Guiding Protection Principles and Minimum Standards for Emergency Relocation Support in Northwest Syria

Where advocacy and other protection efforts have failed, humanitarian actors in Northwest Syria may provide last-resort emergency transportation support to vulnerable at-risk civilians who face immediate threats to physical safety or survival due to active hostilities and rapidly shifting frontlines and who desire to move to areas of greater relative safety but lack the means to do so independently.

Emergency relocation support, as provided by humanitarian actors in Northwest Syria, differs from large-scale and organized humanitarian evacuations in that it is provided on a household or individual level from areas where populations that are able to move of their own accord have already begun leaving and do not cross active frontlines.

The Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey) developed the below Guiding Protection Principles and Minimum Standards for such emergency relocations, aiming to uphold ‘do-no-harm’ and protection principles, and considering the operational and protection context.

Guiding Protection Principles and Minimum Standards

- Relocation is a life-saving measure of last resort, in line with the humanitarian imperative, when other protection measures are impracticable and/or have shown not to have had the desired impact. Emergency relocation supports civilians who face immediate threats to physical safety and/or life due to aerial bombardment, active hostilities, and shifting frontlines and request support as they are unable to depart on their own from conflict-affected areas where civilian departures are already taking place.

- Provision of relocation support to civilians at risk does not discharge parties to the conflict of the obligation to adhere to IHL and IHRL principles¹ which prohibit inter alia the targeting and forced displacement of civilians for reasons related to the conflict. Civilians who opt to or involuntarily remain in areas of conflict are to be protected in accordance with IHL; provision of emergency relocation support does not alter the civilian character of respective locations. Emergency relocation support is provided in line with humanitarian principles and exclusively by humanitarian actors; it is not in any way related to obligations or measures taken by parties to the conflict. Moreover, parties to the conflict also remain obliged to enable free and safe movement of civilians, including humanitarian actors, and should ensure access to humanitarian assistance and services for affected populations.

- Civilians not facing acute and life-threatening risks s due to conflict escalation and those able to move independently will not be supported through emergency relocation activities. Clear eligibility and vulnerability criteria, including for prioritization purposes, should reflect this. Moreover, to ensure principled action, a well-defined methodology and criteria for assessing the threat level for civilians as well as safety and security en route should be in place. Decision-making procedures, building on these criteria and methodologies, should be well-defined.

- Relocation should be voluntary in nature, based on a free and well-informed choice. Humanitarian actors will not exert any undue pressure of any kind; they will provide relocation only upon the request of the affected population (i.e. the affected population initiates the support provision process) and will provide accurate and objective information to civilians, including on limitations of support provided (e.g. eligible locations of destination, available support and living conditions in destination, unpredictability of the security situation, the lack of a permanent solution to displacement, the right to but lack of clarity on return, inability to provide return transportation, etc.) and on the importance of bringing civil documentation and property ownership certificates/title deeds (if available). Humanitarian actors providing relocation support should be prepared to use diverse communication methods to ensure that all persons understand choices and can make an informed decision.

- Even in emergency circumstances, humanitarian actors must obtain informed consent, preferably in writing, before commencing relocation. Informed consent should be assured for all individuals regardless of impairment. The evolving capacities of children with disabilities should be recognized in this regard. Where applicable assisted

¹ Notably, the obligation to distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives; the prohibition on making civilians or civilian objects the target of attacks; the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks; the obligation to take precautions in attacks to spare the civilian population; the prohibition on acts or threats of violence to spread terror among the civilian population; the prohibition on starvation as a method of warfare; the prohibition on the destruction of objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population; the prohibition on reprisals against the civilian population and civilian property; fundamental guarantees such as the prohibition on ill-treatment; and the prohibition on collective punishments. Respect for these basic rules of IHL, as well as for the basic provisions of IHRL, would prevent most displacement as it occurs predominantly as a result of violations of these rules.
decision making may be used, for example a family member may support the decision-making process of persons with disabilities recognizing that in certain circumstances family members may pose barriers to informed consent.

