

Twenty years ago protection practitioners convincingly communicated the protection imperative to the broader humanitarian community. Early champions such as Diane Paul¹ and Roberta Cohen of the Brookings Institute drew attention to the inadequacy of humanitarian responses focusing only on relief items – food, shelter and medical assistance – whilst failing to address gross human rights violations.² The use of the term ‘well-fed dead’ to describe the consequences of this oversight in contexts such as Bosnia and Rwanda was evocative and effective. Affected communities were similarly convinced (and convincing) about the need to consider protection. This was perhaps best illustrated by a Kurdish girl fleeing from the Iraqi regime holding the sign ‘we don’t need food. We need safety’. The simplicity and directness of this plea captured the attention of humanitarian actors around the world.

The humanitarian community overwhelmingly rallied to the call to think more about, and do more to ensure, protection of disaster-affected communities. The ALNAP Guide on Protection was produced to provide succinct and accessible guidance on protection programming.³ The IASC’s *Growing the Sheltering Tree* helped motivate action through providing a range of practical examples from the field.⁴ Agencies with no previous role in protection embraced the imperative to mainstream protection in their programs by developing policies and guidelines.⁵

What had been achieved, knowingly or not, were the first crucial steps of an effective social marketing campaign. Simple and engaging messages that largely arose from field-based experience had created awareness and interest in the protection imperative. Positive attitudes

emerged that motivated humanitarian actors to introduce and prioritise protection initiatives.

Today, too much of the clarity and conviction of protection messaging and communication seems to have been lost. Protection is still considered a priority by many humanitarian actors; indeed it is a core mandate to organisations such as UNHCR and ICRC. Important progress has been made on the development of protection tools and key policy documents and initiatives including the IASC Principals’ Statement on the Centrality of Protection⁶ and the Rights Up Front Initiative.⁷ However, a legalistic and theoretical narrative seems to have replaced the compelling narrative of the late 1990s and 2000s. This contributes to a growing sense of confusion and frustration with regards to protection amongst humanitarian actors. There is evidence at the headquarters and field level of growing confusion regarding what protection is; what outcomes we are trying to achieve; and how they are to be measured. The recent whole of system review noted the lack of a simple conceptual framework for protection;⁸ the absence of a common understanding of the protection definition;⁹ and of clear narratives and quotable messaging on major crises such as DRC, South Sudan or Syria.¹⁰

So why has the protection discourse lost the clarity and conviction it carried in the late 1990s? And how can we reclaim it? This paper suggests that some of the explanation lies in the increasing complexity and inaccessibility of protection messaging. It further suggests that part of the solution may lie in applying a social marketing approach to protection communication.

The definition of protection itself is a quagmire of conflict and interminable debate. Humanitarians have failed to provide a simple accessible definition. This has resulted in key stakeholders in

1 Diane Paul, *Protection in Practice*, RRN Network Paper 30, July 1999

2 Roberta Cohen, *The Displaced Fall Through the World’s Safety Net*, February 1997

3 Hugo Slim and Andrew Bonwick, *Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*, 2005

4 Inter Agency Standing Committee, *Growing the Sheltering Tree: Protecting Rights Through Humanitarian Action*, 2002

5 See for example the work of CARE, Caritas, Oxfam and World Vision to create mainstreaming standards initiated in 2006 culminating in the publication: Paolo Lubrano, Louise Searle and Kate Sutton; (2012); *Minimum Interagency Standards for Protection Mainstreaming* (World Vision)

6 <www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/IASC%20Principals%20Statement%20on%20the%20Centrality%20of%20Protection.pdf>

7 <www.un.org/sg/rightsupfront>

8 Norah Niland, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, Amra Lee, Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action, May 2015, page 48

9 Norah Niland, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, Amra Lee, Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action, May 2015, page 63

10 Norah Niland, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, Amra Lee, Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action, May 2015, page 48

the humanitarian community not understanding the most important and central protection 'message', namely what protection is. As a result, agencies have developed their own definitions of protection to make it operational and useful, intensifying divergence of understanding.¹¹ Another outcome, critical from a social marketing perspective, is that people are unable to move from believing something is a good idea to acting on it because they don't really know what 'it' is. To make matters worse, discussions on sub-categories of protection have been equally fraught. Does it matter to a field practitioner whether 'protection mainstreaming' or 'safe programming' is the best term? Does it make any difference to how it is implemented? Is the resulting confusion at the field level worth the debate?

Protection is not simple. It must, however, be understood simply and be simply understood. Today policy positions, resource materials and communications provided to the field may be technically sound but are not always accessible. The complexity and increasing use of legalistic language undermines people's ability to 'own' protection and to take action. This was illustrated by senior decision-makers interviewed for the whole of system review that reportedly prefaced comments in interviews with the comment that they were not protection specialists,¹² effectively distancing themselves from ownership of, and responsibility for, protection. Fear of doing 'it' wrong – amongst those who should be drivers of implementation – contributes to inaction.

So is social marketing part of the way forward? Humanitarians do not have to 'buy' protection in a literal sense, but they do need to 'buy in'. That is, to believe in it and act upon those beliefs. The type of technical expertise and support humanitarian leaders request will be influenced by whether they are 'sold' on the importance of protection; whether they listen to protection experts will depend on feeling positive about their input; whether they use protection tools and ideas will depend on accessibility, presentation and emotional engagement. In short, being well marketed.

Bringing on board expertise from a different sector can be a painful process but if there is openness to the potential opportunities it can have enormous advantages. For humanitarian protection a social marketing perspective could help us:

- Understand how protection and protection actors are perceived and how these perceptions can be positively strengthened
- Develop clear and simple messages that practitioners can understand, own, feel empowered by, and act upon
- Bring practitioners together to address complex issues such as those raised in the whole of system review
- Unite practitioners around shared positive messaging.

Perhaps the real promise of a social marketing approach is that it may re-ignite the passion and motivation to prioritise protection that existed in the late 1990s. Maybe we in protection need to still our pens for a while and reach outside our sector for a fresh perspective on selling protection.

¹¹ See for example the Oxfam's working definition 'improving the safety of civilians' <policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/conflict-disasters/protection>

¹² Norah Niland, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, Amra Lee, Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action, May 2015, page 23

