

This document forms part of the 4th edition of the UNHCR Emergency Handbook and was generated from the digital Emergency Handbook system.

Accountability to affected people (AAP)

Key points

- All responders working in an emergency response are accountable to persons of concern (PoC).
- AAP is not new or additional work: it is at the centre of UNHCR's protection mandate, as set out in its age, gender and diversity (AGD) policy, and implemented through community-based, participatory approaches that are already well-established.
- Ensure that participation, feedback and complaint mechanisms are integrated in all strategies, plans and programmes from the start of an emergency.
- Provide a range of accessible and rapid channels of communication with affected populations, and use them to inform affected populations about procedures, structures and processes that affect them, so that they are able to make informed decisions and choices.
- Programming decisions and actions should be responsive to the expressed priorities, needs, capacities and views of all persons of concern.

1. Overview

The phrase 'accountability to affected people' (AAP) is widely used in the humanitarian community to refer to the commitments and mechanisms that humanitarian agencies have put in place to ensure that communities are meaningfully and continuously involved in decisions that directly impact their lives.

Accountability refers to the responsible use of power (resources, decision making) by humanitarian actors, combined with effective and quality programming that recognizes a community of concern's dignity, capacity, and ability to be independent. As an international humanitarian organization, with a protection function at its core, UNHCR is committed to 'putting people first' and drawing on the rich range of experiences, capacities, and aspirations of refugee, displaced, and stateless women, men, girls and boys. In addition, it is committed to being accountable to the people it serves by listening and responding to their needs, perspectives, and priorities.

UNHCR's AAP framework and these values are outlined in UNHCR's *Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity* (AGD, 2018), specifically core actions 2-5:

- Participation and inclusion (Core Action 2).

- Communication and transparency (Core Action 3).
- Feedback and response (Core Action 4).
- Organizational learning and adaptation (Core Action 5).[1]

UNHCR is a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Team on accountability to affected people, which includes the task team on protection from sexual Exploitation and abuse (PSEA). Its goal is to create a system-wide culture of accountability by institutionalizing AAP, including PSEA, in the functions and resourcing of each humanitarian organization, alongside system-level cohesion, coordination, and learning.

UNHCR accountability to persons of concern has a history of continuous innovation and improvement, beginning in the early 1990s with the adoption of people oriented planning. Subsequent AAP-related policies and guidance include UNHCR's *Code of Conduct* (2004), its *Tool for Participatory Assessments in Operations* (2006), its *Accountability Framework for Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming* (2007), and the manual *A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations* (2008). AAP is also reflected in UNHCR's *AGD Policy* (2018), which aims to ensure that all sections of populations of concern have equitable and non-discriminatory access to protection and assistance programmes, and a say in decisions that affect their lives.

[1]

UNHCR, *Age, Gender and Diversity Policy* (2018)

2. When and for what purpose

UNHCR is accountable to persons of concern from the outset of an emergency until durable solutions are achieved. This requires direct and continuous work with communities of concern for the duration of their displacement, to make sure that they are able to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. UNHCR systematically involves persons of concern in participatory assessments. The outcomes of assessments are reflected in the annual and emergency response plans of country operations, as well as their priorities, programme designs, and monitoring and reporting.

Strong accountability mechanisms lead to more effective and efficient programming. Accountability is not a vague or moralistic concept: it is rooted in programming, which it should contribute to and improve. AAP is therefore an essential element of quality assurance across an operation's activities (in programming, monitoring and evaluation, reviews, and organizational learning), alongside AGD and protection. The humanitarian system as a whole has made itself accountable to affected people.

UNHCR's AAP policy.

The AAP policy defines key elements of accountability to which UNHCR is committed. They include: communication and transparency; feedback and response; participation and inclusion; and learning and

adaptation. The policy also standardizes the language used in reporting; informs priorities; supports assessments of the extent to which UNHCR achieves its AAP commitments; and provides criteria for evaluating learning and improvements.

3. How to implement this at field level?

The following key components of accountability to affected people are intrinsically linked and build on each other and other community-based participatory approaches. They are applicable in all UNHCR operations and provide a framework for the practical integration of accountability into protection and assistance programming.

