access specific services, such as education. For Kachin IDPs, this process of flight has become a classic self-protection strategy, with many families/communities displacing multiple times over the decades of civil war. Since 2011, the usual practice of spending short periods in the surrounding jungle has no longer been feasible due to the scale and protracted nature of violence and their previous strategy of temporary flight has subsequently changed, with many now residing for longer periods

in formal camps and camp-like settings before moving onwards to other locations.

Social capital takes different forms and can be very valuable as a source of protection but can also expose individuals, particularly minorities, to other threats. Similarly, local civil society or religious groups – which may be a source of social capital – can play a crucial role in enhancing protection outcomes for conflict-affected people but also pose their own risks. Both displaced Kachin and Libyans explained to HPG researchers how they drew upon familial, tribal and ethnic networks to sustain themselves, particularly during the initial phase of displacement. Libyans often sought shelter with Libyan communities in different areas of the country or with Tunisian families across the international border who generously offered their homes as emergency shelter in a spirit of kinship and solidarity. Libyan refugees also spoke of how they relied on family who had remained in the country as source of information on remaining risks if they, as individuals, wished to return. However, there were also negative aspects of such social ties. As a long-standing social structure that has traditionally played an important judicial and security role in Libyan life, the tribe could potentially offer a form of protection for some conflict-affected communities or individuals. But many Libyan refugees interviewed for this research largely rejected the idea of their tribe as a provider of protection because it would come with conservative social mores, including relating to the status of women, that are incompatible with their human rights. Many also felt the concept of tribal protection was outdated and in any case unlikely to be effective given the complexity of the conflict in Libya today: 'When tribal leaders meet and reach an agreement, after they finish, the complete opposite of what they agreed upon takes place by those militias that are no longer under the control or authority of the tribe' (as cited in El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019: 18).

The Kachin nation is a strong ethnic, linguistic, religious and social construct and provides substantial social capital upon which Kachin IDPs can rely in their time of need. The Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO), the civilian arm of the KIA, has become a de facto local authority and service provider, offering assistance to displaced communities through its IDP and Refugee Relief Committee (IRRC), established in 2011 (South, 2018). Populations in areas under the KIO control reportedly have more positive relations with the KIO and feel safer than their counterparts in government-controlled areas (Durable Peace Programme, 2018). But beyond

these practicalities, the KIO and KIA are effectively the manifestation of Kachin nationalism and core to social identities, ‘which can in turn be mobilised, including for recruitment by armed groups’ (South, 2018: 17). The KIA operates under the political and strategic leadership of the KIO – with implications for the safety of civilians in IDP camps and other areas under the KIO’s control. But despite its ‘authority’, the KIO has generally not utilised its leadership role and influence over the KIA to improve the latter’s respect for international humanitarian and human rights law, specifically in relation to the protection of civilians (South, 2018).

Kachin IDPs also explained how heavily they relied upon their local churches as providers of emergency assistance and protection, with many seeking initial refuge in church compounds. Church leaders have proven effective protection advocates, having negotiated safe passage for communities out of conflict-affected areas and securing the release of detainees – often at great personal risk to themselves (South, 2018). This role is based on a sense of Christian solidarity and on the pastor’s sacred mission of care and redemption. However, the conservative values of the Baptist and Roman Catholic Churches in these areas sometimes exclude the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community, religious minorities or others whose personal choices, lifestyle or circumstances fall outside the conservative framework of these religious identities (see Fast and Sutton (2018) for similar findings in relation to faith-based responses in the Pacific).

In both case studies, it was clear that as valuable as social capital is, it cannot protect against all risks, may present supplementary risks and may also begin to wane over time (see also Maxwell et al., 2017; Uzelac et al., 2018). Some Libyan refugees in Tunisia, for example, spoke of their fear that the local Tunisian populations were increasingly frustrated by their presence and that support for them was declining. Inside Libya, the capacities of communities to host and protect their brethren is limited by the impact of

the conflict on their own resources and situation (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019).

