GPC Peer Exchange Webinar:
Advocacy in protracted crises for communities living under
non-state armed groups control

9 March 2022

A recording of the webinar is available here
Objective of the event: Find the ways how advocacy can be better used in the context of protracted crises, when communities live under control of non-state armed groups

Opening: Alison Kent -Advocacy TT co-chair
GPC task teams on Human Rights Engagement and Advocacy have been working intensively on a range of different initiatives, looking for opportunities to strengthen them and taking the best of available mechanisms. Task teams committed to driving forward the full range of advocacy approaches and tactics that play a critical role in support of the protection and rights of communities in crises, including diplomacy, engagement with actors, using global human rights mechanisms, lobbying, awareness raising campaigns, etc. Therefore, the main focus of the work has been placed on the existing and emerging good practices in terms of how different advocacy approaches can be used to support the protection of the communities, what mechanisms work and what tools could be adopted in particular situations, how the engagement could be built with local, international, human rights actors, and how these stakeholders should complement each other.

How can advocacy be used in crises, where the communities are living under control of non-state armed groups? The issue of the protection of these communities is an urgent one. The ICRC estimates that between 60-80 million people are living in the territories exclusively controlled by armed groups, including Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan, Mali and others. Although in some cases there might be some basic governance functions that the non-states armed groups are carrying out, insecurity, violence, human rights abuses are still widespread phenomena in these areas.

Pascal Bongard – Geneva Call
The panelist raised the issue of community engagement of non-state armed groups (NSAG). The engagement with NSAG is carried out both directly and indirectly through actors of influence, including community actors that are living in the areas under the control of armed groups, such as community-based organizations (CBO), elders, religious leaders, women groups, refugee and diaspora communities. Many NSAGs have some sort of constituency or social base, therefore, the main task is to identify and mobilize relevant community actors that may influence the behavior of the NSAGs. This approach has been used for many years, specifically in the situations when direct engagement was not successful or not possible. Community partners are trained on humanitarian norms and negotiation skills in order to enhance their capacity to engage with NSAGs on protection issues, such as child protection. When community actors are better equipped, they are in a better position to advocate for respect.

Social media, radio and other channels are used to disseminate messages and raise public awareness, especially in the areas under control of NSAGs. Over 20 years mixed results have been achieved: in some cases, community actors were very instrumental and assisted a lot in persuading NSAGs to release child soldiers or facilitate mine clearance; in other cases, community actors were too close to the NSAG and viewed IHL violations as government propaganda or community actors were considered biased by the NSAGs.

Level of influence depends on various factors, notably the type, support basis and governance responsibility of the NSAG, as well as the profile of the community actor, its legitimacy and proximity with the NSAG. All these factors show the need for a solid knowledge base to inform strategies of NSAG engagement. There are examples of successful engagement with NSAGs through religious leaders. For instance, in 2015 in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued an influential "Advice and Guidance to the fighters on the battlefield" addressing abuses committed by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The Generation Respect Project aimed to explore these two factors: 1) what factors make religious leaders influential; 2) how they can effectively influence the behavior of parties to armed conflict. The project looks at several contexts: Colombia, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Syria and Yemen. The results of the research will be available by the end of the year.

Community approach may be useful to add pressure on NSAGs and influence their compliance with IHL. Yet, it is crucial to know more about the internal dynamics existing between NSAGs and communities living in areas under their control.

Julian Watkinson - OCHA Colombia
In Colombia, there are two initiatives, focusing on access and humanitarian operations and human rights. The first one is awareness on humanitarian principles and IHL. Last year, there was an increase in attacks against humanitarian operations and UN agencies. Armed groups are changing the control quite frequently in the country. To respond to this changing operation context, the humanitarian advisory team resorted to broadcasting radio campaigns, three types of 30-second radio spots through more than 60 local radio stations in 16 departments, where the greatest access restrictions were registered on the main three principles: neutrality, impartiality and independence. Indigenous languages are used to increase awareness both of the community and armed groups on the humanitarian operations in countries.

Research study on: Humanitarian impact of living under the influence/control of NSAGs. Although mass displacement and confinement are considerably increasing in recent years, they do not reflect the large number of people living under the influence and control of armed groups in large parts of Colombia. The advisory team undertook the mapping exercise to quantify the number of affected people to publicly visualize the scale of the impact. It turned out that there are nearly 7 million people living under control of armed groups. There are still several gaps. For example, it is difficult to differentiate between influence and control due to the absence of appropriate capacity. The advisory team also conducted an analysis of the humanitarian impact: research study combining quantitative and qualitative research with the support of OHCHR and Human Rights Watch. This provided communities with a voice to illustrate their humanitarian impact and human rights violations. Socialization of results of the research with all stakeholders involved is the most important part. Results need to be discussed through roundtables, involving local, national and international actors. The team aims to develop an Action Plan to improve the protection of the affected people.