Participation and inclusion.

Women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds are able to engage meaningfully and are consulted on protection, assistance, and solutions.

- Establish arrangements that permit meaningful participation at all stages of the operation's management cycle (assessment, planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation). The arrangements should be accessible to all groups in a community. In particular, ensure that potentially marginalized groups are included, such as minorities, people with disabilities, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Ensure that all persons of concern have equal and non-discriminatory access to protection, assistance and solutions. Act in a manner that enables forcibly displaced and stateless women, men, girls and boys to be resilient and achieve self-reliance.
- Identify the capacities and priorities of all persons of concern and develop protection, assistance and solutions programmes that accord with them.

Communication and transparency.

Women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds in all operations have access to timely, accurate, and relevant information on (i) their rights and entitlements, and (ii) the programmes of UNHCR and its partners.

- Facilitate communication and dialogue between UNHCR, its partners, and persons of concern at key stages throughout the operation's management cycle.
- Share information and communicate in languages, formats, and media that are culturally appropriate for, and accessible to, all groups in a community.

Feedback and response.

Formal and informal feedback from persons of concern is systematically received and responded to, and corrective action taken when appropriate.

- Establish and maintain effective feedback systems (including comments, suggestions, and complaints), using a variety of communication channels that are accessible to all persons of concern and that are appropriate for both sensitive and non-sensitive feedback.

- Allocate human and financial resources to ensure that feedback from persons of concern is systematically collected, acknowledged, assessed, referred, and responded to in a timely, confidential, and effective manner.
- Collaborate with partners in feedback referral and response processes (wherever appropriate).

Organizational learning and adaptation.

Interventions, planning, priority setting, course corrections, and evaluation are informed on an ongoing basis by the views of persons of concern.

- Learn from continuous engagement with communities of concern and adapt interventions and programmes in response to new knowledge gained through community participation and feedback, both in the short and long-term.
- Measure and improve accountability to all persons of concern through assessments of organizational performance on accountability.
- Include persons of concern as partners throughout the operation's management cycle, inter alia by reporting the results of assessments and follow up actions to them.

Good practices when communicating with communities

Listening and talking to communities is a fundamental part of a humanitarian response, for UNHCR and its partners, and is vital to ensure we remain accountable to persons of concern. Accordingly, **involving communities through effective, inclusive and consistent communication** is central to the AAP framework (reflected in the AGD Policy).

It is important for emergency responders to understand the information needs, preferred channels and trusted sources of different groups and individuals. It is equally important to ensure that communities' voices inform humanitarian decision-making. Emergency responders should therefore show that they have listened and should explain the decisions they make, including why certain actions cannot be taken.

Emergency responders are encouraged to be open to adopting new channels of communication. They should be aware that, while communication should not be driven by technology, in certain contexts and with certain populations new technologies can facilitate communication. Before choosing a particular form of communication, focus on the *purpose* of your communication, the *target population*, and *content*.

Understand your context by running an information and communications needs assessment.

Emergency responders should consult communities to determine what channels of communication they currently use, what sources they trust, and how they would like to talk to humanitarian agencies. Assessments should describe the local communication and media landscape; how the community shares information; leadership structures; levels of literacy; what languages are spoken; the community's age, gender and diversity (AGD) profile; and other relevant cultural practices. The information habits of target audiences, and the level of access of different AGD groups, are key factors when determining which channels to adopt and how to share information. This assessment process can be led by UNHCR or undertaken jointly with other humanitarian or other actors. UNHCR's general participatory assessments can include specific

sections on information and communication needs.

Coordination of communication initiatives is critical, both in organizations and at interagency level. Coordination minimizes the risk of circulating contradictory or duplicated information, encourages joint messaging, and allows organizations to pool, co-resource and share information channels. To manage and respond to community feedback effectively, it is particularly important to define and agree roles and responsibilities, internally and at inter-agency level. Responders should draft standard operating procedures (SOPs) that set out agreed commitments, time frames for follow-up, and agency and individual roles. Coordination mechanisms for communication may already exist; for example a working group for communicating with communities may have been activated as part of protection. If so, additional actors may need to be invited to join (for example, from the local media or telecommunications companies) to ensure it is representative.