Displaced populations in protracted conflicts learn to adapt their political, social and other allegiances or behaviour in order to improve their protection. Many Libyan refugees engaged in this research had fled persecution by belligerents in Libya and had taken specific actions to alter their own behaviour during their displacement, including to reduce their online or media presence and limit their public profile. Many also explained that they did not wish to associate with other Libyans in Tunisia (displaced or otherwise) for fear of information about them being passed back to belligerents. Many have sought anonymity in their places of displacement, often choosing to seek shelter in crowded neighbourhoods in cities or towns where they can be more easily hidden from groups that may be hostile to them (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019).

The research in northern Myanmar found that Kachin families have long hedged their bets in relation to the gains and losses of the two main conflict parties. Many have ensured that some family members are affiliated with the central government in some way, including even serving in the military, while other members are affiliated with the KIA (Smith, 2016). This has enabled them to draw upon whichever political allegiance would offer them protection or assistance at different stages of the conflict. This is partly related to their long experience of conflict but is also characteristic of these communities for whom ethnicity is a fluid concept and subject to evolution across time and context. South (2018: 16) highlights how the Kachin and nearby Shan communities have long ‘shade[d] into each other depending on local socio-economic and political factor’. That conflict-affected communities adapt their behaviours to protect themselves is not new of course. But what the Libyan and Myanmar case studies illustrate is how sophisticated these adaptations can be and how they evolve with context, time and in relation to the range of threats they face.

3 International support for local and self-protection response strategies

Since the early 2000s, there has been much policy debate within the international humanitarian community on the importance of supporting local and/or self-protection efforts (see for example Slim and Bonwick, 2005) and the need to enhance the protection of civilians more broadly. An array of institutional and community-wide commitments have been made in recent years, including through the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) outcome documents (2015–2016), the Grand Bargain (2016), the Charter for Change (2016) and in the Strategic Framework 2016–2019 of the Global Protection Cluster (GPC). However, operationalisation of these commitments at country or crisis level is seriously lagging, as indicated both in the two case studies and in a wider review of current practice.

3.1 Critical gaps and missed opportunities

The research for this project evidences that little has changed in terms of system-wide operational practice, with no major shift towards more ‘localised’ protection responses by the collective of international humanitarian organisations. For example, according to Betts et al. (2018), the practice of engagement and partnerships with local refugee-led organisations is absent from most of UNHCR’s key strategy documents, and ties between the agency and refugee-led community organisations in Kakuma, Kenya (one of its largest and longest-standing refugee operations) are ‘virtually non-existent’ (Betts et al., 2018: 2). UNHCR is not alone, however. Other protection-mandated agencies of the UN and the RCRCM, as well as self-defining protection specialist organisations, have yet to fully embed a ‘localised’ approach across their operations, including their protection operations (HPG interviews, 2019; see also Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). Reflecting on the two case studies for

this project, as well as a wider review of available literature and consultations with key experts in the field, several critical observations can be made about the current status of efforts and the real challenges and dilemmas faced by organisations trying to institute a more localised approach to protection.

First, international humanitarian organisations have still not fully operationalised or ensured the systematic application of their long-standing policy commitments on participatory approaches. Engaging affected populations in assessments as well as in the design, implementation and review of programmes is a key norm of humanitarian programming and central to supporting affected people’s efforts to protect themselves. Although there is a plethora of inter-agency and institutional policy and guidance on this, the recent independent review of the implementation of the Grand Bargain concluded that ‘operationalising this norm at country, programme and project level has proven [...] challenging’ (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019: 46). This failure to fully embed participatory approaches into programming is also evidenced in the findings of research by Ground Truth Solutions in 2017 and 2018 in which affected people surveyed in six countries asserted that the protection and assistance they received from international aid organisations did not contribute to their self-reliance or empowerment and that they felt they had little influence over what aid they received (GTS and OECD, 2018; GTS, 2019).