- Humanitarian actors should avoid instigating or accelerating mass movements; to that end, emergency relocation will be initiated only from areas from which civilians have already begun departing. Consultation with community leadership and groups representation is necessary within the community and can provide information on the dynamics in an area. Humanitarian actors should take measures not to exert undue pressure of any kind, including unintentionally, keeping in consideration the voluntary nature of the relocation as well as short and long-term protection implications of displacement.

- Including during emergency relocation support activities, civilians have the right to freedom of movement and choice of destination, within the bounds of feasibility and safety of route.

- Civilians utilizing relocation support can bring personal assets along within the bounds of reasonability and feasibility; humanitarian actors will make the necessary arrangements to facilitate loading, transport, and unloading of assets in support of households and individuals that require such assistance. At a minimum such assets include personal belongings and objects indispensable for survival in a reasonable amount not to hinder the movement process. Assistive devices and supplies to facilitate care for persons with disabilities will always be transported. Measures should be taken that such personal effects are not confiscated during the relocation or upon arrival.

- Civilians who are unable to present civil documentation will not be excluded from relocation and subsequent assistance provision and/or referral.

- Humanitarian actors will exercise all due care to ensure that family unity is preserved throughout the relocation process, especially to prevent the separation of children, older people, and persons with disabilities from their households and caregivers (e.g. by providing identification bracelets, ensuring that households travel in the same vehicle, taking specific care that persons with disabilities are not separated from caregivers and assistive devices).

- Identified unaccompanied children should be registered before departure and accompanied by a known adult or a humanitarian staff member to the destination and referred to specialized child protection agencies. Family unity should be verified before and during relocation and procedures for ensuring family reunification in cases of involuntary separation in place.

- Humanitarian actors engaged in relocation support must maintain an up-to-date intersectoral service mapping and coordinate with service providers of all relevant humanitarian sectors in the area in order to ensure assistance and service provision upon arrival at reception locations. Dignity kits should be provided to all women and girls of reproductive age, including women and girls with disabilities, either during transit or upon arrival at first safe destination.

- Information provided by civilians to humanitarian actors throughout the cycle of relocation provision will remain confidential, protected, and retained in line with applicable data protection standards.

- Humanitarian actors providing relocation support are trained on humanitarian and protection principles and approaches, including the provision of Psychosocial First Aid, safe and confidential referrals, as well as the rights of persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts and accessible communication. Humanitarian actors providing relocation support have PSEA and Child Safeguarding policies and mechanisms in place, provide avenues for complaints, seek feedback, and staff (including volunteers) is regularly trained on these topics as well as GBV guiding principles and referral pathways. High-risk cases should be immediately referred for specialized services upon arrival at the reception center or first safe destination and follow-up should be conducted in line with applicable standards.

- Humanitarian actors providing relocation ensure gender-balanced teams and gender-sensitive interventions and support. At least one female staff member or volunteer should be present at the time of arrival at the reception center/first destination. Diversity in staffing is strongly encouraged to ensure inclusive approaches. Furthermore, at least one female staff member or volunteer should be present for any secondary relocation to a final destination, e.g. to stay with relatives.

- In conducting emergency relocations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its public health implications, humanitarian actors should observe the guidance and recommendations of the Health Cluster.

- Humanitarian actors will take all feasible measures to guarantee safety and security of civilians during and after movements. This inter alia includes risk monitoring and mitigating measures, as well as training to staff engaged in relocations in basic first aid, (explosive) hazard awareness, and safety practices. Parties to the conflict have an obligation to ensure the safety and security of civilian movements in line with IHL and IHRL.

- Relocations are civilian in nature; humanitarian actors will not transport active fighters and goods/equipment that facilitates hostilities or benefits parties to the conflict.

