

IASC's Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Meeting
28 June 2021

TOPIC: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT AND ASSOCIATED PROTECTION RISKS
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN
SUMMARY RECORD

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) convened on 28 June 2021. The primary objectives of this meeting were to reflect on the socio-economic impact and associated protection risks of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and children, and to consider concrete steps to strengthen the system's collective response to protection risks and threats.

In his introductory remarks, the OPAG co-Chair, Mr. Geir Olav Lisle welcomed participants, including Emergency Directors' Group members, Results Group (RG) co-Chairs, Chairs of the Associated Entities and presenters to the meeting, noting that this discussion was part of the protection dialogue series which stemmed from a desire to elevate protection across the IASC system and to ensure that collective protection analysis informed IASC discussions and decision making.

Ms. Harriet Mugeru of the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement introduced the key findings of the socio-economic impact and protection risks of the pandemic on women and girls, by noting that the pandemic has been defined as a 'crisis like no other' due to its global character. Some 170 countries saw their income decrease in 2020, while the projections had been for 160 countries to register economic positive growth. Based on research conducted in Iraq, Chad, Ethiopia, Uganda, Yemen, Bangladesh, Djibouti, and Kenya, the income loss, including from remittances, as well as rising food prices resulted in limited coping strategies (e.g. reducing food consumption), and lower living standards (i.e. reduced access to health and education). The findings underscored that forcibly displaced groups, such as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – especially those living in camps - were affected to a greater extent than returnees and host communities. Overall, women experienced a higher level of job loss, both among the displaced and non-displaced; and displaced children were affected by school closures to a higher degree than non-displaced children because private schools remained more operational than public schools. Ms. Mugeru added that the uptake in the vaccine was greater among displaced populations than host communities and returnees, which supported the key ask to make more vaccines available for these groups.

Ms. Alison Sutton, Global Child Protection Director at Save the Children presented the research results of children's views on how COVID-19 had affected their lives and underscored that children in humanitarian settings were disproportionately affected by the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic due to constrained essential services. Mr. Cornelius Williams, Associate Director at UNICEF emphasized the mental health toll of COVID-19 measures on children and their caregivers, increasing the risk of violence. He presented evidence of three major categories of immediate and long-term protection risks for children: violence, in the home; negative coping mechanisms such as child labor, child marriage (which had decreased by 15 per cent over the past ten years before COVID), trafficking, and children without parental care. Based on previous epidemics, the Child Protection sector quickly

responded by: advocating for social services to be considered 'essential'; adapting child protection interventions like case management to overcome disruptions; and scaling up the reach of child protection work through frontlines and digital engagement. Key priorities are: i) the international community's continued support to enable governments to maintain education and social protection support for families, including the recognition of social services as essential and the provision of cash assistance; ii) age appropriate gender-sensitive and inclusive protection analysis and interventions in response plans; iii) and collaboration with women, youth and child-led national and local organizations to improve the quality and efficiency of protection services, e.g. giving preference to family-based or residential care.

Ms. Jennifer Miquel, the Head of UNFPA's Regional Hub highlighted three main socio-economic consequences of the pandemic and related protection risks regarding women and adolescent girls. While one in three women and girls globally experience gender-based violence (GBV) once in their lifetime, incidents of intimate partner violence and other forms of GBV have exponentially increased during the pandemic, with the GBV hotline in Zimbabwe recording a 70 per cent increase in calls compared to pre-lockdown trends. UNFPA noticed a deprioritization of GBV and reproductive health services in COVID and socio-economic response plans. As a consequence, i) safe spaces and reproductive health clinics were unable to operate because staff was not categorized as essential or was not prioritized for receiving personal protective equipment (PPE)s; ii) supplies for sexual and reproductive health and GBV were not prioritized in global supply chains, resulting in delayed deliveries of reproductive health supplies, such as post rape treatment kits; and iii) women's organizations were insufficiently represented in COVID taskforces to represent women's needs.

