



**GPC Peer Exchange Webinar:
Collaborative Advocacy by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors: How to better manage
the tensions between Advocacy and Operational Access?**

17 May 2022

Summary Note

A recording of the webinar is available online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVzpuW6CpmM&feature=youtu.be>

1. Event Background and Concept

As a part of the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) and the GPC's Advocacy and Human Rights Engagement Task Teams co-organised a peer-exchange webinar on the topic of "Collaborative Advocacy by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors: How to better manage the tensions between Advocacy and Operational Access?".

The event took place online on May 17 with several speakers as well as a panel discussion involving leading protection and advocacy colleagues who shared national, regional and global perspectives on the topic. It was attended by approximately 97 participants.

The webinar's theme is grounded in the ongoing perceived and real tensions that often exist between access and advocacy. On the one hand, robust advocacy on protection issues is critical in terms of protection actors' ability to call attention to and help stop rights abuses. On the other hand, the need for access, both in terms of communities impacted by crises being able to access protection services and protection actors being able to access these communities, remains critical. Across many complex emergencies around the world, these two elements are often seen as at odds with each other, making some operational organizations weary of 'speaking up' given the risks of operations being 'shut down'. And yet, both advocacy and access are foundational for effective protection response. How they can be navigated and managed together is an ongoing point of debate and learning across the sector.

An important contribution to this topic was made in 2021, with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of ODI's research (done in partnership with the GPC's Human Rights Engagement Task Team) into collaborative advocacy by humanitarian and human rights actors. The research report, entitled '[Opportunities and challenges: Collaborative advocacy by humanitarian and human rights actors](#)', included key findings and recommendations for further collaborative advocacy and action. Many stakeholders interviewed for this research highlighted that advocacy by humanitarians has become a 'race to the bottom' in recent years, with even private diplomacy increasingly compromised or deprioritised for the sake of maintaining operational access. Importantly, the research also highlighted a number of positive practices where closer collaboration between humanitarian and human rights actors supported the proactive management of some of the tensions between advocacy and access.

The peer exchange event sought to use this research and its recommendations as the foundation for a 'deeper dive' discussion on the topic. Bringing together leading practitioners working across humanitarian and human rights sectors, speakers and panelists focused on how to more effectively manage the risks linked to undertaking advocacy as operational actors, including through closer collaboration with human rights partners.

The following questions served to guide speaker interventions and the panel discussion:

1. To what extent have we collectively advanced in addressing on the real or perceived tensions between access and advocacy?
2. What current examples are there of positive practice to showcase how such tensions have been/can be managed through a more collaborative relationship with human rights actors? What can we learn from them?
3. What challenges/barriers remain to using both advocacy and access to secure better protection outcomes for affected people?
4. What opportunities are there to reinforce the concept that advocacy and access are both integral to humanitarian action and that tensions can and must be proactively managed?

2. Summary of Speakers' Interventions

Opening remarks by William Chemaly, Global Protection Cluster Coordinator

- There are currently 150 million internally displaced persons across the globe—the highest number since the inception of the cluster. Last year, it was 110 million people in need of protection. We thus face a 'quantum leap' of protection needs in a very short amount of time.
- Conflict and human rights abuses are by far the main drivers of these growing protection risks. Covid, economic crises, climate shocks and more are all adding to the stress faced by communities impacted by conflict, further driving negative coping mechanisms and deepening protection risks.
- And yet, while the needs are growing, access is shrinking. Across protection cluster operations, we (as protection actors across agencies/orgs) are able to reach at best 25-50% of those in need of protection. This question of access to affected populations by protection actors and access to protection services is particularly alarming in Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen and Mozambique where we are able to reach far less than 25% of the population. We have less access overall, but specifically for protection purposes.
- It's clear we need strong advocacy to change behaviours, to end impunity – but at the same time we need expanded access.
- For GPC it's not a question of whether we should prioritize access over advocacy or vice versa. It's actually 'how can we have access that protects?'. How can we have access to engage with armed groups and change behaviours, how can we have access to communities to prevent/stop early marriage, to access villages to provide comprehensive protection services etc.?
- GPC reflections on these trends:
 - Since start of the year, GPC is preoccupied with feeling/evidence that there is less access, less access for protection services and even when there is access, it's not systematic that protection is integrated into delivery of materials assistance etc.
 - The current set up for access negotiations is not fully geared toward protection – how do we shift existing approaches and tools to build in more protection related efforts into access negotiations?
 - It seems taken for granted that advocacy undermines/compromises access – but reality is much more nuanced, as there is a need for proper analysis of different cases and learnings. The accepted narrative is that protection advocacy limits access. But is this always true or more so in certain instances? With certain modalities/approaches?