Ensure you provide factual, objective and actionable information that enables people to make informed decisions. Work with team members and partners across sectors to define what information needs to be shared, and ideally what response/information is expected in return. Be sure to address information gaps highlighted by the information and communications needs assessment. Agreeing with stakeholders procedures and protocols for generating and signing off new messages is a key step - particularly for sensitive information.

Adopt a variety of communications channels to promote inclusivity and accessibility. The more channels you establish, the less likely it is that you will not reach a community because a channel has failed. Situations evolve: be aware of new communications opportunities; that existing channels can be disrupted; that information needs will change over time; and that different groups may be affected in a variety of ways by information gaps. Consider how different technologies affect information ecosystems, and how hi-tech tools integrate with more traditional tools. (For example, information from Facebook may be transferred onward by word of mouth.) Non-traditional actors, such as media and media development agencies, telecommunications organizations, and software developers, can provide expertise and support on such matters.

Don't assume that communication is 'one-way'. Communities want the opportunity to question and respond to the information they receive. For example, a common mistake is to broadcast 'bulk' SMS without planning to receive messages from the community in return; as a result, a large number of enquiries, and potentially protection concerns, can go unanswered. It is important to establish a forum or platform for discussion to generate new ideas and enable people to challenge and contextualize the information being shared. These can be high-tech, low-tech or no-tech. Examples include refugee-led Facebook groups, call-in radio shows, or 'town hall' meetings.

Manage expectations, counter misinformation and address rumours. In all communities, expectations and rumours are normal. Both love information vacuums; neither can be ignored. However, rumours only have value when they are the sole source of information. Responders can help to devalue them by listening to a community's concerns, monitoring 'misinformation', and proactively providing factual and verifiable information through trusted channels.

Don't duplicate efforts. To make communication initiatives sustainable, build on staff capacities and work with services that are already active. Work out what activities are already underway and

build on these. Identify which community members, partners and staff you can work with. For example, if people are regularly attending schools, medical centres or distribution points, you can integrate your communication activities into these services, working with teachers, parents, medical staff, distribution volunteers, etc.

Identify the resources you need, to ensure you have the capacity to implement, receive and react. Depending on your communications planning, and the arrangements you make, emergency operations will need staff and materials, including tools, expertise, budgets, and possibly additional technology. It is critical to include resources for 'listening and responding' in your planning, so that the operation can receive and respond to information that communities share. Consider the sustainability of activities, and find effective response strategies. For example, if feedback boxes are introduced, ensure they are accessible (location, language, access to writing materials) and that suggestions and complaints are regularly reviewed and followed up.

Test and refine your communications activities. Consult communities that do not engage to understand why. Work with specific groups in the community – young adults, disabled groups, women's associations, adolescents. Brainstorm solutions that will overcome challenges.

Considerations for practical implementation Keep up to date with technology but do so with your eyes open

Technology can facilitate community engagement by opening up new communication channels; people are becoming more and more connected. Technology can help reach remote populations, help to scale up certain interventions, increase efficiency. At the same time, technology is not always neutral and it is important to manage data, especially sensitive data, ethically and appropriately. Don't be led by technology. To ensure you 'do no (digital) harm', address the following:

- Ownership of technology. Is the channel owner associated with an interest, or with one side in a conflict?
- Neutrality. Is the content that is normally shared through this channel biased against one group of people?
- Data protection. How secure is the information that is shared through this channel?
- Digital divide. Does this channel marginalize certain groups without access?
- Appropriate. Is this channel preferred and trusted by communities?

No community is homogenous – be inclusive

Everyone accesses and consumes information but we each do so in a personal way. It is therefore vital to use a variety of communication channels. The fewer channels you use, the more you are likely to exclude some groups and individuals. 'Invisible' (marginalized) groups will need to be identified and reached using specific information and channels. The information and communications ecosystem should be an enabling environment for everyone. Draw on the expertise of other organisations or colleagues to help you reach out more effectively to the diversity of your audiences.

