Community-based protection: the ICRC approach

Angela Cotroneo and Marta Pawlak

The ICRC tries to ensure that its activities on behalf of IDPs and those at risk of displacement support, rather than undermine, communities' and individuals' self-protection mechanisms and coping strategies.

Communities and individuals affected by armed conflict and violence do not wait for humanitarian actors to analyse and address the problems and threats they face. They permanently monitor their surroundings and take decisions themselves: displacing themselves as a self-protection mechanism, deciding how best to travel in groups and to ensure that children and older people are not left behind during flight, choosing in advance which road to take, discussing locations to avoid, hiding food and medical supplies along the route, negotiating directly with weapon bearers…

There are plenty of measures that people adopt prior to and during flight in order to move in a safer and more organised way, and – while in displacement – to cope with the new situation and meet their protection and assistance needs. How can humanitarian actors ensure that their interventions do not undermine communities' and individuals' self-protection mechanisms and coping strategies but rather help to strengthen them? At the same time, how can communities and individuals be supported to avoid having to resort to harmful coping mechanisms?

While proximity to and dialogue with affected populations have always been part of the working modalities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), today the ICRC makes specific efforts to ensure that community-based protection (CBP) approaches are integrated more systematically into its response. Engaging with communities in this way not only aims to help strengthen their resilience by reducing their exposure to threats and to harmful coping strategies but is also seen as a crucial component of the ICRC's commitment to being accountable to affected populations. This means engaging with affected communities and individuals in order to better understand their needs and protection concerns, recognising that they are the 'experts' on their own situation,

The ICRC talks with community leaders in Chad who have given shelter to displaced people about the distribution of agricultural equipment.

and taking their capacities and views into account in defining the ICRC's response.

In some cases, the ICRC supports communities by strengthening their existing self-protection activities or by developing new strategies identified by the community. In other cases, where it identifies a possible strategy that has not been suggested by the community, the ICRC may propose such a response in full consultation with them.

The ICRC's CBP activities are an important complement to its other protection approaches. Through confidential dialogue and structural support targeting authorities and weapon bearers[1] (both state and non-state actors), the ICRC seeks to prevent forced displacement, and other violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and harming behaviour that may result in displacement of the civilian population,[2] and to help the authorities fulfil their obligations to protect and assist IDPs under their jurisdiction.

By combining activities at the levels of the weapon bearers, authorities and communities, the ICRC aims to maximise its protection impact. The idea is to work simultaneously to influence the behaviour of perpetrators, provide support to responsible authorities to create a conducive environment for the respect of people's rights and dignity in the longer term, and strengthen the resilience of people by reducing their exposure to risks. For example, in some situations activities at the level of the weapon bearers and authorities may take some time before they translate into tangible and sustainable results. In these circumstances, CBP activities can help communities to reduce their vulnerability to protection threats and reinforce their coping strategies with more immediate effect. In order to guarantee a successful CBP approach, it is best if complementary activities are undertaken at all levels.

CBP workshops

The ICRC organises workshops, bringing together members of a community and ICRC staff, in order to develop a greater understanding of their specific needs, vulnerabilities and capacities, and to engage in a structured discussion with concrete outcomes and conclusions. Participants debate the problems and threats they face, rating them in order of importance; they then analyse the causes and consequences of

the problems, making concrete suggestions for addressing them and identifying corresponding coping strategies. After the workshop, the ICRC evaluates each suggestion and will conduct a feasibility assessment if necessary; the ICRC then shares with the community its suggestions about which activities could be implemented, and the community is then involved in the design and implementation of the selected activities. Where appropriate, suggestions received from the community that go beyond the ICRC's scope of action are communicated to other actors for possible follow-up.

The selection of workshop participants is crucial, and the composition of the focus groups must be determined to allow for consideration of gender-, age- and disability-related vulnerabilities. This helps the ICRC take into account IDPs' specific vulnerabilities and capacities in contributing to their own protection. For example, in contexts of displacement, men can be particularly vulnerable to arbitrary arrest, women to exploitation, children to forced recruitment, and elderly people and those with disabilities to movement restrictions. The CBP workshop can also be used to bring together members of the IDP community and residents in order to better understand the possible similarities and/or differences in the situations of IDPs (or returnees) versus their host communities, and to foster joint strategies.

Concrete activities within a CBP framework

The ICRC identifies five types of activities that can be implemented as part of a CBP framework to help address people's specific vulnerabilities and protection concerns, taking into account their capacities, during the different phases of displacement.

