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Overview of Available Guidance on Armed Actor Engagement for Protection Outcomes

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The purpose of this overview

There is a wealth of literature surrounding humanitarian-armed actor engagement, specifically on protection and with non-State armed groups (NSAGs). The Centre on Competence for Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) and Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)/ODI Global will soon be publishing a report from a literature review and interviews on protection negotiation practice. This document will not be duplicating the great work that has already been undertaken. Rather, it will provide an overview of existing practical guidance and training material available on the topic for humanitarians, as well as fill in some missing gaps. It will cover, in order:

1. Who is this for?
2. Methods and approaches for armed actor engagement on protection
3. Thematic aids
4. When to engage
5. The importance of coordination

Who is this for?

[The Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Principals Statement on Protection](#) (2013) affirmed that *all* humanitarian actors irrespective of their sectoral activity have a responsibility to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action. Their collective responsibility was further explained in the 2016 [Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (see section on Centrality of Protection).

This overview is for all humanitarians at all levels that may find themselves in a position to engage with armed actors for protection outcomes, e.g. to reduce or stop the risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation faced by civilians (non-combatants). It is specifically pertinent for humanitarian actors who are already in regular contact with armed actors, be they State armed forces, law enforcement entities, peacekeeping forces, non-State armed groups (NSAGs), gangs, militias, private military and security contractors, etc. This interaction with armed actors can be anywhere from a small component of their work (Humanitarian Coordinators, Programme Officers, Community Liaisons, Drivers, etc.) to a full-time position (Civil-Military Coordination Officers, Humanitarian Civil Military Officers, Humanitarian Military InterAction Officers, Access Advisors, etc.)—job titles are diverse. Duties may entail among others humanitarian community representation, negotiating safe access for aid delivery, navigating through checkpoints, or acting as a community liaison where community members might also be affiliated with armed actors.

It is important to keep in mind that humanitarian actors who are in regular contact with armed actors have specific knowledge, skills and experiences that can be leveraged to achieve protection outcomes. There are many ways that humanitarians in full-time civil-military positions can contribute to protection, beyond solely negotiating safe and secure access for protection



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actors to conflict-affected communities. This can be either supporting the engagement process or directly undertaking protection dialogue given interacting with armed actors is central to their role. These aspects are further fleshed out in InterAction's training module on [Optimizing Armed Actor Engagement for Protection Outcomes](#). In addition, the 2020 [Guidance Note on OCHA CMCoord Support to Protection Outcomes](#) identifies five areas of CMCoord Tasks that can support protection outcomes.

Methods and approaches for armed actors engagement on protection

Prior to any engagement with armed actors on protection, there must be a clarity of purpose as to what the engagement seeks to achieve. Affected communities should guide the prioritization of issues. A [Protection Risk Analysis](#) that fleshes out what is behind or guiding the behaviour of armed actors perpetrating protection risks is a key first step in this process (including a stakeholder mapping and analysis), followed by developing a strategy or action plan (see InterAction's [Results-Based Protection \(RBP\)](#) website as well as the IASC's [Aide Memoire](#) and the [Benchmarks](#) for guidance in this regard). It is important to remember that specific objectives will evolve as the engagement unfolds, but the underlying purpose will remain constant. That said, one may start with less controversial issues to build confidence before moving on to more challenging issues. Consistent and regular engagement is a must in order to build the necessary trust to achieve protection outcomes. Approaching the engagement with clarity of purpose allows humanitarians to shape and sequence issues of concern.

There are many methods and approaches that can be used to change awareness, knowledge, understanding, perceptions, policies, behaviour, and practices of armed actors to reduce civilian harm and enhance the protection of civilians. The choice of methods and approaches to employ should be carefully considered vis-à-vis the desired protection outcome to achieve, the type of armed actor, an analysis of what would work best to influence that particular armed actor, how accessible the armed actor's decision-makers are, and who is best placed to engage, while keeping in mind potential risks to reputation, staff safety, and operations. Change usually comes about when a variety of methods are employed at multiple levels by several different actors over time, including those outside of the humanitarian sector.