Second, international humanitarian organisations are also still failing to understand or assess the capacities, assets and behaviours of affected populations and therefore failing to take these into account when designing and implementing protection, including advocacy, responses. Reflecting on her own experiences as an IDP in Georgia, in 2001 Kharashvili observed that international humanitarian organisations were unfamiliar with the capacities of local communities for

‘persuasive advocacy’ (Kharashivili, 2001). Research for this project suggests that progress since has been limited. In Kachin, IDP communities and their church leaders have engaged in advocacy with various power holders to gain safe passage and IDPs in southern Libya, where there is little to no access for international organisations, are continuously negotiating with the frequently changing power holders to protect themselves and their families (HPG interviews, 2018). However, there was limited evidence that international humanitarian organisations had taken these efforts into account in their own advocacy or that they were seeking to echo or support the voices of affected people (HPG interviews, 2018 and 2019). Although the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in Myanmar adopted strategic objectives in 2018 on advocating for increased respect for international humanitarian and human rights law and on strengthening the resilience of communities (OCHA, 2017), during the period of fieldwork for the case study there was scant evidence of the operationalisation of either objective (South, 2018). Hopefully, greater progress can be made, including enhanced partnerships with local protection actors, under the HCT’s new 2019–2020 protection strategy, which includes a specific objective on enabling conflict-affected communities to ‘self-protect and mitigate protection threats’ (although much will depend on resolving ongoing armed conflict across much of northern and western Myanmar) (Myanmar HCT, 2018). In Libya, it was unclear from the UNHCR-led Protection Working Group’s Protection Sector Strategy 2018–2019 (Protection Working Group Libya, 2017) how or to what extent IDPs and other conflict-affected populations would be engaged in determining the key protection threats they face, how these should be responded to, or to what extent their existing capacities for self-protection would be supported.

Third, despite much discussion on the importance of ‘localised’ humanitarian responses, most international humanitarian organisations are still failing to work strategically with local actors, including local civil society organisations and human rights groups, on addressing protection threats. There is a continuing tendency to assume that such groups are unlikely to have the capacity or the understanding to deliver ‘principled’ responses and, consequently, that only international or external actors are able to deliver protection services in a neutral, impartial and professional way – concerns raised by the GPC itself (GPC, 2019). These concerns were prevalent in our research in Kachin, where local CBOs felt they were not trusted by international organisations (South, 2018).

Perhaps due to gaps in their contextual knowledge and/or physical access to areas of conflict, some humanitarian organisations may be unaware of the number, nature and capacities of local civil society, community-based, refugee-based or other grassroots organisations that are already working on protection-related concerns (Betts et al., 2018). But broad assumptions about the capacities of local actors are generally inaccurate and unhelpful – instead investing in formal assessments of their capacities would enable identification of actual gaps and facilitate efforts to address them. Moreover, failing to engage with the broad range of local civil society and state actors who are or could contribute to better protection outcomes for affected people also risks both impartiality and neutrality by falling into the trap of supporting one set of ‘vulnerable victims’ over others and potentially thereby emboldening those that international organisations may think have a righteous cause (South, 2012).

Furthermore, when international humanitarian organisations do seek engagement with local groups they tend to encourage local actors’ participation in international coordination mechanisms, rather than reach out to, consolidate with or support existing local structures. For example, several Kachin interviewees complained about being co-opted into projects designed by external actors without much ‘upstream’ input from local organisations (South, 2018). For its part, the GPC has invested significant resources in its ‘Localisation of Protection’ project, aiming to increase local actors’ engagement with and influence in humanitarian country teams and international protection coordination mechanisms, including through provision of capacity-building support in five countries (HPG interviews, 2019; GPC, 2019). While such efforts are laudable and desirable among local NGOs, corresponding investments in engaging with or supporting pre-existing local protection networks have been lacking (HPG interviews, 2019; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). In Libya, for example, the Protection Working Group’s Strategy 2018–2019 pledged to ‘engage, support and invest’ in national civil society organisations (Protection Working Group Libya, 2017). But the GPC recently concluded that such actors ‘play a significant role in the operationalisation of the response yet have very limited leadership and decision-making power’ (GPC, 2019: 9). This is, as the GPC notes, partly related to the physical disconnect between local organisations working on protection inside Libya and the international humanitarian organisations who are largely based in Tunis and only recently in Tripoli due to security concerns. Security and access constraints

