



# Protect

The Right to International Protection

Civil Society Organisations and International Protection:  
Condensed findings



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 870761.





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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.7688250](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7688250)

# CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION: CONDENSED FINDINGS

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This summary focuses on the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in international protection and their relationship with the Global Compacts on Refugees and on Migration. As key actors in connecting the political sphere with on-the-ground activity, CSOs represent an essential part of the overall picture in the operation of international protection, a fact that has only been heightened by the Global Compacts' mission to broaden and make more inclusive the mechanisms that derive from the 1951 Refugee Convention. A mixed-methods approach has been undertaken to understanding the nature, activities and dispositions of CSOs across the European Union (EU), Canada, South Africa and in the international system more widely, producing a number of outputs that connect this back to the overarching PROTECT theoretical modelling of Sicakkan's (2021) cleavage approach. In this report, we present the main research questions, the findings and a number of academic- and practitioner-oriented conclusions.

## 1 Research questions

We start from the observation that Civil Society Organisations are relevant actors in relation to international protection. Acting independently or in conjunction with bodies such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or national public authorities, groups provide extensive direct and indirect support to millions of individuals around the world, from emergency relief and rescue to education, resettlement assistance and family reunion. As much as the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Protocol were signed by and bind states, it has become evident that without the contribution of CSOs the practical implementation of those provisions would be much weaker.

Various studies (cf. Martin & Nolte 2020, Mayblin & James 2019, Garkisch *et al.* 2017) have highlighted the scale and diversity of this work, placing CSOs firmly as defenders of the Convention's norms about the necessity of protecting refugees' rights and ensuring support on the ground. This role has only become more pronounced in the past decade with the formulation and agreement of the Global Compacts on Refugees (GCR) and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which institutionalised roles for CSOs alongside states and international organisations (Clark-Ginsberg *et al.* 2022,). It is widely acknowledged that CSOs play a vital role in implementing solidarity initiatives and are integral to a functioning democracy (Scholte 2002). This has become even more evident as a result of the impact of the 2008-2010 economic crisis, austerity measures – a label under which the state progressively has retrenched from its role as welfare provider (Dagdeviren *et al.*, 2019) - and the recent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic so that a variety of CSOs have, at the street level, responded to the demand for concrete implementation of solidarity initiatives in the form of social services and advocacy.

However, despite this growth in volume and scope, research on CSOs has tended to focus on how they *provide* international protection, rather than how they *interact* and *reflect* wider social currents and divisions around refugees and refugee policy. Put differently, while much work has focused on CSOs as agents of pro-refugee activity (e.g. Feischmidt *et al.* 2019; Larruina *et al.* 2019), the Work Package has sought to develop a much more rounded picture of CSOs in both theoretical and practical terms, and how they relate to broader political opportunity structures within and across states.

The research question is therefore: “**what is the role of CSOs in international protection?**” This has allowed us to consider the full breadth of CSOs that work in this field, regardless of their dispositions or activities. This breadth requires both a more inclusive mapping of groups and an understanding of their motivations, neither of which has been previously addressed so systematically in the literature. By understanding that CSOs are simultaneously a product of their members’ collective interests and of the political and social opportunity structures of the territories in which they operate, this opens up clear lines that connect to the overall PROTECT objective of discovering ways of better aligning the Global Compacts with human rights and the right to international protection. This occurs at the theoretical level, with a testing of the utility of Sicakkan’s (2021) cleavage model, and at the more applied level, with the surveying of CSO activity on international protection and their effective engagement with the Global Compacts. To return to the opening observation of this section, CSOs are relevant actors in this and so must necessarily be included in any project that seeks to develop a full understanding of international protection either in theory or in fact.

The Work Package created two novel data sets of CSOs.<sup>1</sup> Work Package 7 produced a list of organisations proximally linked to mentions of ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’ and ‘asylum seekers’ (and variations thereof) in social media posts in 17 countries between 2015 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> Automated processing marked up all identifiable organisations and bodies to form the target list for the present research. Aware of the diversity of CSOs (for example, community-based organisations, trade unions or voluntary, faith-based organisations, and other non-governmental organisations, to name a few. See Garkisch *et al.* 2017) we have been fully aware of the risks of generating specious outcomes based on the particularities of how the boundaries are drawn. In this case, the criteria for inclusion as a CSO were solely that there was an evident organisational structure, that it was not a public body or treaty-based international organisation and that it was not a political party, in line with the Anglo-Saxon scholarly debate (Salamon & Sokolowski 2016).

