

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME,
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NGO Statement on community based protection

Dear chair, distinguished delegates,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs, including refugee-led organisations and organisations focusing on statelessness, with the objective of reflecting the diversity of views and commonality of purpose within the NGO community.

In today's humanitarian landscape, characterised by overlapping crises, protracted conflicts and displacement, intensifying violence, increasing nationalism and authoritarianism, a growing climate emergency and shrinking funding, the case for investing in community-based protection (CBP) has never been more urgent or compelling. CBP refers to protection activities led by survivors and communities, as well as initiatives that enable them to prevent, mitigate, or respond to protection risks with minimal external intervention. At its core, CBP is a people-centered, rights-based, and ethically grounded approach that promotes and supports communities' agency and self-protection capacities, recognizing crisis-affected people not as recipients of aid but as key agents in their own protection. In the delivery of its mandate activities, for UNHCR, community-based protection (CBP) puts the capacities, agency, rights and dignity of forcibly displaced and stateless persons at the centre of programming. It generates more effective and sustainable protection outcomes by strengthening local resources and capacity and identifying protection gaps through regular consultation.

While recognizing that States bear the primary responsibility for protection, CBP commands an ethical imperative that is also matched by operational necessity. Funding for humanitarian aid is under increasing strain, while access to forcibly displaced and stateless communities is frequently impeded by insecurity, bureaucratic hurdles, or instrumentalized and weaponized humanitarian space. Meanwhile, some donors are shifting away from protection as a funding priority, just as the threats to life escalate. In this context, CBP offers a timely, adaptive, and context-sensitive approach to protection, one that strengthens the resilience and self-reliance of communities in the face of deepening crises.

CBP as a Strategic Response to Operational Constraints

CBP addresses one of the most critical gaps in contemporary humanitarian protection: proximity. Communities have been there long before international actors arrive, and will be there long after they depart. Community actors, including organisations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, are trusted by the people they serve, speak their languages, and comprehend their cultures. Community actors therefore possess the knowledge and legitimacy to act, often more quickly, efficiently, and responsively than external responders. Indeed, in many situations where international actors did not maintain a consistent or meaningful presence, communities are demonstrating leadership even with limited resources. Community protection structures have proven particularly effective in identifying risks, negotiating with armed actors, and mobilizing protective responses that align with local realities.

CBP aligns with humanitarian principles not only through its effectiveness but also through its values. Upholding the agency of forcibly displaced and stateless persons is not a luxury; it is an

ethical duty. Communities have the right to define their protection priorities and responses. CBP initiatives have also included those which empower local community leadership such that they can respond quickly when new threats emerge, without waiting for outside assistance. Supporting crisis-affected people's agency is therefore a way to rebalance power, ensuring more representative protection responses, and sustain impact even after external actors exit.

If supported intentionally and equitably, CBP also becomes a transformative tool for gender justice, economic justice, inclusion, and environmental justice. Through close-knit networks, it provides a platform for forcibly displaced and stateless women, youth and children, survivors of gender based violence, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups to lead protection efforts on their own terms sustainably. CBP can be vital for women, child and youth protection, offering community-driven mechanisms to identify, prevent, and respond to risks faced by those populations. Indeed, communities are the strongest advocates and defenders of their own people, with in-depth, first-hand knowledge of their own protection needs, making them best placed to voice those needs to relevant policymaking processes. However, supporting CBP requires moving beyond tokenism, and avoiding the replication of the very power imbalances it seeks to dismantle. Instead, it must ensure that the inclusion of marginalized voices is meaningful, resourced, and grounded in shared leadership rather than symbolic consultation.

Critically, CBP does not absolve states or international actors of their legal obligations as primary duty-bearers of protection. Rather, it creates a necessary complementarity: communities take the lead in identifying and acting on threats, and international actors must continue to amplify their demands and struggles, advocate for their rights, protect and support civil society space, mobilize resources, and demand accountability under the 1951 refugee convention and its 1967 protocol, international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law. Community protection strategies can also feed into formal accountability mechanisms by documenting violations and engaging with duty bearers, even when this is indirect or mediated through trusted interlocutors.

In situations of conflict, violence and protracted displacement settings, where protection violations are met with impunity and protection needs are left unmet, CBP becomes not just a necessity but a cornerstone of safety, dignity and resilience. Importantly, CBP already exists in many of the most complex forced displacement crises. It exists not as a product of humanitarian design, but as an organic expression of local solidarity and survival. Reinforcing CBP is not always about creating structures from scratch but about recognizing and supporting what emerges from the local fabric, values and sense of community. This requires acknowledging that there is no single or standardized model for CBP; we must remain open to diverse forms of protection work as defined by communities themselves, especially in contexts where extreme violence renders conventional tools and frameworks unworkable.

As communities are often the first and only line of protection, it is morally unacceptable and strategically unwise to underfund or overlook their role. Community actors have already been doing more as international actors such as UNHCR now withdraw or reduce their operational scale. Furthermore, in heavily sanctioned contexts, excessive compliance with financial restrictions hampers humanitarian efforts by limiting support and funding to the community-led initiatives CBP aims to support. If local actors including civil society cannot continue their work, the entire system of CBP which they have worked extremely hard to create risks being dismantled.

Given this, we call on UNHCR and Member States to take concrete actions advancing the following priorities:

Firstly, humanitarian actors should support community-led protection by mapping and strengthening existing efforts, while safeguarding community leadership. Locally-led initiatives must be made visible, recognized, and supported across humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development sectors.

Secondly, CBP must be integrated as a central pillar in protection strategies, not as a peripheral activity. This includes using community-led analysis in humanitarian needs assessments, response planning, and evaluations. This effort should aim to enable linkages between immediate protection response and longer-term development and peacebuilding goals.

Thirdly, in the context of a deepening global funding crisis, multi-year, flexible funding must be increased and specifically earmarked for CBP initiatives, allowing for adaptation to local contexts and emerging threats. At a time when budgets are shrinking and needs are escalating, investing in community-based protection is a cost-effective strategy that leverages existing capacities and sustains impact beyond short-term project cycles. Funding should be directly provided to community-led and refugee-led initiatives, prioritizing local organizations and women-led initiatives that are often at the frontlines of community protection efforts. This also requires advocacy to remove administrative and bureaucratic barriers to access funding for local groups and initiatives leading protection efforts.

Fourthly, relationships with community actors should be premised on mutual learning and equitable partnerships, not one-way capacity sharing. This includes acknowledging the technical knowledge and contextual expertise communities already possess, as well as providing spaces and platforms for communities to meaningfully participate in decision-making in line with Grand Bargain commitments and the Global Compacts on Refugees. At the same time, community actors cannot be expected to immediately shoulder gaps left by the reducing presence of UNHCR and other international actors. UNHCR and Member States must continue supporting community actors in their protection work, including providing technical guidance where relevant, sustaining referral pathways, and facilitating the sharing of best practices.

Finally, and critically, UNHCR and Member States must support community-led approaches by using their political leverage to engage duty bearers and advocate for the fulfilment of protection responsibilities. This includes actively promoting civic space, and recognizing community actors as human rights defenders rather than dismissing their activism. International actors must act in solidarity with communities in order to match and amplify their protection efforts with sustained political pressure to ensure rights are respected and accountability is upheld.

The current humanitarian environment demands new paradigms of protection – ones that are agile, grounded, and led by those closest to the risks. Community-based protection is not just an effective way to respond to today's challenges; it is also an ethical, sustainable, and inclusive way forward. Supporting it is both a humanitarian imperative and a strategic investment in dignity, safety, and justice for all.

Thank you.