



## MEETING BRIEF

### Protecting Civilians: Distinct Approaches and Complementarity of Roles

There is no doubt that grave violations of human rights or humanitarian law, like those in Sri Lanka in 2009 or in Syria today, require a holistic political response. Nonetheless, humanitarian actors can play a vital role protecting civilians, and their approaches need to be improved. This was the key message of a policy forum held at the International Peace Institute on March 19, 2013, and co-organized with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the occasion of its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The discussion brought together Peter Maurer, president of the ICRC; Michael Keating, senior adviser to the UN Secretary-General's Executive Office; and Elizabeth Ferris, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Participants discussed challenges and opportunities for better protecting civilians in conflict, drawing on the ICRC's experience of placing protection at the core of its operational strategy and ongoing reflections within the UN on how to improve response to acute protection crises.

The following insights emerged from the discussion:

1. Protection of civilians has moved center stage in international fora, and the “protection toolbox” available to the international community has grown substantially. Yet, gaps remain between policy developments and their concrete implementation on the ground. While states bear the primary responsibility of protecting the civilian population, creative ways must be found to better engage them without further politicizing the humanitarian response.
2. Different approaches to protecting civilians create tensions. For instance, outspoken public advocacy can sometimes undermine engagement with the conflict parties based on humanitarian principles. Similarly, the need for justice often collides with the need for humanitarian access. Although these dilemmas are real, distinct roles and approaches can also be complementary. The comparative advantages of different actors must be acknowledged, respected, and used to the best effect.
3. There is therefore an urgent need for protection actors to be more strategic in how they manage and respond to acute crises. This is particularly true within the UN system, where the diversity of actors sometimes results in competing priorities. This diversity should instead be leveraged and used more effectively—for example, by devising more systematic protection strategies at the country level and better crisis-management strategies at the global level.
4. Response to acute protection crises requires strong leadership and courage, particularly within the UN system, to manage competing priorities and make tough operational and political choices. While courage cannot be manufactured, it can be nurtured by recognizing and encouraging it institutionally, and penalizing a lack of courage when this leads to manifest failures.
5. The role of local and national actors in protecting civilians, including Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, must be better acknowledged and strengthened. While local and national actors can sometimes create challenges—as stakeholders in a given crisis—they are also part of the solution. There is a need to engage with these actors while being fully aware of the risks they are exposed to when undertaking protection activities.

A video recording of this rich discussion is available [here](#).

– Jérémie Labbé