121 CSOs in 14 European states and in general international operation were identified in this way. While this is evidently not a full coverage of CSOs, it does provide a well-grounded evidence base with a more uniform cut-off of smaller groups that have not been linked in public social media discussion to the key themes in international protection, and there is no *a priori* exclusion of groups that might have been negatively-disposed (or indeed, indifferent) towards refugees. As a result, it allows us to capture the full range of positions within the cleavage

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<sup>1</sup> CSO Survey available at: <https://darus.uni-stuttgart.de/privateurl.xhtml?token=c3371e7b-0ef1-4db2-ae3e-83e05058eb30>. Desk-based survey available at: <https://darus.uni-stuttgart.de/privateurl.xhtml?token=c3371e7b-0ef1-4db2-ae3e-83e05058eb30>.

<sup>2</sup> In Europe: Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Germany, Austria, UK, Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia. South Africa, Canada and USA were also surveyed. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on the European states, and those CSOs identified as operating on a broad international basis.

model, with coding by researchers on the basis of their publicly-available statements and materials, including activities undertaken by groups in the period 2019.

## 2. Findings

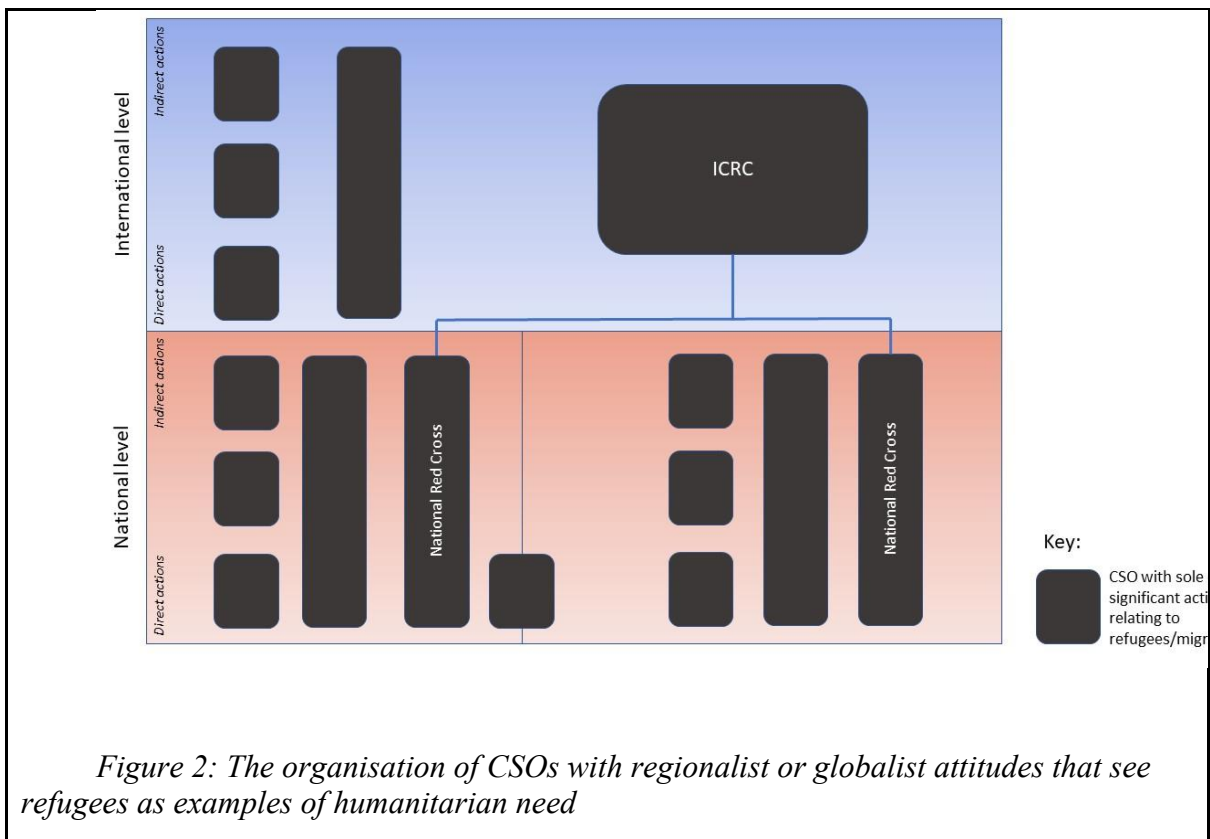
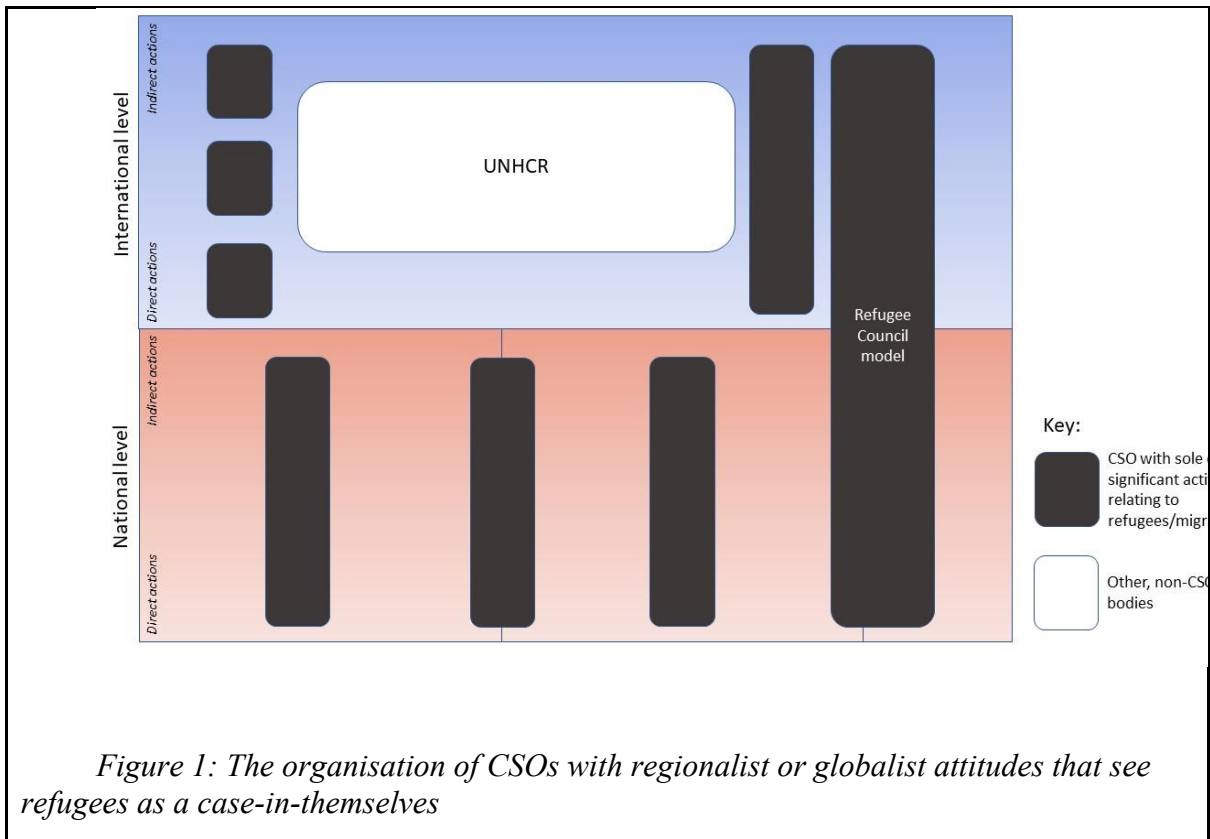
The Work Package's primary findings are empirical, based on the surveys outlined above. These have in turn supported some theoretical and conceptual work, with which we start here.