Kirnan Kothari - Save the Children
How Save the Children works? There are 4 advisors that focus on the relations with different actors, access, negotiations, normative dialogues, transactional side, trying to improve practical access to people who either are controlled or influenced. The aim is to speak to all actors directly, but if it is impossible, intermediate resources are used. The panelist is a regional officer in Oman and focuses on the Middle East and Eastern Europe regions, including Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Ukraine. The greatest focus is placed on relations with actors in order to be

able to rely on these relations later. To build trustful relations with the community, it is necessary to analyze the context, plan the interaction with the actors, consider carefully about transactions or the dialogue that the organization will be engaged in, and identify the priorities. Stakeholder mapping is another important step that helps understand who the key investors are and who the organization will be able to influence. Save the children pays particular attention to its humanitarian partners, as well as to who they work with within the communities. Each relation will have different strategies, varying from capacity building type relations to sharing common advocacy messages, common communications and diplomacy approaches.

Sabrina Amirat - Mali Protection Cluster
The panelist talked about negotiations with NSAG during the encirclement of villages in Mali, where the armed groups took control of the villages, blocked access to them, used IED, destroyed the infrastructure of villages, isolated the population, restricted civilians' freedom of movement and denied access to basic social services and livelihoods (Farabougou, Dinangouro, Sokolo, Marebougou). The main challenges were connected with communication, centrality of protection, access to food and water, red lines and principled framework on assistance to be designed and agreed.

In terms of opportunities and aspects that needed to be strengthened, the panelist highlighted the following issues:
- Strengthening community-based approach;
  - Key information on existing situations at risk, persons with specific needs
  - Implement remote and targeted explosive ordnance risk education
- Strengthening Civil-Military cooperation (CIMIC) especially to better integrate a protection sensitive approach in military led-interventions;
- Collect regular information for stronger advocacy (evidence based) to feed political negotiations for suitable solutions.

Nora Achkar – UNMAS Mali
During the process of negotiations with NSAG during the encirclement of villages in Mali, the work of the team was mainly addressed improving risk education approaches with the communities to make sure that they are being informed about the risk of explosive ordnance and how to get protected. Therefore, it was necessary to have focal points doing risk education activities in those areas, at the same time focusing on remote approaches, such as radio campaigns. To conduct better protection and monitoring, other actors were integrated.

Gbaka Franck Dakouri - OCHA Mali
The panelist explained how the team gets involved in negotiations of access and what solutions are implemented. There is no direct access to negotiations, that is why the team has to cooperate with community leaders, who are engaged in the dialogue with NSAGs. In order to improve the security situation and get more involved politically, it is also essential to engage the local authorities.

Jamal Abdo - Tamdeen Youth Foundation
The topic of the discussion is more than relevant for Yemen due to the large presence of multiple non-state armed groups. The situation in Yemen differs from other conflict areas since most of the population in the country has arms. Furthermore, armed groups are a frequent phenomenon and availability of weapons is a part of Yemen's traditions and daily life. Working on the protection is quite challenging. In terms of coordination and engaging key stakeholders, it is necessary to integrate with a great number of stakeholders and groups controlling different regions of Yemen, getting permits to intervene in the situation from all interested parties. Advocacy mechanisms can be used during the personal meetings and negotiations, as it is the only way to achieve effective results.

DISCUSSION:

Pascal Bongard – Geneva Call
In order not to expose them to additional risks, we have often privileged working with community actors that have a preexisting relationship with NSAGs. For example, the Sahrawi Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Sahrawi Association of Mine Victims contributed a lot to the engagement with the Polisario Front, facilitating the renunciation of anti-personnel (AP) mines and the destruction of its stockpile. This is an example of successful cooperation supported by community partners that have already been engaged in dialogue with the armed groups. Community actors also participate in the development of engagement strategies and risk analysis. However, sometimes, especially in divided societies, it might be challenging to find a right partner due to the presence of multiple NSAGs fighting each other.

It is also important to scrutinize the NSAGs, their motives, values and sources of influence. This knowledge gives a better understanding of how to articulate organization's goals and international standards, so they would resonate for the armed groups. It is also crucial to look at the policies and internal regulations established by the NSAGs as they may provide potential entry points for humanitarian dialogue.

Kirnan Kothari - Save the Children
Stakeholder mapping is used for specific situations and conversations. Advocacy is not only about the respect for norms, since on the frontline, there are so many competing values, customary rules, and practices. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the group that will be engaged in the dialogue, their values, and norms, look at the international standards and explore the ways they can be applied.

Sabrina Amirat - Mali Protection Cluster
It is also significant to take into consideration feelings of civil societies that might not be comfortable cooperating with NGOs and international organizations, willing to avoid additional risks that civilians can get exposed to.

Gbaka Franck Dakouri - OCHA Mali
Although OCHA is trying to avoid direct communication with the armed groups, the organization cares about the damage that can be made to communities in case of OCHA's intervention. Thus, OCHA is taking all the necessary measures to minimize the risks for communities.

Resources:

- Information on the Generating Respect Project is available here
- Research project on NSAG practice and interpretation of IHL norms is available here