aside, however, there are still questions as to whether international humanitarian actors could be doing more to better support these local protection efforts. More broadly, though global efforts are being made by OCHA, the GPC and its members to address the lack of access to and influence over international coordination mechanisms for local actors, they often still find themselves ‘locked out of the formal humanitarian system’ (Betts et al., 2018: 5; see also Barbelet, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019).

Fourth, despite working through and with multiple local partners, international humanitarian organisations are too often failing to publicly acknowledge, give voice to or otherwise provide capacity-building support to those partners who are at the forefront of protection responses and bearing the greatest of risks to protect conflict-affected communities (HPG interviews, 2018 and 2019; Easton-Calabria, 2016; Betts et al., 2018). This was a key concern raised by local CBOs in Kachin and northern Myanmar, with many noting they were given little credit for the work that they did (South, 2018).

Fifth, some international organisations are still falling back on the ‘standardised’, ‘projectised’ approach to protection programming and are unable or unwilling to adapt to a given context or population (see for example Barbelet, 2015). In Myanmar for example, local community organisations complained that they were expected to shoe-horn their long-term programmes of engagement with communities into short-term, results-driven projects that undermined their long-term work (South, 2018). In Libya, the standardised response to displacement has meant that most of the Libyan refugees interviewed for our research had received little or no assistance from international humanitarian organisations because they fell outside of the traditional definitions of ‘vulnerable persons’.

This is a long-standing challenge for humanitarian organisations in general and those engaging in protection in particular. Given the large-scale crisis situations that they are called upon to respond to, their whole approach is necessarily generalised, intended to be delivered at scale and speed. But in the two case studies for this project, as in many others, protection needs are more individual, more nuanced and more complex, requiring a more in-depth assessment, understanding and response than humanitarian organisations are generally equipped or funded to provide.

Finally, protection work is by its nature very high risk and, although it can bring positive outcomes, supporting local or self-protection efforts generally

increases those risks. Localising protection responses means empowering communities and their local partners to determine the nature, scope and ‘results’ to be achieved by the protection response. This reduction of control by international organisations may increase the physical risks to the very people that international organisations are trying to protect, since it may in some instances leave them more vulnerable to local power dynamics. It also increases physical risks to the staff of international and local organisations supporting affected populations because they have less control over who is involved with or benefits from programmes or how the principles of neutrality and impartiality are applied. International organisations’ reputational and financial risks will also increase because they will have less control over the way a programme is designed, implemented and accounted for. The financial and reputational risks for donors will increase for the same reasons – they will have less control over how their money is managed, allocated and accounted for. To date there seems to have been limited discussion in IASC policy fora or with donors on what the real dilemmas and challenges of localising protection are, and less still on understanding the true nature of the physical, reputational and financial risks involved. Such an informed discussion is essential to understand how these risks can be better managed and to determine what levels of residual risk may be acceptable or reasonable to donors, international organisations and local populations themselves (HPG interviews, 2019).

3.2 Supporting affected communities and local actors to enhance their own protection: good practice and key challenges

Notwithstanding the gaps and missed opportunities listed above, there are some examples of international humanitarian organisations working with and alongside national and local partners and affected populations to support them in enhancing protection outcomes. Christian Aid and other members of the ACT Alliance have, for example, been working through local partners as their default operational modality for many decades. Through their more recent Survivor and Community-led Response (SCLR) approach, Christian Aid, Dan Church Aid, Local to Global Protection and Church of Sweden have directly supported the efforts of affected populations to enhance their protection in several contexts. During the 2017 internal armed conflict in Marawi in the Philippines, the SCLR programme (implemented in