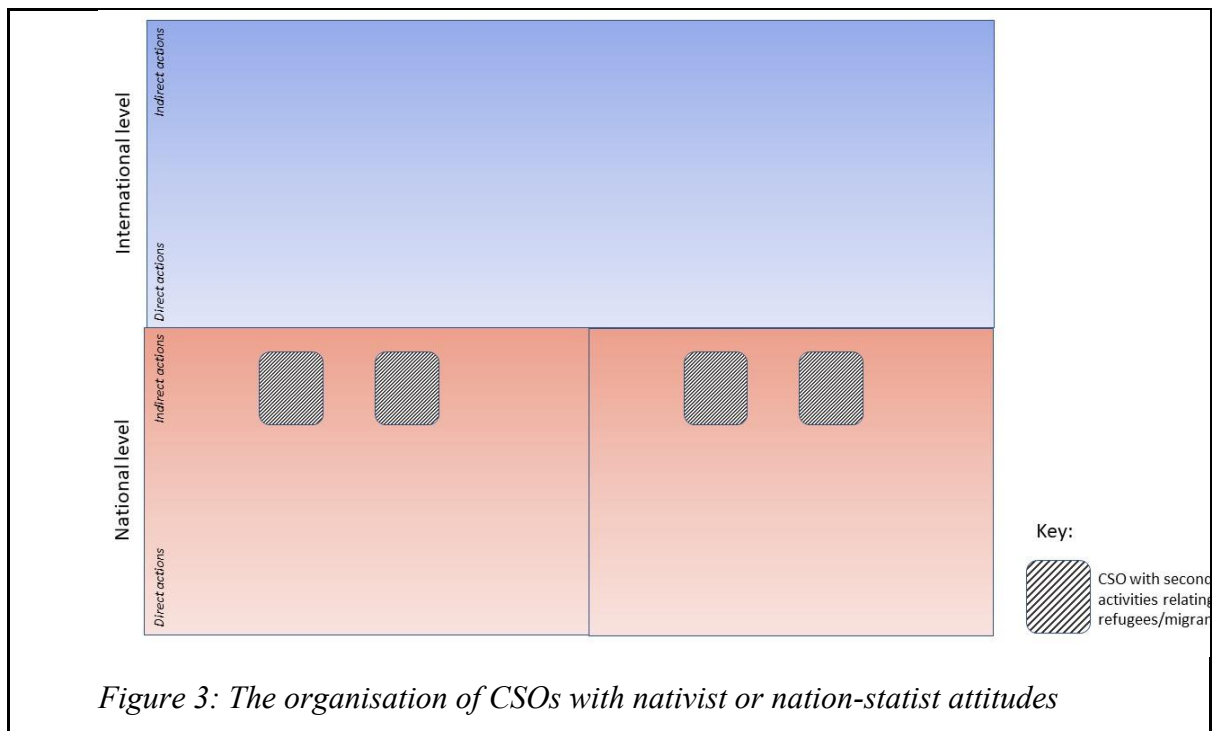
Usherwood (2021) developed a theoretical model of CSO activity on international protection, based upon an application of the cleavage model to political opportunity structures. Treating CSOs as expressions of social interests, it is posited that attitudes towards refugees and towards international protection will be central in the mobilisation of such interests into organised activity, but that there will be a number of different incentives around that mobilisation and activity that result from the general political system within a country. These endogenous and exogenous aspects operate co-constitutively to affect the space within which CSOs can exist at all, the profile of preferences they exhibit and the activities they undertake.

This model was substantiated by the findings from the surveys to produce a report (Usherwood *et al.* 2022) with its modelling of the scale and nature of CSOs along these lines (Figures 1-3). Each diagram represents the national-international space within which groups can operate. Groups with only a single country of operations are placed within one of the red boxes, which symbolises a state: for groups which have limited cross-border activity, they are situated across state borders. Those groups with an international/global mission sit in the blue, international box. The two exceptions to this are the ICRC, with its unique operating model of a global core body and autonomous (but coordinated) national sections, and the handful of national refugee councils (as in Denmark) which conduct significant international (and bilateral) work from a strongly defined national base.

