

PROTECTION CLUSTER

Introduction

The Protection Cluster Working Group (PCWG), chaired by UNHCR and comprised of numerous IASC participants from the UN, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement, has met regularly (generally on a monthly basis) since the inception of the cluster leadership approach in July 2005. Meetings are taking place in Geneva and participants from Washington, New York, London, Rome and offices in the field are joining the meeting by teleconference. The meetings are organized by UNHCR with the support of OCHA-IDD. A particular achievement of the PCWG has been to benefit from a continuous engagement of a large number of NGOs, as well as from the support and guidance of the International Committee of the Red Cross. In order to ensure a continuous process of engagement, the PCWG has chosen to minimize meetings to once a month, and to maximize productivity by relying on information exchange and development of tools and policies electronically and through smaller focus groups. This latter approach has permitted, in particular, a continuing engagement with NGOs on an equal footing with other PCWG participants.

The report of the PCWG to the IASC Principals, endorsed in its September 2005 meeting, established a framework for protection activities in country operations where the cluster leadership approach is applied. This framework identifies UNHCR as the global cluster lead for the protection of internally displaced persons and affected populations in complex emergency situations, subject, however, to the understanding that UNHCR's involvement must not undermine the institution of asylum, including the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.¹ In situations where UNHCR cannot assume cluster leadership or where another protection-mandated agency would be better placed to act as cluster lead, the PCWG has agreed that OHCHR, UNHCR and UNICEF will jointly propose alternative arrangements to the HC/RC, in full consultation with the country team.

Apart from establishing a mechanism for predictable and coherent leadership in protection, the PCWG has concentrated on three main areas of activity: mapping of response capacity, identification of common protection gaps, and assignment of focal point responsibilities for ensuring predictable and comprehensive response. Given the evolving nature of involvement in situations of internal displacement – particularly given the contextual variations of country operations, as well as the efforts of agencies to enhance capacity to respond to protection challenges – this framework remains, necessarily, a “work in progress”.

¹ UNGA Resolution 49/169 of 23 December 1994, OP10.

Challenges

Although protection cluster leadership vests with UNHCR (or OHCHR or UNICEF, in the circumstances described above), the PCWG has strived to ensure an inclusive and participatory approach to protection. In this regard, UNHCR has promoted “strategic partnership” with NGOs as a means of multiplying protection capacity and protection impact. One unexpected challenge in this area has been the difficulty of mapping NGO capacity at the global level and to “engage” local NGOs. The PCWG has also faced the challenge of establishing priorities among protection activities, particularly given the intersecting but varying protection mandates of the PCWG’s participant agencies. Similarly, the cross-cutting nature of protection has given rise to some confusion in country operations with regard to responsibility for some activities that have a protection component (for example, the relationship between water and sanitation and prevention of gender-based violence; or at the “inter-cluster” level between camp management/coordination and protection). Equally, it appears that agreement has yet to be reached at the IASC Principals’ level on the meaning of the concept of “provider of last resort” and its implications. Finally, due primarily to inadequate financial resources, UNHCR and other PCWG participants continue to face enormous difficulty deploying staff with relevant profiles to country operations where the cluster approach is being piloted.

Current Activities

The PCWG, in its report to the IASC Principals, provided a series of twenty-four “actionable recommendations” for the implementation of protection cluster responsibilities. Consensus among PCWG participants has now emerged that the implementation of all twenty-four actionable recommendations will require time, and that priority should be given to recommendations that ensure appropriate support to country teams in the field. Therefore, since November 2005, the PCWG has shifted its focus from the development of conceptual frameworks toward proactive support to field operations. For example, the PCWG met by teleconference with country teams in Liberia and D.R. Congo to review and help develop protection strategies for those two operations. Similarly, the next meeting of the PCWG, which will be joined by Lt. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, will focus upon practical strategies to ensure the physical security of IDPs.

In order to further assist country teams in implementing cluster responsibilities, the PCWG has issued a standing offer to country teams (not only in the three roll-out countries) to send inter-agency, multi-functional teams:

- to provide support in undertaking needs and capacity assessments,
- to assist in the development of planning exercises and strategy formulation,
- to provide targeted training support,
- to generate support within the participant agencies for the deployment of protection staff.

The PCWG has also been a forum for providing support to Governments dealing with issues of internal displacement, for example by providing technical expertise on an initiative by the African Union to develop a Protocol on Internal Displacement. The

PCWG has also acted, in a sense, as its own resource centre, for example by engaging the expertise of participants in developing tools for the operationalisation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and other relevant protection standards.

UNHCR, as chair of the PCWG, with the support of the Norwegian Refugee Council, will establish a resource centre for protection activities. The resources centre also acts as a support cell to the PCWG. The intermediate objective of the resource centre will be to be a repository of best practices, real-time evaluations and lessons learned; to ensure availability and dissemination of relevant (harmonized) tools and resources to country teams, participating agencies and Governments; and to support training and capacity building efforts. In the meantime, a pilot version of a CD-ROM titled “*Key Resources for Camp Coordination/Management and Protection*” has already been produced, containing collections of documents aimed at assisting participating agencies to build strategies, use existing tools and develop capacities and responses to IDP crises. In parallel efforts are being pursued with NRC and OCHA-IDD to develop adapted training materials to support protection staff in the field.

April 2006