partnership with national NGO, Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits, Inc. (ECOWEB)) enabled local community leaders to establish safe spaces for dialogue to address the social divisions appearing between Muslim and Christian communities as a result of the conflict, thereby mitigating the risks of inter-religious tensions and violence (Antequisa and Corbett, 2018). In northern Kenya and Myanmar, Christian Aid led a collaborative programme following the same approach (as part of its Linking Preparedness Response and Resilience (LPRR) strategy), working through local NGOs to provide communities with technical assistance and micro-grants that they could allocate to their own priority projects, including peacebuilding, psychosocial support and promoting community cohesion (Corbett, 2018). While these approaches generally involve a long-term strategy of investment and partnership, in some of these examples, the international organisations involved were able to see tangible returns on their investments more quickly than anticipated, with communities able to respond effectively to some of the crises they faced soon after joining the programme (HPG interviews, 2019).

Oxfam International has pursued a similar localisation approach for over a decade in its protection programmes in Colombia and the DRC, and more recently with Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon and with conflict-affected populations in the CAR. The basis of their approach is to support engagement among community members and between communities and local authorities or powerholders. To do this, Oxfam and its partners work with local communities, providing training and small grants to help them establish protection structures to develop and implement community protection plans that address the key threats identified *by* communities, in the way *they* want to address them. This has included supporting communities to negotiate with local authorities for removal of illegal road barriers, or to challenge discriminatory practices or norms such as those affecting women and girls (Lindley-Jones, 2016). The Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) has been running a targeted capacity-building programme for refugee community organisations through which 10–12 organisations are selected to take part in a two-year training programme, which includes courses on management, leadership and accounting, for example. At the end of the programme, it offers the organisations up to \$1,500 to start or expand programmes that contribute to the community (Easton-Calabria, 2016). The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) has been working with its local partners in Lebanon to strengthen their

advocacy on the situation of Syrian refugees, including facilitating their direct representation to the UK parliament (CAFOD, 2019).

There are a number of common elements in these programming approaches. In each of these examples, the INGOs involved worked with local NGOs to help communities assess their own vulnerabilities, risks and priorities, develop their own plans of action and implement their own responses to protection-related threats, risks and challenges. Though relatively low cost in overall project terms, these INGOs also invested substantial time and staff resources over several years to develop partnerships with communities and local organisations before yielding tangible results. And therein lie some of the challenges.

Funding is the principal practical challenge to working in this way, particularly given the current levels of risk tolerance and lack of flexibility among donor states (HPG interviews, 2019; see also Wall and Hedlund, 2016). Even some of the most liberal of donor countries are seemingly uninterested, unwilling or unable to fund the kind of long-term, adaptive, flexible and timely programming approaches – with all the inherent risks – that are required to support local and self-protection efforts (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019). This lack of flexibility is in large part related to the prevalence of counter-terrorism measures among donor governments that may limit or even exclude funding for programmes in certain geographic areas or for specific populations and, more generally, have led to greater risk aversion among donors in complex conflict situations (see for example Metcalf-Hough et al., 2015; NRC, 2018; Charney, 2019; Maurer, 2019). Additionally, humanitarian financing structures are, as is well documented elsewhere, simply not designed for the kind of longer-term, flexible programming that more localised responses require (High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2015; Bennett and Foley, 2016; OECD, 2016; Willits-King et al., 2018). As a result, most organisations operating in this way have had to rely upon core or private funding to finance such projects, making it difficult to take this approach to scale across several different contexts (HPG interviews, 2019; Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019).

Measuring the success or outcomes of such programming approaches is also an inherent challenge. Some of the examples cited above evidence positive impact and demonstrate these approaches can be achieved at scale and speed. But more generally measuring or proving (positive) outcomes for affected populations has long been a challenge for international organisations engaged in protection

work (see for example Bonino, 2014). Addressing this challenge, being realistic about what ‘results’ may look like and when they can be expected, will be key to garnering more donor support and to gauging how and when to scale up.