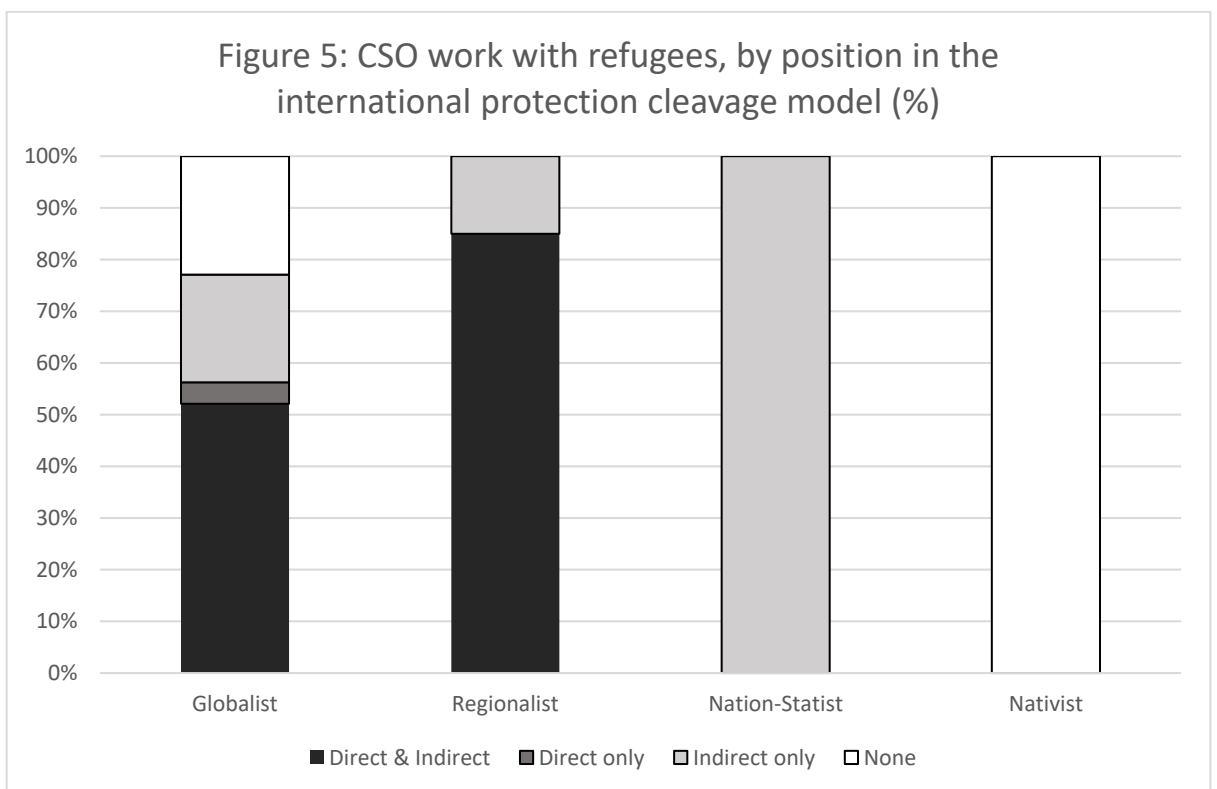
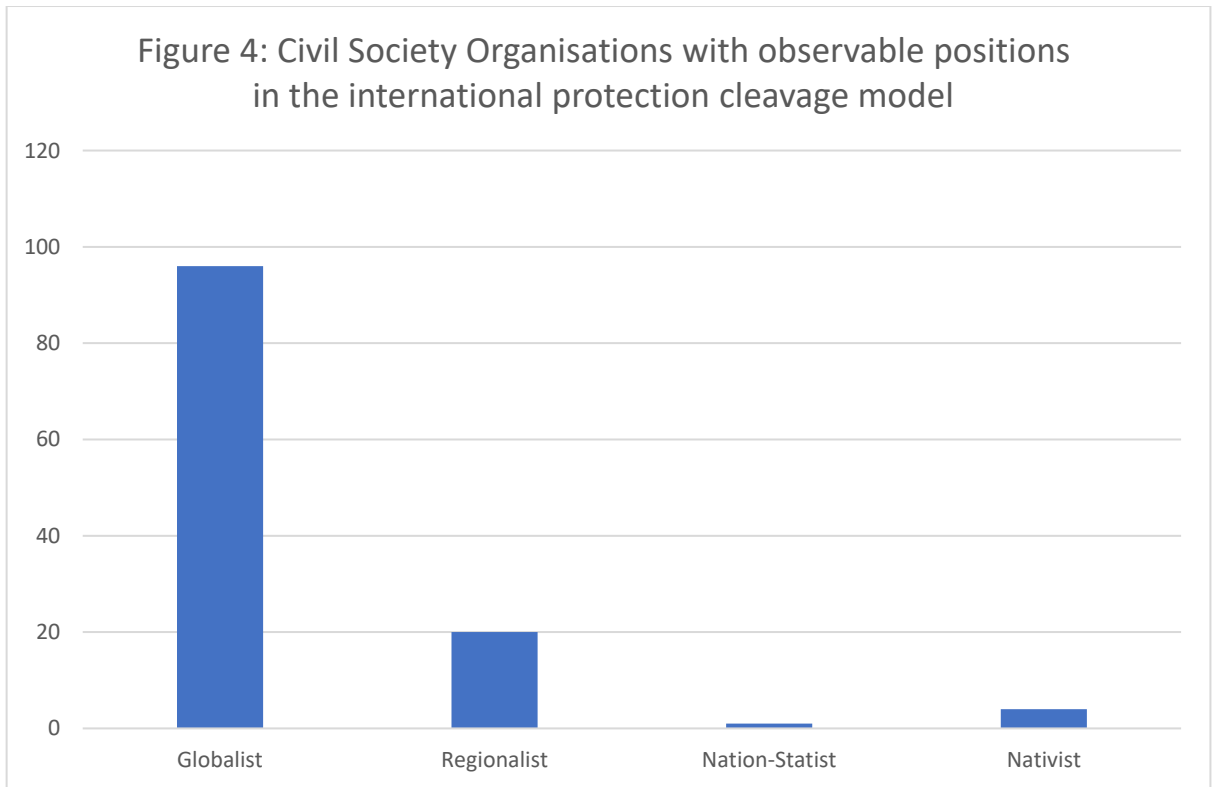
These national and international spaces are further differentiated by the types of activities that are undertaken within them. This matches the split between direct (e.g. emergency aid, case work) and indirect (e.g. lobbying, public campaigning) activity outlined above in this report. The diagrams represent the mix of groups that focus on a single type of activity and those that span across a wide range of work.

