## Leveraging Community-Based Protection in Evolving Operational Environments Division of International Protection, Ms. Elizabeth Tan 93<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of The Standing Committee, 17-19 June 2025

Mr Chair, Distinguished delegates,

As highlighted this morning in the Note on International Protection, forcibly displaced and stateless persons are facing increasing challenges as the protection space is shrinking. At the same time, UNHCR is navigating one of the most challenging periods in its history, having to make difficult choices to maintain presence and capacity to respond.

Yet amid this uncertainty, one truth remains: empowered communities are among the strongest sources of protection and hope. Time and again, we have seen displaced and host communities step up—as first responders, trusted intermediaries, and often the only safety net when others step back.

This is the heart of the Conference Room Paper before you: "Leveraging Community-Based Protection in Evolving Operational Environments." It reaffirms UNHCR's long-standing commitment to working with communities—not just as beneficiaries, but as agents of protection and change.

Over a decade ago, in this very forum, UNHCR introduced a significant shift from "Community Services" to "Community-Based Protection." This was more than a change in language. It marked a transformation in approach, from viewing communities as passive recipients of aid to recognizing them as active agents in their own protection.

Today, that approach is more critical than ever. We face overlapping emergencies, protracted displacement, mixed movements, armed conflict, climate shocks, and a deepening funding crisis. In response, UNHCR is revitalizing its operational framework for community-based protection to better harness its full potential and to align closely with current priorities and approaches, including the principles shaping the humanitarian reset.

This paper reaffirms that community-based protection is central to achieving sustainable protection and solutions outcomes. It tailors interventions to local realities and promotes community ownership of responses.

At its core, the community-based protection approach embodies the concept of "people protecting people", recognizing that community members are often best placed to support and safeguard one another. It affirms that community agency, resilience, and leadership are essential in identifying and mitigating protection risks and shaping responses and solutions. This includes enabling informed, voluntary, and dignified decisions on return, as discussed earlier in the context of durable solutions and complementary pathways.

But community-based protection is not implemented in isolation. It is rooted in collaboration with governments, local actors, and humanitarian partners, to ensure coordinated, sustainable responses. It moves us beyond listening to marginalized voices and toward enabling those voices to lead. At the same time, community-based protection does not idealize communities. It acknowledges their complexity, including power imbalances and harmful social norms. Through inclusive engagement and trust-building, community-based protection supports communities in addressing these challenges from within, ensuring that at-risk groups are meaningfully included and protected.

The paper highlights compelling examples of UNHCRs protection work in this areainitiatives that demonstrate that community-based protection is not only inclusive – it delivers tangible protection outcomes:

- In Malawi, groups of refugees with disabilities were able to raise awareness and improve accessibility to camp services.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women led organizations have been critical in mobilizing communities around gender-based violence prevention.
- In Bangladesh, sustained engagement with religious leaders contributed to a reduction in child marriage and greater women's participation in public life in camps in Cox's Bazaar.
- In Ecuador, youth-led sports initiatives helped strengthen safe spaces in violence-affected areas, offering psychological support to both refugees and host communities' children and youth.

I witnessed the transformative impact of community-driven protection

- In Nigeria where I observed how an IDP-led organization was providing critical community outreach and psychosocial support services, leading activities in child-friendly spaces and women's centers.
- In Colombia, I witnessed the power of sustained community engagement in areas where refugee, internally displaced and host communities are working together to combat xenophobia and reduce tensions. Youth engagement and community dialogue were at the heart of these efforts.

These were *community-led*, complementing and strengthening local governance structures.

But these efforts are under threat.

Amid severe funding cuts and the loss of field staff and resources, hard-won progress and the trust carefully built with communities over time are at stake.

Refugee-led organizations, women-led organizations, other community-based organizations, as well as frontline NGOs are being hit hardest. These partners are the backbone of community-based protection and solutions efforts, yet many are struggling to survive, and our capacity to support is dwindling.

If we lose these partnerships, we will lose access. We will lose trust. And we will lose the opportunity to build responses that are locally owned, context-specific, culturally appropriate, and sustainable.

Let me be clear: community-based protection is not only the right but the smart thing to do. It strengthens our accountability to the people we work with and for. It is more sustainable and cost-effective, but it is not cost-free. It requires UNHCR presence and sustained investment to nurture relationships with community representatives who know the context, speak the language, understand the cultural dynamics, and are best positioned to respond effectively and inclusively.

This paper calls for predictable, flexible funding to sustain community-based protection, and for stronger support to the work of various community-based organizations.

**This is a decisive moment.** Let us reaffirm our commitment to community-based protection—not as a side effort, but as a core pillar of our collective response. In the face of shrinking resources and growing needs, communities remain among our strongest and most essential partners in protection.

Let us invest in them, stand with them, and learn from them.

Thank you.