Making the kind of wholesale institutional cultural changes required to better support local and self-protection responses are, as noted earlier, another major challenge. Even for those international organisations that are operating in this way, shifting towards an approach that necessarily means adopting broader objectives, with less control over results that will (generally) take longer to manifest, should not be underestimated (HPG interviews, 2019). The operational changes required are also substantial since this would mean major changes to how programmes are managed, staffed and reviewed.

A number of stakeholders in this project also highlighted the ethical dilemmas that working in this way can sometimes pose. Some suggested that the more ‘local’ a protection response strategy, the more complex it may become, with attendant risks relating to adherence to humanitarian principles, safety and security, and legitimacy of the international response (Fast and Sutton, 2018; HPG interviews, 2019). In some instances, local organisations do not self-define as ‘humanitarian’. Although they may be committed to the principle of humanity – of alleviating human suffering – they might not consider themselves as neutral or impartial in a conflict. This can pose attendant physical, programmatic and reputational risks for international humanitarian organisations who, for practical and ethical reasons, are supposed to uphold all humanitarian principles. In the occupied Palestinian territories, for example, the protection cluster working group has been successful in bringing together a wide spectrum of local and national civil society organisations to identify and respond to conflict-related violence and abuse facing the Palestinian civilian population. But some of these local members have an explicitly non-neutral position on the conflict, for example focusing exclusively on protection issues arising directly from the Israeli occupation and its military and security forces, with little if any attention paid to protection concerns relating to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas and their respective forces, to other armed groups or to conflict-related social protection issues such as domestic abuse and violence against women (HPG interviews,

2019). However, this problem is not all that frequent and neither is it insurmountable, with appropriate engagement. Many local actors understand the concept and value of humanitarian principles but also understand the limitations and make conscious decisions about how to utilise them in practice. As some local organisations in Syria articulated, they are ‘neutral to the humanitarian situation, not the political situation’ (Svoboda et al., 2018).

The strategies and tactics adopted by local populations to improve their protection may also pose ethical dilemmas for international organisations. In 2009, for example, local communities in southeast Myanmar laid their own landmines in an effort to stave off attacks by the government military forces, but in doing so exposed themselves and other civilians to injury and death – a practice which sometimes continued even after ceasefires were agreed in these areas (South, 2012; HPG interviews, 2019). As noted earlier, local de facto authorities in Syria have attempted to assist local populations to access local services by issuing new identity documentation (including birth and marriage registration) but in doing so made it dangerous for these populations to access or travel through government or Islamic-held areas since they would be considered affiliated with the ‘opposition’ (HPG interviews, 2019). Responding to such dilemmas is profoundly difficult and there are no easy answers.

Power dynamics also play a major role in the operationalisation of localising humanitarian response, with many international organisations concerned at what they see as a threat to their current power, status and share of the vast global humanitarian funding pool (Bennett and Foley, 2016; Collinson, 2016; HPG and ICVA, 2016; Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Featherstone, 2017; Barbelet, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). Finding the necessary incentives for the strategic, financial, administrative and operational changes required to bring about a system-wide focus on better supporting local and self-protection efforts is perhaps the greatest challenge. Supporting self-protection strategies is in effect a realisation of the core principle of humanity, giving people a voice, giving them back some control over their own lives, helping to give them a sense of dignity. But such ‘moral’ incentives have not thus far proved sufficient to spur a whole of system shift towards more support for local and self-protection responses.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The research findings for this project largely reinforce what is generally already understood, namely that civilians are the principal agents of their own survival and recovery; that how successful they are is determined in part by the pre-existing capacities and assets they are able to draw upon and by the strategies, tactics and actions that they undertake; but that whatever their strategies, their survival is ultimately determined by the motivations and behaviour of the conflict parties. It also reaffirms that local actors – civil society, other non-state as well as state actors – can and do play a critical role in enhancing protection outcomes for conflict-affected people. The research also highlights that these local actors can pose their own threats, with individuals and communities often forced to seek protection from actors that are either incapable of providing it or demand a quid pro quo that exposes people to other risks.