Finally, groups are differentiated by the extent to which refugees or migrants form a significant part of their work. This is determined by whether they indicate in their promotional materials and in media coverage that such work is closely connected to their core mission rather than any arbitrary quantification of the work itself. In practice this mostly serves to differentiate nativist and nation-statist groups from the rest (Figure 1), since none of these undertake direct actions in relation to refugees or migrants and limit themselves to campaigning about more generic issues around immigration, in which refugees and migrants are functions of national policymaking, rather than objects of interest in themselves.





Despite their much more marginal role within this landscape, nativist and nation-statist CSOs still require attention, since their core work often focuses on shaping and shifting national political and public debates, contesting the field for regionalist and globalist CSOs that are concerned about the effective provision of protection to refugees and migrants (Figures 4 & 5). Given the central role of governments within international policymaking, this contestation can have global repercussions. Usherwood *et al.* (2023) argue that the relatively absence of nativist or nation-statist CSOs does not mean that there is no social mobilisation of such attitudes, but that this mobilisation instead is directed into party political activity, where there is both supply and demand for parties with restrictive policies on international protection-related topics, such as immigration and multiculturalism. This is also a function of the lack of viable (or legal) direct activities a CSO critical of refugees can undertake.



Much more dominant in the CSO landscape are those groups with regionalist and globalist attitudes, all of which engage in some form of work to aid or support refugees and migrants. As noted above, in practice globalist attitudes are predominant here, not least because the bulk of resourcing and activity is situated within humanitarian-framed groups, which are definitionally globalist. Figure 2 maps out a rich landscape of such CSOs, anchored in many respects by the



ICRC by virtue of its resource base and its institutionalised integration into governmental and intergovernmental structures. At both the international and national levels we find humanitarian groups operating a wide range of spreads of activity, from healthcare to sea rescues and from education to disaster relief. What defines and differentiates these from the refugee-framing groups is that such work is understood as a response to a humanitarian need, in which refugees or migrants might be part of the target population, but not necessarily all refugees or migrants, and not necessarily only refugees or migrants.