When considering which methods and approaches to utilise it is important to take into consideration what influences the armed actor's behaviour. An International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (or Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC))-based argument might resonate with some armed actors, especially if their own Rules of Engagement or Code of Conduct are inline with IHL. For others, appealing to human consequences on women and children or local norms, beliefs, customs and values (e.g., what it means to be an honorable soldier or good Muslim/Christian) might hold greater weight. Before choosing a method and approach, it is important to know what existing restraints on violence towards civilians exist and why. The ICRC's [The Roots of](#)



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[Restraint in War](#) (2018) report explores in depth the sources of influence for armed actors and provides useful guidance in terms of the most effective tactics to achieving protection outcomes.

Methods:

- **Direct dialogue** is the best method if safe access is feasible. Direct dialogue may take the form of negotiation, mediation and humanitarian diplomacy depending on what might have more impact. For example, mediating between communities and armed groups can be more powerful than speaking on their behalf. Likely there will be a need to pass through gatekeepers before getting to the individual(s) responsible for a decision related to the particular protection concern to be addressed. While in-person dialogue is best, other forms of communication can be explored according to the context and armed actor. Dialogue will likely need to occur at multiple levels and locations might be in or outside the country.

It is important to identify those best placed to engage in direct dialogue on protection issues. In some cases, it might be humanitarian leadership, CMCoord Officers, or protection officers. Be aware of other actors outside the sector (e.g., human rights, peacebuilding, communities) who might also be engaging with the same armed actors and ensure that messages strengthen and do not undermine each other. Irrespective of who is in dialogue with armed actors on protection, humanitarians who are in direct contact with armed actors should be informed and in close contact with those undertaking this work. They should seek to support the efforts for example by establishing contact with the armed actors, facilitating coordination amongst actors and helping to frame messages and approaches while understanding the risks that need to be reduced.

There are several public resources available on how to negotiate with armed actors. While the objectives and desired outcomes of access and protection negotiations vary and there are arguments over the right terminology to use, many practitioners do not see a difference between the two in terms of process. The most well-known is the [Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiations'](#) (CCHN) [Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiations](#) which was developed by frontline negotiators for how to undertake humanitarian negotiations, including on protection. It provides instruction on how to prepare for the steps in the negotiation process. CCHN also runs several Peer-to-Peer workshops and other training events. Another resource is [Negotiating Humanitarian Access: Guidance for Humanitarian Negotiators](#).

- **Education and training** for armed actors on IHL and protection issues is another useful method, if feasible. In some cases, protection issues might be folded into CMCoord trainings with armed actors on humanitarian principles, while in other cases, they may be



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distinct trainings. There are several specialised organisations that provide training to armed actors, including the [ICRC](#), [DCAF](#), [Geneva Call](#), [OCHA](#) and [PAX](#). Some armed actors organise their own trainings around IHL and the Protection of Civilians (PoC), such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), national militaries, etc. Humanitarians have been able to influence and collaborate in these trainings. This has proven an important pathway to influence positive change.

However, keep in mind that available literature and interviews with IHL trainers have confirmed that classroom presentations are not enough. Armed actors must have training exercises that incorporate what they've learned in the classroom to absorb the principles. In addition, training alone is insufficient. IHL and civilian harm mitigation must be [embedded into military culture](#) for long-term sustainability of protection outcomes.