- Displacement as a result of relocation must be temporary in nature and should last only as long as the circumstances require. All involved stakeholders, including relevant authorities and parties to the conflict, recognize that no permanent solution is achieved through the provision of relocation support; this should be clearly communicated to individuals and families supported with emergency relocations.
Principles and Considerations for Facilitating Emergency Relocation of Children and/or Families

In addition to above cited principles that also apply to children, additional principles drawn from international law in regard to relocation of children apply and should be observed:

- **Best Interests of the Child:** In all actions taken concerning children, the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration.
- **Child Participation and the right to be heard:** All children, including children with disabilities, should be able to express their views regarding decisions affecting them and to have those views given due weight according to their age, maturity and evolving capacity; this includes decisions related to relocation, family tracing and reunification.
- **Family Unity:** Every effort should be made to keep family units intact during relocation. Children should only be relocated without family members as a temporary measure and when in the best interests of the child (for instance when there is a life-threatening risk to the child or the child is already separated and will be reunited at the destination). Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are also entitled to special measures of protection, including alternative care, family tracing and reunification.

**Considerations and special protection measures:**

- The humanitarian actor facilitating relocation should designate a child protection officer who will act as a focal point for all child protection matters.
- For unaccompanied and separated children (UASC): Before conducting relocation, family tracing and any other actions for UASC, the humanitarian actor should obtain informed consent of a guardian/caregiver or the implicit consent of the child to receive assistance and share personal data, if their age, maturity and evolving capacities allow them to understand the implications of their decisions. Specific measures should be taken to ensure children with disabilities can provide informed consent.
- The child protection focal point will liaise with a child protection agency on the ground to ensure that all efforts to trace UASCs’ parent(s) or other adult family as soon as possible are made. At minimum, (s)he should document the name of the child and that of the parent(s)/family member(s) to be traced as well as the age, contact details, place of origin and relationship to the child, circumstances of separation, information about where the adult might be, as well as details that might help verify the relationship.
- If there is no guardian/caregiver: Use the ‘Best Interest’ principle as a guide to assess whether or not relocating the child or group of children is in their best interests (when, how, to where, with whom), with primary consideration for risks to children’s survival and development. Those older children who explicitly requesting relocation can be considered that they have provided implicit consent.
- To the extent possible, partners through its child protection officer/focal point should document decisions and refer/liaise with a child protection agency on the ground and with a child protection agency at arrival.
- Assign escorts to travel with unaccompanied children ages 15 and younger, and older children as required.
- Create a private area for breastfeeding.
- Keep children safe at rest stops, at checkpoints, and when uploading offloading baggage.
- Provide children with immediate basic services upon arrival and refer/liaise with a child protection agency on the ground for further support and follow up after arrival in new location.
Decision-making and information provision to humanitarian leadership

- Given the need for quick action to save lives in emergency circumstances, humanitarian actors who adhere to all guiding principles, minimum standards, and reporting procedures described in this document can undertake population-initiated emergency relocations.
- Humanitarian actors initiating emergency relocation activities will as early as possible, within the day, inform in writing the designated HLG Emergency Relocations Committee which is overseen by the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator. In this communication humanitarian actors will specify:
  - Justification for relocation initiation, including an analysis based on the methodology adopted for assessing the threat level and steps followed in light of the defined decision-making procedure;
  - Areas where civilians are identified for relocation;
  - Planned reception location(s) for civilians that do not request a specific destination;
  - Number of requests received.
- Humanitarian actors providing relocation support will coordinate with other actors, especially those conducting the same activity, and will update the HLG Emergency Relocations Committee daily during ongoing activities. In these daily communications, humanitarian actors will detail activities of the prior 24 hours:
  - Number of civilians supported (households and individuals, including age, gender, and diversity characteristics) and destinations chosen;
  - Areas where civilians are identified for relocation and changes in these areas;
  - Challenges in providing relocation, especially related to safety and security along routes and in destinations (including security screenings, detentions, etc.),
  - Challenges in access to services (including for groups with specific needs) in destination locations,
  - Emerging protection trends and concerns.
- Humanitarian actors will cease providing relocation support when civilians are no longer facing an acute and life-threatening risk due to active hostilities and shifting frontlines.
- Humanitarian actors providing relocation support will inform the HLG Emergency Relocations Committee of suspension and/or conclusion of activities.
- The Protection Cluster consults regularly with the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator and other members of the Emergency Relocation Committee on information provided and trends related to emergency relocation activities and may request humanitarian actors to discontinue relocation activities based on a collective assessment and analysis of the trends, situation, protection dynamics, and risks. Humanitarian actors requested to do so by the HLG Emergency Relocations Committee will cease providing relocation support immediately.
- Targets and indicators may be set for projects/programmes which include relocation support activities; however, it is recognized that achievement of respective targets is situation- and context-dependent. To mitigate any risk of adverse incentives for facilitating civilian movements these implementation targets should be treated with flexibility by the donor; there shall be no penalty for underspending if circumstances end up not requiring emergency relocation – such projects/programmes can be considered humanitarian and protection preparedness measures.