Physical impairments

- Where carers or advocacy groups for physically impaired people are active, work through them and use their communications channels.
- Include disability information (for example, about wheelchair access) in your communications.
- Some people with a disability have carers: include carers in discussions too.
- When you print messages, use a large font and prepare audio versions if you can.

Cognitive and learning difficulties

- Consider reaching out to social networks, family and carers.
- You may need to provide information verbally. It will need to be clear and simple, using short sentences.
- Do not provide too much information because this may cause confusion and stress.
- Use pictures or colours to help communicate (primary on a white background).
- Make sure your messages are consistent.

Communicating with children

- Start by connecting with what they are doing.
- Tell them your name and who you are.
- Create an environment that is not distracting.
- Ask their name(s) and age(s).
- Take your time.
- Watch, wait and listen.
- Play a game to build trust – have fun.
- Confidentiality is important.
- Avoid jargon.
- Always have a non-judgmental attitude.

How to use pictures

- Use one central image to avoid confusion about how to read the images on the page.
- Don't use symbols that require prior understanding.
- Avoid using comparison images to demonstrate differences in sizes, processes or numbers.

Make information easy to read

- Use words that communities use all the time.
- Use active verbs.
- Use full stops.

- Try not to use other punctuation.
- Use bullet points for examples and instructions.
- Do not split words over 2 lines.
- It is easier to read straight across the page.
- It often helps people to have a box to write in rather than lines to write on.
- Words in white (reversed-out text) on a coloured background can be harder to read.
- Use bold to highlight important words.

Resources and partnerships

Collaborative initiatives, such as the Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network

(of which UNHCR is an active member), help bring together collective expertise in communicating with communities (CwC). CDAC brings together over 30 technology providers, UN agencies, INGOs and the ICRC. Their field presence varies but the international secretariat (based in London) can help partners to link up where needed.

Consider partnering with:

- Local media (TV, radio, newspapers, social networks).
- Mobile network operators (MNOs).
- Government agencies, for example communications commissions or licensing agencies.
- Technology providers and software developers.
- Art and theatre groups.

4. Links

Accountability to Affected People E-learning

UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity

Information and Communication Needs Assessment Tool

How to control the 'CTRL+P' urge: embracing audio

10 things to consider before rolling out two-way SMS

Set up a system to manage two-way SMS in two minutes

Radio for Communicating with Communities

IASC Revised AAP Commitments, 2017

Revised CAAP Guidance note and resources list 2018

IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team

PSEA Task force

Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide

OCHA on Message: Communications with Communities

CDAC

Tools and Resources

Assessing Information and Communication Needs

CDAC Message Library

CBP Community of Practice

COMPACT GUIDANCE FOR SENIOR MANAGERS ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE (AAP) (2020)

OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE ON ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE (AAP) (2020)

5. Media

Introduction to Community-Based Protection

ERC video message introducing the Transformative Agenda

A short film with IASC Principals explaining the importance of the Transformative Agenda

Need help?

CONTACT As first port of call, contact the UNHCR Deputy Representative (Protection), the UNHCR Assistant Representative (Protection), or the Senior Protection Officer or Senior Community-based Protection Officer in the country.

Alternatively, contact the UNHCR Head of Protection, or the Deputy Director (Protection), or the senior Protection Coordinator, or the senior Protection Officer, or the senior Community-based Protection Officer in the Regional Bureau.

The person you contact will liaise as required with the relevant technical unit at UNHCR DIP.

Annexes

- UNHCR, Age, Gender and Diversity Policy (2018)
- UNHCR, Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations, 2006
- UNHCR, Understanding Community-Based Protection, Policy Paper, 2013
- UNHCR, Manual on a Community-Based Approach in UNHCR Operations, 2008
- UNHCR, The Heightened Risk Identification Tool, 2010
- UNHCR, Manual on Security of Persons of Concern, 2011
- IASC, Humanitarian Programme Cycle, Reference Module, 2013
- IASC Emergency Directors' Group, Protection and Accountability to Affected Populations in the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (2016)

- Leslie Groves, Working Together to End Discrimination and Ensure Equality Outcomes for All (UNHCR)
- COMPACT GUIDANCE FOR SENIOR MANAGERS ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE (AAP) (2020)
- OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE ON ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE (AAP) (2020)

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