If at times it is indeed a reality, what actions can we as protection actors take to mitigate or better manage the risks?

- The GPC is running a series of events, including this one, over the year to help us ‘get smarter’ at understanding the problem and thinking through solutions (including the need for a ‘protection access review’, defining tools/approaches for holistic approach to access that protects, monitoring of quality of access, study that further nuances learnings re. advocacy and access).

Reflections from the ODI research on collaborative advocacy by humanitarian and human rights actors by Vicki Metcalfe-Hough, Research Lead with the Humanitarian Protection Group at ODI

- ODI is concluding two years of research on the practice of protection advocacy by humanitarian organizations. It is true that there are many risks in advocating for increased protection of civilians. There also many risks inherent in *not* advocating on behalf of them. Some organizations express that access is more often compromised by advocacy. But other humanitarians expressed that this is the wrong approach—advocacy is an integral part to humanitarian work and is aimed to improve the physical, legal and material safety of civilians affected by armed conflict. There is a moral and practical obligation on our part.
- It is important to acknowledge instances of threats and impediments to protection access because of undertaking different forms of advocacy. Over the years, this has been noticed in Darfur, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Palestine. But a proper assessment of the risks inherent in advocacy is required. Such assessments continue to be rare. Decision-making on advocacy is often based on assumptions- that are not context or time specific.
- Some useful questions to consider are:
 - Was there a direct correlation between advocacy and access restrictions? Is it black and white?
 - What were the direct consequences for affected population of restrictions imposed on international organizations? Often the consequences considered are the impediments to our operational access and less about people’s access to systems.
 - If access to services or assistance was disrupted, would it have been better to not advocate on their behalf? Perhaps better to consider if we need access at *any* cost?
- Partnership across humanitarian and human rights organizations can increase the impact of advocacy and mitigate risks to operational access. This happens in several ways:
 - It serves to build a stronger evidence base on which to advocate – harder for conflict parties to rebut.
 - Advocating on the same issues, calling for the same actions may reduce the risk of an organization or entity being singled out for retaliatory action.
 - More public advocacy can be undertaken by those organizations that face less risk – because they are more distant from operations.
 - Ramping up the pressure on conflict parties to change their behaviour, thereby reducing the risks to civilians.

3. Panel Discussion with Protection Practitioners

Eva Linaki, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Humanitarian Affairs Advisor and Legal Specialist

- MSF was created by a group of doctors and journalists, which brings two inseparable elements in MSF’s work: (i) provision of medical care; and (ii) bearing witness (témoignage). Hence, speaking out flows from MSF’s commitment to bear witness. The issue of whether access will be lost upon speaking out is an ongoing debate in MSF.
- In most instances, it may not be the case that we lose access because of speaking up on human rights issues. From a humanitarian affairs perspective, instead of asking the question of

whether it is either access or advocacy, it may be more useful to consider the following questions:

- How do we do advocacy in a way that is in the best interest of the people we serve?
 - Do we want to have operational access at all costs? What if there are situations where the organization judges that it prefers giving up its access in return for speaking out?
 - How do we conduct advocacy? Advocacy can be conducted using different tactics and on different levels.
 - It is imperative to consider the context and specific circumstances of the situation each time.
- MSF's independence (MSF receiving most of its funding from individual donors and private institutions) can help, as it can give MSF more liberty to make its own choices from an access, operational and advocacy perspective. Although MSF is not a human rights organisation, it recognizes their important role and that it is important to engage with them when it comes to advocacy.

