

Professional Standards on Protection Work (PSPW)

Note of the HERE-organised meeting on the Protection Standards, Geneva, 18 December 2019

Since 2009, the ICRC has led an inter-agency process that has produced three editions of the “Professional Standards for Protection Work” (professional standards) - with the latest edition issued in 2018. These standards, which are directed at humanitarian and human rights actors working in armed conflict and other situations of violence, cover a broad range of issues in the area of protection. The professional standards are both conceptual and practical in their nature. They were developed with the support of an advisory group composed of operational agencies, NGO networks, institutional donors and coordination agencies. The third edition of the Sphere Handbook (2011) also covers protection to some degree and both documents were updated in parallel, cross-referencing each other as necessary. While not formally, organisations who have contributed to their development have de facto committed to their application. Yet, on the ground, protection is often not part of a first-line humanitarian response or is under-funded. As the 2018 review of the State of the Humanitarian System has shown, priority protection needs are often not met, despite increased focus on protection in-country strategies.

As there have been three editions, and in light of the professional standards’ tenth anniversary in 2019, two students from the Graduate Institute (IHEID) in Geneva have worked with HERE and have examined the drafting and revision process of the standards as well as the uptake of the standards by relevant actors. HERE organised a meeting on December 18, 2019, in order to present the findings from the students’ research and to explore the next steps for HERE’s research around the linkages between the standards and protection practices of agencies on the ground.

This Note provides a summary of the main points discussed on this occasion.

Summary of the discussion

The presentation of the research findings highlighted five specific areas of focus: the openness of the drafting of the standards; the existence of a common framework; the type of dissemination used; the feedback, reporting and monitoring on the standards; established practices.

Openness

The research has looked at the process of the drafting and revision of the standards. ICRC brought a number of representatives from organisations with a protection expertise together in an advisory board, which became the main body to guide the drafting process. The research looked at the composition of the advisory board and the role the representatives played in the dissemination of the standards. The drafting process of the PSPW has been less inclusive as compared to other standard-setting initiatives, such as the Sphere standards or the Child Protection Minimum standards. While there are no questions as to the quality of the PSPW per se, there are questions as to whether the less inclusive character of the drafting process has impacted on the knowledge and use of the standards within the humanitarian community.

The articulation of a broadly agreed framework

Despite the existence of a common definition of protection, the boundaries for protection work remain broad. The definition does not elaborate on what specific activities are to be considered protection. To this extent, the standards are clear about the need for different approaches. However, despite the acceptance of a common definition to work on, potential users of the standards do not necessarily share a common understanding of how protection should be carried out, how the standards should be contextualized, how they should be understood or implemented. Further support on this type of articulation may therefore be necessary.

Dissemination

The research focused on two levels of dissemination: the first level, meant to integrate/mainstream the standards into the policies of the different organisations; the second level, relating to the use of the standards by field-based practitioners. For the first level, the position and role of the members of the advisory group within her/his organisation as well as the support within the organisation for protection seems to influence the extent to which the standards are being mainstreamed. For the second level, it is not entirely clear how practical the standards are in terms of their operational relevance. Perhaps because of this issue, the incorporation of the standards alongside other protection standards into internal training materials was found to be the most effective way to disseminate them amongst field-based practitioners. The uptake of the PSPW by the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) could prove particularly effective in promoting wider field-based dissemination.

Feedback, reporting and monitoring

While the lack of inclusion of field-based staff in the revision process of the standards is born out of a concern to preserve their focus and avoid overload, this has also a bearing on the effective monitoring of the implementation of the standards in the field.

Established practices

The structural integration of a regular process of revision of the standards is generally seen as a helpful practice to take the temperature and align the standards with evolving humanitarian practices and changing humanitarian contexts.

Main points for reflection

Nature of the standards: there was general agreement that the standards were supposed to be normative and not for direct application in the field. As such, it has been up to the different technical sectors to detail them. The value of the standards has been historically the opportunity to agree on a common reference. There was a general word of caution expressed around how much it is expected from the standards. It is excellent if they are translated into internal policies/guidance and effectively owned by protection actors and/or donors.

The role of the GPC: the standards have been referred to in the new Strategic Framework of the GPC and that is a step forward. Such a development should not be read as handing over the dissemination and ownership of the standards entirely to the GPC. The current Advisory Group with their breadth of organisations that are not found within the GPC, will continue leading the process. The GPC remains an important partner.

Definition of protection: while the current definition of protection has been adopted by the IASC, it is up to the individual organisations and focal points part of the Advisory Group to help people work with the complexity of protection, as some are already doing. One issue is the way in which the standards can help to ensure that the centrality of protection is a meaningful concept.

Dissemination: there is a clear greater role for donors to play in the dissemination of and of monitoring and reporting against the standards. Some like SIDA, ECHO, SDC have already started embracing results-based protection approaches.

Next steps for HERE: linking the use of the standards to actual protection outcomes is something participants expressed value in researching. One approach could be to develop a draft evaluative protection framework to be tested in a few contexts. The starting point could be to explore existing individual

frameworks that some organisations are already using. It will be important to work closely with both the Advisory Group as well as the GPC.