But the research further indicates that, broadly speaking, the international humanitarian community is still not systematically pursuing opportunities for more localised protection responses in most contexts. Despite the efforts of the GPC, there is still a lack of emphasis on supporting local and self-protection strategies at country or crisis level. The reasons for this are multiple – some practical, some technical, some cultural and some related to the long-standing power dynamics that govern the humanitarian sector. Regarding the latter, any fears that localisation will mean a reduction in the role or value of international humanitarian organisations engaged in protection work are largely unfounded. Their role may need to shift but will continue to be critical. Protection crises are invariably highly complex and a range of complementary tactics and actions from a diversity of actors – international, regional, national and local – is thus required to remove or mitigate threats to civilians, repair the damage done and support recovery. The comparative advantages of each of these actors will vary over time, in relation to conflict dynamics and other contextual factors. The degrees

of ‘localisation’ that are possible and appropriate will similarly vary over time and in relation to different conflict and contextual factors.

Thus, international actors will need to remain flexible and determine their role and approach based on context. But a number of facts will almost always hold true: as international actors, UN agencies, INGOs, the RCRCM and others can enable access to (direct) funding to support local protection efforts – a key problem for many local protection actors. Through targeted long-term support, they can strengthen the local skills base on protection, ensuring that national and local actors and affected communities have the requisite technical capacities and tools, as well as contextual knowledge, to mitigate the threats civilians face. Crucially, international organisations have access to global decision-makers. They can use this to amplify the voices of affected people at that level, utilising their global credibility, resources and presence to raise protection concerns and try to influence the behaviour of conflict parties (i.e. to improve their respect for international humanitarian, human rights, refugee and other relevant laws). This can be done through quiet diplomacy, public advocacy or through third party lobbying. There are no guarantees of the efficacy of such efforts, but these are critical actions that local actors and affected communities are unable to take up because they do not have the access to third party states, the influence over central authorities or the public voice to raise such concerns.

The importance of more localised protection responses and how this can be done, including the challenges to be overcome, are laid out above. But although there is increasing momentum behind actioning the broader commitments on localisation that so many international organisations and donors have made in recent years, there is still a need to incentivise the major inter-agency and institutional shifts required, to ensure that organisations make the necessary investments to fully embed a flexible but determined approach to more localised protection responses, take current good practice to scale, and effectively navigate

the challenges posed. Moreover, there is a need to find incentives that mitigate and absorb the range of reputational, physical and financial risks inherent in such an approach. The recommendations below include suggested actions that may serve to create such incentives, and outline how a system-wide shift to more localised protection responses could be achieved.

4.2 Recommendations

Utilising its authority and capacity as lead agency for the GPC, UNHCR, together with the lead agencies for the GPC's Areas of Responsibility (AOR)¹ should incentivise a more strategic and informed approach to more localised protection responses among members of the GPC and its national/subnational level clusters (as well as the wider international humanitarian community). This should be done through:

- Reaching out to national and local civil society organisations to better understand how and to what extent the GPC and national/local level cluster working groups are of relevance, interest and accessible to them. It will require a concerted effort of engagement to facilitate their meaningful participation (not just representation) in key strategic and policy work of the GPC and its national/subnational cluster working groups. The lessons already documented clearly indicate that this means ensuring local actors have access to and influence over the discussions and decisions taken within the GPC and its national/subnational cluster working groups.
- Presenting a clear and transparent business case (within the membership and beyond) for more localised protection responses. This should include collating and presenting evidence of the *practical* value (i.e. reflecting on downward funding trends, decreasing access for international organisations, and the increasing scale of needs) and the *technical* value (i.e. the value of utilising local capacities and knowledge) of the differing forms of localising protection responses, while making clear the risks, challenges, mitigating measures required and limitations. Crucially, as the global entity responsible for promoting protection at the foundation of humanitarian response, the GPC's leadership should also more forcefully articulate the *principled* arguments for ensuring appropriate support for local and self-protection strategies.