By contrast, refugee-framing groups take interest in these individuals because of the status, and so present a distinctive organisational form, in two ways. Firstly, refugee-framing groups are much rarer than humanitarian groups in all of the countries surveyed and in the international domain. This is because refugees and migrants present a wide range of humanitarian concerns (so attracting the attention of such groups) but can be defined as refugees or migrants in a very limited number of ways (the former primarily by the Convention). Secondly, all refugee-framing groups in our survey adopt a full-spectrum approach to their work, with both direct and indirect activities. Again, this reflects their interest in the full life-cycle of being a refugee or migrant, from their initial displacement to their ultimate relocation and integration into a host community: humanitarian groups typically only intervene at key junctures in this journey. Indirect work thus becomes integral to ensuring a broader supportive environment for these individuals to complete their transition.

Finally, and most obviously, the particularities of refugees' and migrants' needs and situations has driven the creation of a particular organisational form: the refugee council. As noted above, states such as Denmark and Norway (and sub-national units like Scotland) have found it useful to create a single organisational focus for refugee matters, in which member organisations can simultaneously coordinate and amplify their work in this field. The network effects of such bodies tend to draw in all relevant activity, leaving minimal refugee-framed CSO work outside the council. This is analogous to the role of the UNHCR itself which predominates in the international space, even more than the ICRC in the humanitarian field: Those refugee-framing CSOs that do exist internationally all exhibit strong interactions with the UNHCR, which itself works in many ways like a CSO despite its intergovernmental organisation status.

The levels of interconnection are high within this CSO community. This is especially so in the international space and within individual state spaces: numerous examples of joint campaigns or fieldwork exist across the surveyed groups. Even nationalist and nation-statist groups have demonstrated some links within themselves. Such connections reflect the fuzzy boundaries of where interests lie and the imposed constraints of funding: as the refugee council model has shown, the pooling of resources can generate impacts well beyond the individual contributions of member bodies.

More directly, with regard to the Global Compacts, the survey highlighted a very limited engagement to date by CSOs. Typically, it has only been larger and/or international groups that have shown indications of involvement in either the formulation or implementation of the Compacts. Almost without exception, those (few) CSOs that have expressed views on the Compacts have focused on the need for better funding, implementation and responsibility-sharing with states. Strikingly, critiques of the actual practice around the Compacts were frequently connected to criticism of states' undermining of the (legally more robust) 1951 Convention, which is seen as the bedrock of the entire international protection system. CSO non-engagement is thus at least as much about more pressing concerns about that system than it is about any intrinsic failings of the Compacts.

The key findings can be summarized as follows:

- **CSOs working in international protection are key partners for accessing both refugees themselves and wider social groups.** CSOs are expressions of collective social interests and priorities: individuals have decided that something is worth their time and effort to mobilise themselves and to act. This produces groups with high levels of motivation and with specialist knowledge and resource, which public bodies are likely to find of particular use when trying to enact public policy in the field. But these groups are also gateways back into the societies from which they emerge and so offer opportunities for public bodies to engage with CSOs as representatives of broader constituencies on the nature and purpose of that public policy;
- **CSOs do not reproduce the full diversity of society.** The research has highlighted that there is a differential in CSOs mobilisation around the issue of international protection: only those sections of society with globalist or regionalist views on the matter are likely to organise themselves into groups that place it centrally in their work. When public bodies are trying to engage with civil society in the round on how to understand and enact international protection, they need to be aware that other views will be present in CSOs that do not make it a central concern;
- **The diversity of CSO forms and interests requires policy-makers and other partners to be aware of the implications of different framings.** As this report has highlighted, there is a key distinction between groups that see refugees as a case in themselves and those that see them as exemplars of humanitarian need: these two clusters conceive of the priorities and their role in meeting those rather differently. Consequently, public bodies need to engage closely with current and potential CSO partners in order to understand the particular ways in which these conceptualise and operationalise policy and actions. The trade-off of CSO specialisation is that it cannot be assumed that a group that works well on one element of international protection will be able to translate that to other elements;
- **CSOs might be the harshest critics of the Global Compacts, but also are their strongest supporters.** Non-engagement with the Compacts' development and implementation by most CSOs cannot simply be attributed to indifference or apathy. Where groups have been involved, they have shown a thoughtful and well-reasoned view of the challenges involved. In particular, there is evidence that these groups are more than willing to make more of the Compacts, should states make material efforts to uphold their side of the arrangements, and this in turn would give cause to more CSOs to become active in their implementation and enforcement. CSOs thus represent a critical resource, but one that can only be unlocked by states;
- **Global Compact implementation cannot be separated from the general enforcement of the international legal order.** CSOs have been very active advocates of the international regime that centres on the Convention, and larger groups did make efforts to shape and advance the Global Compacts. The evidence is that those Compacts have still to make much impact in operational terms, partly through limited knowledge among medium- and small-sized CSOs, but mostly because all CSOs see the international regime as a whole as being under threat from states and their unwillingness to actively pursue enforcement. The Convention remains a much more legally powerful tool than the Compacts for CSOs to leverage public policy and so remains their primary focus: there is a desire to make the most of the partnership elements within the Compacts, but this needs partners in the form of states. Those states and relevant

international organisations could readily build effective relations with CSOs on the Compacts if they so desired, as long as there is built on substantive action across the board on international protection.

- **Resourcing is essential.** A clear message from our data is that CSOs live and die by their resource base: finance is the lifeblood of any organisation that wants to deliver effective action on the ground. There is no sense that public funding is a solution to the intrinsically uncertain flow of income from the various sources that are used, but if public bodies wish to continue to make use of the expertise and access that CSOs can provide in the field, then they need to be cognisant of the precarity of individual groups and to be willing to consider stepping in to cover particular shortfalls (although note Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire's 2017 findings). Good levels of understanding, trust and dialogue between public bodies and CSOs is essential in this.

### 3. Conclusions

The research casts light on how international protection can be improved. In particular, it has developed a methodology for better identifying relevant CSOs (including those that might be working to limit or dismantle the system of international protection) and evaluating their interests and preferences. This in turn has provided extensive evidence on the scope and nature of CSO's interaction with and shaping of international protection. Moreover, it has highlighted the need to place CSOs within a wider context in order to understand their motivations and their potential: both public opinion and political opportunity structures have strong shaping effects in CSO mobilisation and activity.

The very significant and specialised resource base that CSOs can offer is an indispensable part of contemporary protection for refugees, especially as states have become less reliable partners in the effective implementation of Convention obligations. The extent of CSO activity suggests that these groups will be an essential part of any resilient and adaptable system of international protection in the era of the Global Compacts, but this requires them to be better integrated into structures that are currently dominated by national governments. CSOs represent the best available pathway for making refugees' own voices heard in the Compact architecture, and the strongest advocates for making the Compacts have real impact in enhancing international protection, but they cannot do this by themselves. States and international organisations therefore need to increase their efforts to build links with CSOs, especially in areas where public provision is weak or non-existent, if they are to maximise the possibilities of the more inclusive and balanced model of responsibility sharing. This would not only give immediate access to some significant reflection on how to develop the Compacts, but would also start to generate a virtuous circle, drawing in the many smaller CSOs into the Compact system, adding their resources and strengthening the mainstreaming of the Compacts more widely. Such work would also potentially serve to bolster the very uneven support for the 1951 Convention, by drawing states into a wider community of practice on international protection that is both responsive to those states' situations and needs and able to deliver more effective protection to refugees.

The work has pointed up a number of avenues for further research in three key areas. Firstly, more precise measurements of both CSO activity and impact would be invaluable in allowing all involved in international protection to know better what resource might be available at any given point. Secondly, systematic mapping of state-CSO and international organisation-CSO ties would help in identifying gaps in creating more effective international protection. And thirdly, data on the durability of individual CSOs and the factors that effect this

would be critical for these organisations in planning their operations and for those other bodies that seek to support and enhance CSO's vital contribution to international protection.

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