- **Indirect engagement** is when humanitarians utilise intermediary actors to convey messages. For example, a Muslim religious leader issuing fatwas (a non-binding legal opinion or ruling on a point of Islamic law), a military peer incorporating the protection issue into security assistance (e.g., trainings or due diligence processes), diplomatic pressure, etc. In some cases, rather than maintaining their own staff for armed actor engagement, NGOs and UN agencies may choose to utilize CMCoord to engage armed actors on their (and the larger humanitarian community's) behalf. No matter who undertakes indirect engagement, it is important to be cognisant not to transfer risk to the individual undertaking the engagement on behalf of the humanitarian community, especially to actors who have less protection overall, like community members.
- **Public advocacy campaigns** can be another effective way to mobilise not only public support, but also to engage with armed actors that are difficult to reach. Carefully selected messages, videos, and open letters can be sent via different mediums: radio, television, social media, and print material (newspapers, posters, flyers, etc.). The most effective medium depends on what's most readily available to the armed actor. Humanitarian staff specializing in advocacy will have useful advice on how to develop an impactful campaign.
- **Publicly revealing document facts**, sometimes referred to as "naming and shaming" or denouncing, can be an effective method by which to encourage an armed actor to change their behaviour. The listing of countries and armed groups that were found to have committed grave violations affecting children in situations of armed conflict in the [UN Secretary General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict](#) has proven to be an effective measure to galvanise some armed actors sensitive to their public image to engage with UNICEF on Action Plans. Clearly, publically revealing documented facts can also pose risks for the agencies and organisations involved, and thus actors need to



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carefully considering and weighing of risks prior to employing this tactic. It might be better for journalists and human rights activists rather than humanitarians to utilise this tactic.

Documenting civilian casualty reporting (see [Guidance on Casualty Recording](#)) can be more than a tool by which to denounce an armed actor, but can also be a useful tool in dialogue, as evidenced by UNAMA's work in Afghanistan. Additional guidance on casualty reporting can be found at Every Casualty Count's [Standards for Casualty Recording](#). Bellingcat also has made available [resources](#) for open source research.

Approaches:

There are also various approaches that should be combined with the chosen method. Some common ones are as follows (remember this is not a comprehensive list!):

- **Directly referring to IHL** can be an effective approach with armed actors who care about their international standing. The IHL Centre has recently produced the [Stockholm Manual: A Practitioner's Guide to Conducting IHL Assessments and Humanitarian Advocacy](#) as to how best to use IHL in advocacy, including by providing key messages depending on the violations encountered. That said, negotiators should be aware of the relevant obligations even if not directly referring to IHL, as any agreements reached should conform to legal obligations.
- **Utilizing local norms, values, ideology and beliefs** (for example religious beliefs) to appeal to the armed actor and highlight why the issue is relevant to them. This works particularly well if the negotiator shares these aspects.
- **Leaning on armed actor's self-perception** (e.g. belief they are the 'good guys') can be useful, as well as highlighting the negative impact on their reputation if they continue certain behaviours. This later approach is effective if they require the support of the international community or their constituency. It can also be helpful to point out inconsistencies between their actions and stated policies and positions. For example, it doesn't look good if their stated purpose is to protect and defend a community when at the same time they engaged in vitiating them.
- **Leaning into common interest and humanity** as well as to seek to foster their empathy can be effective. For example, in terms of common interest, everyone needs to eat, so ensuring that food systems are protected can be effective.
- Lastly, and here it should be carefully thought through so as not to be seen as supporting a warring party, there could be **quid pro quo and compromises** reached. For example, to secure access of civilian populations to medical care, one could offer to treat their soldiers as well. Under IHL, wounded soldiers are protected and have a right to medical care, as at that stage they are no longer perceived as combatants.



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As with all humanitarian activities, armed actor engagement in all its facets should be monitored, with results (or lack thereof) reflected on, and lessons learned and applied. There might be a need to switch methods and approaches and try something else if the desired protection outcomes are not achieved. It requires constantly being on the lookout for new opportunities and new points of leverage.

Thematic aids

There are many protection tools publicly available—including those specifically developed for armed actors—that can be modified to a particular context and armed actor. Many of these tools are thematic based and are specifically developed for armed actors. Here is a sample of available resources:

- [Civil Society Guidance for a Model Policy](#) (2020) on civilian harm mitigation.
- [Civil Society Guidance for the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan \(CHMRAP\)](#) (2022)
- [The Practical Measures to Prevent and Mitigate Conflict-Induced Hunger](#) (2024), includes both a guidance tool as well as training material and a short educational video.
- ICRC's [Protecting Healthcare: Guidance for the Armed Forces](#) (2020)
- CIVIC's [Toolkit: Advancing the Protection of Civilians in Conflict](#)

In addition, several organisations have developed model agreements that have been used for protection negotiations with armed actors, for example the UN's [Action Plans](#) to address grave violations against children, CIVIC's civilian harm tracking mechanisms, and Geneva Call's Deeds of Commitment for NSAGs on antipersonnel mines, child protection, sexual violence and gender discrimination, health care, and starvation.

