

The Contribution of Prevention Work to ICRC Protection of Civilians Engagement

Executive Summary

By JULIA STEETS, ED SCHEINKENBERG, VALENTINE HAMBYE-VERBRUGGHEN

Between December 2022 and September 2023, an independent team from the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE-Geneva) evaluated whether and how the prevention work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) contributes to the organization's protection engagements in contexts of reignited or new crises. The evaluation team reviewed relevant documents, interviewed 46 ICRC staff members, analyzed survey responses provided by 69 ICRC staff members, and conducted case study research on two delegations.

Overall, ICRC staff members recognize both that the organization, through its prevention activities, pursues broader objectives in terms of directly increasing key actors' compliance with humanitarian law and that these activities add value by preparing the ground for the ICRC's protection work. From the survey emerged 47 examples of how prevention activities supported protection engagements and only 3 respondents stated that they did not see this kind of contribution in the context they were currently working in. On average, survey respondents rated the importance of prevention work for protection engagements in their current contexts as 66 out of 100. Staff members with management functions assessed this link most positively, with an average rating of 74 out of 100.

A central effect of the ICRC's prevention activities – which are implemented by all ICRC staff, but particularly by Military and Armed Forces (FAS) Delegates, Police and Gendarmerie (PGE) Delegates, Legal Advisers, Communications Managers or Advisers, Policy Advisers, Multilateral Affairs Advisers, and Networking Delegates – is that they **strengthen key stakeholders' understanding of humanitarian law and of the ICRC**. While little systematic data on the impact of these activities exists, the case study provides many examples that demonstrate this contribution. ICRC staff members working in the case-study delegations noted, for example, that their interlocutors were well aware of the relevant rules, even in cases

in which these rules were broken; that the last escalation of conflict in the region led to comparatively few civilian casualties or other violations of international humanitarian law; that the military's handling of dead bodies had clearly improved; and that key interlocutors actively approached the ICRC to act as a neutral intermediary and were open to receiving messages from it regarding protection standards and concerns.

Another key contribution that emerged from the research is that prevention activities **help build trusted contacts**. Out of the 67 survey respondents who answered this question, 52 agreed that prevention work helped generate trustful relationships that can be used to pass on protection messages. Of these respondents, 37 went even further and also felt that this led to better follow-up on such messages. Corresponding examples from the case study conflict include trusted high-level contacts who facilitated the introduction of humanitarian law components into standard military trainings, created the preconditions for the ICRC to arrange a ceasefire for the evacuation of civilians, and enabled it to support the evacuation of wounded soldiers, the retrieval of dead bodies and the exchange of prisoners of war.

ICRC staff members consulted for the evaluation also agree that internal **cooperation makes both prevention and protection activities more effective**. Protection staff, for example, benefit from a better understanding of military dynamics and tactics, appreciate advice on how to frame, word and time protection messages, and profit from prevention insights when interpreting protection incidents. At the same time, prevention activities are seen as more relevant when they focus on the types of violations and the kinds of stakeholders protection colleagues have identified as a priority. Trainings and information sessions on humanitarian law and the role of the ICRC are more specific, hands-on and relevant when protection staff participate in them.

However, across roles and categories, there is a strong perception among all ICRC staff members consulted that **there is often not enough internal cooperation** and that synergies remain underutilized. **Cultural issues** play an important role here: both protection and prevention staff criticized that 'the other side' can show attitudes of assumed superiority and does not want to cooperate. This mirrors dynamics between mobile and resident staff. Staff members with a military background can face additional issues because there is a tendency at the organization to see the military more as part of the problems than the solutions.

Another key issue is that protection and prevention staff often **lack an understanding of what common objectives** they are working toward. This, in turn, depends on the extent to which planning processes happen in silos or focus on common outcomes as well as to the priorities set by delegation management. Cooperation is also hampered by **concerns about potential negative effects**: protection colleagues often mentioned concerns they have about sharing confidential information with prevention staff, while prevention colleagues indicated that they are worried protection interventions may damage the trustful relationships they have built. Finally, interviewees mentioned several issues pertaining to the ICRC's current approach to **human resources management** as important factors for whether or not prevention activities also contribute to protection engagements. These include a lack of incentives and accountability for cooperation, a tendency over the past years to promote specialization at the expense of generalist profiles, and the dwindling of time that is available for inductions and trainings. In addition, the contribution of prevention activities have been constrained by a lack of institutional prioritization of these activities and an often insufficient level of contextualization.

The evaluation team concludes that strengthening the synergies between prevention and protection activities should be an important objective for reform at the ICRC. Other research conducted by members of the evaluation team suggests that there are only very few organizations with the capacity to engage in serious prevention work and that ICRC's

combination of such efforts with protection engagements is unique.¹ In a context of significant budget cuts, staff members consulted for the evaluation saw this as an important priority. When asked to rate the relative importance of strengthening the contribution of prevention activities to protection engagements compared to other areas of reform, survey respondents provided an average assessment of 78 out of 100.

Four main **recommendations** can help the organization to achieve this goal:

1. **Ensure that prevention and protection activities have clearly defined and well-understood shared objectives**, for example by: strengthening the focus on the common objective of changing the behavior of key stakeholders to reduce or avoid violations of humanitarian law; using planning processes that focus on such common objectives; and creating more accountability for working toward those common objectives.
2. **Systematically contextualize prevention activities and focus them more strategically on behavioral change**, for example by: clarifying what information protection staff should share with prevention colleagues; focusing training and dissemination sessions on priority issues identified by protection teams; including protection staff in training and dissemination activities; and investing in efforts to monitor potential behavioral changes of key stakeholders.
3. **Strengthen capacities and incentives for cooperation**, for example by: highlighting cooperation as a priority in the new Institutional Strategy, in Heads of Delegation meetings and as part of the responsibilities of delegation management; addressing cooperation issues in inductions and trainings, offering joint sessions where possible and strengthening inductions for FAS and PGE Delegates; and giving more consideration to soft skills in hiring and promotion decisions.
4. **Explicitly address issues around organizational culture**, for example by: commissioning an external facilitator to conduct an analysis of the ICRC's various sub-cultures; organizing a process to discuss and reflect on their findings; and working on developing a shared sense of purpose.

¹ Westphal F., S. Stoffel, and J. Steets, *The Logic of Protection Approaches: Four Models to Safeguard Civilians from Harm*, Global Public Policy Institute, 2022, https://gppi.net/media/2022_PoC_Iraq_Report_final.pdf.