Ms. Grainne O'Hara, UNHCR's Director of International Protection, reflected on the extent of protection risks, including the rise in GBV incidents, and how the protection response was not considered to be lifesaving by a range of stakeholders. Likewise, protection priorities had been sidelined in the humanitarian system's COVID-19 response, including through the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) for COVID-19 which did not have a specific GBV objective despite the IASC Centrality of Protection policy. Ms. O'Hara asked OPAG members to consider how early warning and early action and readiness frameworks can be more effective by incorporating protection analysis; how to enhance protection mainstreaming in humanitarian response; what lessons and best practices can be captured from the COVID-19 protection response; and how to effectively use socio-economic data to analyze linkages between socio-economic factors and protection risks and concerns, and to design response interventions accordingly.

DISCUSSION

OPAG members underscored that the crisis was not yet over, especially not in terms of responding to its socio-economic impacts. Hence, the importance of identifying solutions that the IASC could take forward, including at the country level. First and foremost, members suggested that these OPAG-EDG discussions can further support in mainstreaming RG1's efforts, e.g. the country-level reflections on the implementation of the IASC protection policy, as well as the development of protection indicators towards joint protection outcomes. Likewise, members highlighted the importance of humanitarian country team (HCT) protection strategies and the provision of support to UN Resident Coordinators/ Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) and HCTs to implement these strategies effectively. RG1's work

on Centrality of Protection indicators, as well as the IASC Protection Policy Review was to help measure progress towards aspirations of the IASC Protection Policy and provide concrete recommendations and actions to deliver on collective protection outcomes. Third, the IASC early warning early action report could systematically include socio-economic data disaggregated by sex and age. Protection should also be an integral part of risk analysis and monitoring. Fourth, collective advocacy with governments to ensure that protection and social worker staff providing protection services (e.g. case management; psychosocial support etc.) are considered part of the essential workforce was reiterated. Fifth, IASC members' joined-up advocacy with governments and international financial institutions (IFIs) regarding social protection dimensions in national budgets, as well as livelihood and employment programs for IDPs, was key. Sixth, the role of local actors and women-led organizations in addressing protection risks was highlighted, to enhance the accountability and sustainability of humanitarian responses, as well as rehabilitation and recovery efforts. In this context, limitations of remote protection interventions were discussed, and therefore the importance of working with community-based organizations (CBOS) and community leaders; and of ensuring capacity building - including of female staff - on humanitarian principles, confidentiality, and data protection. Seventh, the question was raised whether the challenge of protection resources related to a lack of prioritization, or a lack of resources, which implied different advocacy efforts. Donor engagement on minimum protection thresholds in HRP was also recommended, noting that the protection cluster was currently 40 per cent funded. For instance, the IASC's advocacy on the visibility and volume of GBV funding with donors could offer some lessons learned. Eighth, members noted that protection analysis was already an integral part of Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP); however, potential improvements could be considered to ensure that collective analysis and response is better presented based on a review of HNOs and HRPs. Ninth, lessons learned should also consider the positive steps the IASC had undertaken related to protection early on in the pandemic, such as the IASC guidance on [people being deprived of their liberty, mental health](#), and [COVID-19 prevention in schools](#). IASC members also referred to their related reports, such as UNDP's report on the [impact of COVID-19 in fragile and conflict-affected contexts](#); CARE's report on [COVID-19 and the protection of women and girls on the move](#); the Humanitarian Advisory Group's paper [on diverse leadership within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#); and Chapter 8 of UNHCR's [Global Trends Report 2020](#). Tenth, IASC members were commended to see how to take forward recommendations of the [inter-agency evaluation on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls \(GEEWG\)](#).

In his closing remarks, the OPAG co-Chair reflected on the protection-related resource constraints, the need to focus on protection-related solutions, and the need to build on the work of RG1's centrality of protection efforts.