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2 Humanitarian Liaison Group
3 In addition to the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator or delegate, the committee includes at a minimum the Protection Cluster, OCHA Access and Civil-Military Coordination Teams and other relevant units, an elected UN agency, and two elected NGOs.
Planning and Operational Checklist

This checklist is compiled to assist humanitarian actors with adherence to the Guiding Protection Principles and Minimum Standards during Emergency Relocation Support in NW Syria. It should not be treated as exhaustive.

Humanitarian actors preparing for emergency relocations should define and put in place the following plans and measures.

- **Methodology and criteria for assessing the threat level** affecting the civilian population in areas subject to active hostilities;
- **Methodology for assessment of safety and security** along the intended route, including in relation to destinations requested by civilians;
- **Decision-making procedure** for initiation of emergency relocations, contingent upon the assessed threat level;
- **Eligibility and vulnerability criteria**, including for prioritization purposes; these criteria should specify that civilians not deemed to be at acute risk and facing threats to life due to ongoing hostilities and shifting frontlines as well as those who are deemed to be able to move of their own accord are not eligible for emergency relocations.
- **Information provision plan** to civilians accessing emergency relocations, including on limitations of support provided (e.g. eligible locations of destination, support in destination, etc.) and on bringing civil documentation and property ownership certificates/title deeds (if available);
- **Informed consent form** whereby individuals supported with emergency relocation acknowledge the risks and limitations of relocations and confirm their desire to be relocated;
- **Feedback and complaints mechanisms** in line with applicable standards, including a plan for proactively collecting and acting upon feedback,
- **Data confidentiality, protection, retention, and destruction** protocols;
- **Presence of at least one female staff member** at reception point and for any secondary relocations, diversity in staffing is strongly recommended;
- **Measures to ensure family unity** is preserved, especially to prevent the separation of children, older people, and persons with disabilities from their households;
- **Family tracing and reunification SOPs** for UASCs; Identified unaccompanied children should be registered before departure and accompanied by a known adult or a humanitarian staff member to the destination and referred to specialized child protection services;
- **Verification mechanism** to ensure family unity is preserved during emergency relocations and procedures for ensuring family reunification in cases of involuntary separation;
- **Communication plan** with relevant authorities and community leadership in areas at risk and areas designated as reception locations on a decision to provide emergency relocations as well as in relation to freedom of movement and safeguarding of assets, the plan should also specify when/if to initiate communication with relevant authorities;
- **Designated reception location** and **mechanisms to ensure assistance and service provision upon arrival**, including
  - Updated intersectoral service mapping and protection referral pathways;
  - Arrangements to facilitate loading, transport, and unloading of assets in support of households and individuals that require such assistance;
- **Training for staff and volunteers on humanitarian and protection principles**, including psychological first aid (PFA) and safe referrals, as well as the rights of persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts and inclusive communication methods, the GBV guiding principles, Best Interests of the Child, and utilization of referral pathways. Staff engaged in relocations should also be trained on (explosive) hazard awareness and basic first aid.
- **Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Child Safeguarding policies** and regular training for staff and volunteers on these topics.