When to engage

Armed actor engagement for protection outcomes should take place continuously. The question is more who should be involved, the methods and approaches to be used, where and at what level the engagement takes place, and how it fits in with other humanitarian action. Remember, engagement with armed actors is not only a role for actors mandated to do this. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions states that impartial humanitarian bodies have a legal right to offer “any humanitarian activity aimed at alleviating suffering based on needs on the group”, including dialogue and engagement to influence or persuade parties to conflict to protect civilians and respect IHL (see [ICRC Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups: Why, how, for what purpose, and other salient issues](#)). Common Article 3 further explains that “Such an offer should not be interpreted as an unfriendly act or as unlawful interference...and should not be seen as a threat or a breach of State sovereignty.” The ICRC article above further notes that some counter-terrorism legislation and sanctions are incompatible with the letter and spirit of IHL, specifically Common Article 3.



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However, as with all things, a benefit verses a real (as compared to perceived) risk analysis will need to be made along with identifying practical risk mitigation measures, both within the sector in-country, as well as within each organisation. If identified measures can feasibly reduce risks, even if the risks are high, a cautious approach to armed actor engagement should take place. As noted above, there are several methods available. Several organizations have developed their own, often internal, operational guidelines for engagement with armed actors, specifically NSAGs (see for example [UNICEF Guidelines for UNICEF Engagement with Armed Non-State Actors](#) (2021), [OCHA's Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups: A Manual for Practitioners](#)).

The importance of coordination

Armed actor engagement on protection will likely involve many different actors working at different levels. For example, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) may be the primary interlocutor with the most senior level of national militaries, while Community Liaisons or even community members may engage with the armed actors at the community level. This will require coherence in terms of messaging and asks, thus coordination.

It is worth noting that humanitarian staff engaging with armed actors often do so across a spectrum of issues—from relatively straight forward logistical access negotiations to more sensitive protection-related discussions. These conversations are rarely entirely distinct, and access discussions may be inherently linked to protection concerns. Where engagement on one front risks undermining the other, a broader, coordinated engagement strategy may be required to ensure both access and protection objectives are met.

Therefore, the coordination of armed actor engagement is imperative. This requires an awareness of who is talking to whom within the armed actors on what issues. Coordination ensures that all engagement with armed actors is complimentary and reinforcing. This requires awareness of the existing coordination mechanisms available within any context where humanitarian actors work and the extent to which protection related engagement can be integrated without duplicating or bypassing them. These include notably the Protection Cluster (and Protection of Civilian Working Groups), or OCHA's Civil-Military or Access Coordination platforms.

It is also important to be aware that the most effective actors engaging with armed actors on protection often do not participate in UN-led formal architectures. Therefore, one must look beyond the UN-led architecture and even the humanitarian community to understand who else is engaging with armed actors. In many locations, communities may be directly engaging with armed actors for their own self-protection. Humanitarians who interact with armed actors should be taking direction from these efforts and reinforcing those calls through their own engagements with armed actors. In addition, there might be national or local human rights



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actors actively engaging with the armed actors on the respect of human rights, and/or peacebuilding actors engaging with armed actors towards de-escalation and conflict transformation. It is imperative to coordinate and reinforce messaging with these actors as well.

Some resources to consult in terms of coordination are as follows:

- [Optimizing Armed Actor Engagement for Protection Outcomes](#)
- OCHA's UN-CMCoord Handbook v 2.1 (2025)
<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/un-cmcoord-handbook-version-21-2025>
- [OCHA's Minimum Package of Services on Access \(2019\)](#) (currently being updated)
- [IASC Guidance: Cluster Coordination at Country Level \(2015\)](#)
- [Joint UNHCR-OCHA Note on Mixed Situations, Coordination in Practice \(2014\)](#)