ACTION POINTS

- 1) Ensure that the country-reflections efforts (on the implementation of the IASC protection policy) include clear recommendations on how the IASC can better deliver on joint protection outcomes in the field and expediate the development of protection indicators to support in-country efforts to track progress in delivering on joint protection outcomes. **[RG1 in collaboration with the GCCG and GPC and in consultation with the OPAG]**
- 2) Organize the next protection briefing for OPAG and EDG members during autumn 2021 **[UNHCR in collaboration with IASC secretariat]**

- 3) Strengthen IASC's socio-economic analysis to inform response and early action **[IASC Early Warning and Early Action and Readiness Group in collaboration with the EDG]**
- 4) Capitalize on the IAHE of the IASC's Scale-Up to Respond to COVID to inform lessons learned from the GHRP process as well as what more needs to be done to ensure that Protection and especially GBV is prioritized and appropriately funded **[IAHE SG]**

AOB

The OPAG co-Chair informed that the next OPAG meeting will take place on 8 September with a focus on engaging with non-state armed groups.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

OPAG Co-Chairs	Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary-General, NRC
FAO	Mr. Daniel Donati
ICVA	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi
	Mr. Jeremy Wellard
	Ms. Deepamala Mahla
ICVA - ACBAR	Ms. Lisa K. Piper
ICVA – COAST	Mr. Reza Chowdhury
ICVA - FRD	Mr. Azmat Khan
ICRC	Ms. Alexandra Boivin
IFRC	Mr. Frank Mohrhauer
	Ms. Alexandra Sicotte Levesque
	Mr. Stephen Wainwright
InterAction	Ms. Kate Phillips-Barrasso
InterAction – Catholic Relief Services	Ms. Emily Wei
InterAction – Global Communities	Ms. Pia Wanek
IOM	Ms. Tristan Burnett
	Ms. Angela Staiger
OCHA	Ms. Wafaa Saeed
OHCHR	Mr. Roberto Ricci
SCHR	Mr. Gareth Price-Jones
SCHR - Christian Aid	Mr. Michael Mosselmans
SCHR – Save the Children	Ms. Leah Finnegan
SR on HR of IDPs	Ms. Cecilia Jimenez
	Ms. Kim Mancini
UNDP	Mr. Peter Batchelor
UNFPA	Mr. Ingo Piegler
UN-HABITAT	Mr. Filip Decorte
UNHCR	Ms. Annika Sandlund
	Ms. Shoko Shimosawa
	Mr. Guido van Heugten
UNICEF	Ms. Meritxell Relano
WFP	Mr. David Kaatrud
	Mr. Gian Carlo Cirri
WHO	Mr. Rudi Coninx
	Mr. Kevin Ousman
World Bank	Ms. Maria Dimitriadou

Co-Chairs of Results Groups

Mr. Andrew Wyllie, Co-Chair, IASC Results Group 1, Operational Response Chief, Assessment, Planning and Monitoring Branch, OCHA

Ms. Meritxell Relano, Co-Chair, IASC Results Group 2, Accountability and Inclusion, Director, Office of Emergency Operations, Geneva, UNICEF

Ms. Bernadette Castel-Hollingsworth, Co-Chair, IASC Results Group 2, Accountability and Inclusion Deputy Director, Division of International Protection, UNHCR

Mr. Michel Anglade, Co-Chair, IASC Results Group 3, Collective Advocacy Director and UN Representative, Geneva Office, Save the Children

Ms. Rachel Scott, Co-Chair, IASC Results Group 4, Humanitarian-Development Collaboration Inter-Agency Recovery Advisor, UNDP

Co-Chairs of Entities Associated to the IASC

Ms. Marina Skuric Prodanovic, Chair, Global Cluster Coordination Group Chief, System-wide Approaches and Practices Section, OCHA

Mr. Ron Pouwels, Child Protection AoR Coordinator

Presenters:

Ms. Harriet Mugera, Senior Data Scientist, World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data
Center on Forced Displacement

Ms. Alison Sutton, Global Director Child Protection, Save the Children

Mr. Cornelius Williams, Associate Director, Programme Division, Child Protection, UNICEF

Ms. Jennifer Miquel, Head, Advocacy and Communications Unite, UNFPA

Ms. Grainne O'Hara, Director, International Protection, UNHCR

IASC secretariat: Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Head, IASC secretariat