Risk education/awareness: These activities involve providing information on threats and how to address or avoid them, and raising IDPs' awareness of their rights so that they know how to access essential services and identify when the authorities are not complying with their obligations. For example, in Ukraine, the ICRC has in recent years carried out mine risk education activities for IDPs and returnees in areas contaminated with mines or unexploded ordnance. Since 2010 in Georgia, the ICRC has organised information sessions for families of missing persons, the majority of whom were long-term IDPs, on their legal rights in relation to pensions and missing person declarations, which are needed in order for the family to be eligible for state support. Information on rights and services are especially important for IDPs, who find themselves in a new place, often deprived of their usual support network and without access to information that is essential for them to enjoy their rights and access basic services.

Self-protection: During the pre-displacement phase, CBP can be used to support people at risk to better prepare for displacement by helping communities to reinforce early warning systems and to reduce some of the possible risks associated with flight, such as family separation and the loss of essential documents. In 2011 in Cauca, Colombia, the ICRC helped communities exposed to imminent displacement to safeguard their belongings. Families were provided with boxes in which they could deposit their most valuable possessions, which were then stored by a local NGO in a safe area.

Assistance to reduce exposure to risk: This involves assistance that addresses the physical needs of a person at the same time as reducing their exposure to a direct threat or providing an alternative to risky or harmful coping strategies. In some contexts, the ICRC may move a well to be closer to the IDP community in order that people are not put at risk by having to travel long distances to collect water. In Sri Lanka, the ICRC provides income-generating activities for returnee widows to help reduce their need to resort to harmful strategies such as saving money by not seeking health care or by sending children out to work.

Engagement with those who are the source of threats: Enhancing or developing engagement strategies involves a) activities which reinforce communities' attempts to ensure that authorities and weapon bearers uphold their obligations and respect the community's rights and b) mediation and

liaison activities between communities and authorities and weapon bearers to develop direct dialogue. For example, during a recent CBP workshop with IDPs from a camp in the Central African Republic, women reported that they had formed an association in order to be better equipped to raise their concerns with weapon bearers and to negotiate safe access to land; the ICRC is currently considering the possibility of supporting their endeavours.

Community self-organisation and social cohesion: While weapon bearers are often responsible for causing harm, suffering can also be caused by civilians themselves. This is particularly true in situations of displacement where social cohesion – the willingness of community members to cooperate with each other to better cope with threats and improve resilience – has been weakened, and where tensions between host communities and the displaced population and among the displaced people themselves are common and may increase as displacement becomes protracted. Because of its specific mandate, the ICRC itself does not address social cohesion but Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies (ICRC's primary partners in situations of displacement) can contribute greatly on this issue. Some of the ICRC's activities can nevertheless have a positive impact in terms of reducing tensions between host communities and IDPs, at the same as responding to IDPs' material needs. For example, in order to defuse tensions in situations where IDPs and host communities compete for scarce natural resources such as firewood, the ICRC may distribute briquettes to IDPs.

Limitations and constraints

The contribution of CBP activities to reducing exposure to threats and the need to resort to harmful strategies, and their concrete impacts, are difficult to measure other than qualitatively. During impact assessments, the local communities with whom the ICRC has been working are asked to share how the interventions have contributed to their safety and well-being. Some community-based protection activities may provide a false sense of security. In Sudan, for example, the ICRC provided whistles to IDP women collecting fire wood so that they could raise the alarm in case of danger; during later evaluation of the intervention, it was realised that the women were going out of range and the whistles could not be heard when they were attacked.

Implementing community-based protection is time consuming. Staff must be trained in CBP methodology, evaluations must be conducted and team members from different programmes must be mobilised. This makes it challenging to implement during emergencies. In times of acute emergency, where access and security are a concern, it is often not feasible to organise a CBP workshop with people who are fleeing or are not yet in a stable situation. However, there may still be ways to engage with communities. For example, the ICRC may conduct workshops with people who have recently left a particular situation. In February 2016, the ICRC conducted a CBP workshop with Syrian refugees newly arrived in Jordan in order to collect information on the situation of IDPs at the Syrian border that they had recently left. Another possible solution may be to conduct CBP workshops with members of Red Cross or Crescent National Societies who may be living among the displaced community and may therefore have more direct knowledge of the situation.

Despite these limitations, community-based protection lies at the heart of the ICRC's operations. It reinforces accountability to affected people, and ensures that communities are recognised as agents of their own protection.

Angela Cotroneo *acotroneo@icrc.org*
IDP Adviser

Marta Pawlak *mpawlak@icrc.org*
Community-Based Protection Adviser

International Committee of the Red Cross
www.icrc.org

1. See http://bit.ly/ICRC-weapon-bearers

2. On ICRC and displacement prevention, see Talviste V, Williamson J A and Zeidan A (2012) 'The ICRC approach in situations of pre-displacement, *Forced Migration Review* issue 41. www.fmreview.org/preventing/talviste-et-al