Christelle Hure, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Head of Advocacy, Media and Communication for West and Central Africa regional office

- There are 2 main risks that we need to assess when we're doing advocacy: reaction by the authorities, but also by Non-State Armed Groups, and potential retaliation against the populations that we want to protect and humanitarian staff.
- Advocacy, if well used, can be a means to an end. There is a need for a case-by-case risk analysis and identification of advocacy tactics tailored to the context (especially public vs private advocacy) and mitigation measures.
- Among mitigation measures that have proven to be useful in the region: the collection of strong evidence (which protection clusters can provide); the need to build Coalitions at the leadership level, through a diversity of stakeholders; the need to collaborate with human rights groups, openly or in the shadow. As an examples of these collaborations, at the regional level, NRC and OCHA have created 3 years ago a regional taskforce on humanitarian access and humanitarian principles which gathers INGOs, UN agencies and donors and aims to improve the coordination on access analysis, but also on advocacy. Joint advocacy has been successful in influencing high-level Summits' final declaration. Another example of joint advocacy between human rights and humanitarian organisations is the People's Coalition for the Sahel: it is an informal and diverse alliance of more than 50 CSOs and INGOs, which is doing advocacy on protection of civilians and humanitarian access.
- Another mitigation measure is the use of different voices, be it voices at the regional or international level, if it is too risky to conduct advocacy at the national level (which can be the case for advocacy on IDP returns for instance), voices from high-level representatives, or voices from journalists (with which off the record information can be shared).
- For NRC, humanitarian work is never just to hand out assistance, it never was and never should be. It is also protection of civilians, bearing witness, and speaking out. Beyond the tensions between access and advocacy, advocacy can actually be a very powerful tool for improving humanitarian access. It has been the case for advocacy against armed escorts in Niger, for instance.
- The region needs more than ever a strong humanitarian leadership at national, regional and international level to speak out, help INGOs raise the voice of the civilians and alert on the protection crisis and shrinking humanitarian space in West and Central Africa region.

Tamar Gumushian, Grants and MEAL Supervisor, Insan Association

- In general, advocacy in the MENA region poses many challenges and can even be dangerous so not everyone is willing to engage in it.

- In the past Insan has made efforts to carry out joint advocacy efforts with other organisations. However, this has posed several challenges and therefore Insan now prefers to act on an ad hoc basis and find supporters and allies for every specific cause separately and based on clear alignment in terms of values and approaches.
- Insan works with the assumption that an organisation which solely meets the present necessities of marginalised community members, and acts without addressing the underlying causes of suffering, is at risk of inadvertently strengthening the systems which are the causes of suffering and injustice to those communities.
- Therefore, a more holistic approach to protect affected populations is needed and for Insan, this includes looking at ways for different organizations and activists to focus on playing particular roles or influencing particular issues/actors, while ensuring very strong coordination and collaboration between all the different protection actors and stakeholders. This is about working towards a shared aim but having a clear 'division of labour' or different roles that different actors can play, based on their programming, their relationships, their risk appetite etc. For example, advocacy work must be carried forward by NGOs while the practical provision of services must remain the primary responsibility of government organisations. NGOs should be clearly independent and advocating for more responsive, inclusive service provision and not simply taking on the same role/responsibilities as the authorities.

4. Closing remarks

Carolina Montenegro and Alison Kent, GPC Advocacy Task Team Co-Leads

- From the perspective of the GPC's Advocacy Task Team, advancing our shared thinking and understanding across the sector of how protection actors and the humanitarian system more broadly can more effectively manage any tensions between advocacy and operational access is critical. We know we need both but we also know that advocacy continues to come up against resistance within organizations and the humanitarian community, often framed and understood generically as a 'risk'. However, as highlighted today, ultimately, when done thoughtfully and based on proactive risk management, access and advocacy can really complement and reinforce each other, strengthening protection outcomes for communities impacted by crisis.
- The ODI research is a great contribution to this area of thinking and the discussion today yet another excellent contribution. And so, now how do we continue to build on this?
- One suggested action that we're envisioning as part of the broader campaign by the GPC on enhancing access for protection, as highlighted by William, is to undertake a more systematic review of advocacy and access over the past several years and get very specific about instances where advocacy has curtailed access in particular countries and communities, where advocacy has actually supported with access, and what we can learn from these experiences. In this sense, we're hoping that having more evidence and more examples can help further challenge this notion of advocacy undermining access and actually further highlight where advocacy remains instrumental to supporting/expanding access to communities in need of protection and their access to life-saving assistance. Alongside this evidence, we also need to look at ways to increase accountability (and incentives) of humanitarian leadership to advance this commitment to advocacy and ensure it is seen as core to the responsibilities of different organizations/coordination structures.

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