Such arguments include supporting self-protection efforts to enhance people's dignity, which in turn is integral to the core principle of humanity, and that capitalising on local knowledge and capacities is key to the fundamental tenet of 'do no harm'.

- **Facilitating an honest debate among the GPC membership and particularly among national/subnational-level cluster working groups on the dilemmas and challenges posed by localising protection responses**, which of these might be resolved and how and, crucially, what the limits of a 'localised' response may be in different contexts.
- Identifying and disseminating learning on localising protection to the GPC membership and national/subnational level cluster working groups. This should include collating a sample of good practices in supporting local and self-protection efforts as well as the challenges faced and mitigating actions taken. Such examples should be integrated in all relevant tools and guidance to country level clusters and their members. It may also be useful to critically analyse how international human rights actors and peace and conflict transformation actors engage with/support local protection actors and affected populations, with a view to identifying good practice or lessons that could be extended to humanitarian organisations.
- Improving accountability for existing inter-agency and institutional commitments on localisation by integrating objectives on better supporting local and self-protection responses in the terms of reference of protection cluster coordinators at global and national/subnational levels.
- Considering what 'localising' protection means in terms of the protection advocacy role of the GPC and its members, elaborating an appropriate strategy and action plan to reinforce this role at a global level and in relation to specific crisis contexts.
- Becoming a principal advocate for more localised protection responses, supporting country-level clusters to operationalise existing commitments on this approach and encouraging other actors (including donors and non-humanitarian actors engaged in conflicts and other crises) to support such efforts.

Donor states should directly (and in collaboration with UNHCR as cluster lead agency and other partners) create the necessary incentives for institutional and system-wide shifts towards more localised responses to protection, including through:

¹ Lead agencies of the AORs are: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF – child protection), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC – housing, land and property rights), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund – gender-based violence) and United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS – mine action).

- **Increasing the provision – to both international organisations seeking to support local actors and directly to local actors – of flexible and longer-term funding** that enables rather than undermines support for local and self-protection responses.
- **Integrating appropriate conditions in funding agreements** that require operational partners to demonstrate how and to what extent they have systematically implemented participatory and community-led approaches and local partnerships.
- **Engaging in an honest debate with operational partners on the risks and challenges each face in moving towards more localised protection responses**, the limits of this approach, how these risks may be mitigated, what residual risks are acceptable to each other and where there is common ground for further collaboration to mitigate risks and challenges.
- **Developing an honest review of the challenges that engaging in more localised protection responses has or will bring**, how these challenges were or may be overcome or mitigated and what the limitations of a ‘localised’ approach to protection are.
- **Ensuring that accountability for delivering appropriately localised protection responses is embedded in corporate structures (such as performance management systems) at all levels** – from senior management to local project implementation staff.
- **Ensuring the systematic application of existing participatory approaches and mechanisms of accountability to affected populations.** This may require revising, upscaling, and expanding existing policy and mechanisms to ensure genuinely community-led responses that are assessed, designed, implemented and monitored by community groups themselves.

Building upon recommendations made elsewhere on localising humanitarian response in general, **protection-mandated humanitarian organisations and those that self-define as protection actors** should enhance their support to local and self-protection efforts through:

- Undertaking a critical review of their existing local partnerships in protection programmes, with a view to understanding whether or where these can be reinforced, upgraded or expanded.
- Engaging in peer-to-peer exchanges with other international humanitarian organisations on experiences and lessons learned in respect of programmes that support local and/or self-protection strategies.
- **Local civil society organisations and other local actors** engaged in protection-related work should demand greater recognition and support for their work through:
 - Ensuring that they present a more inclusive and coordinated voice at country level to assert their critical role in and their capacities to deliver better protection outcomes for affected populations.
 - Articulating more clearly what their challenges are and what corresponding support they require from international actors, including in terms of advocacy, technical support and financial support.

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