Humanitarian programme cycle (IASC)

Key points

- Engage fully in HPC processes.
- Familiarize yourself with, and follow, HPC procedures and guidance.
- Fulfill cluster obligations and commit financial and human resources to support cluster roles and responsibilities. Request support from HQ if there are gaps.
- The HPC does not apply in refugee emergencies, which are covered by the UNHCR Refugee Coordination Model (RCM). In "mixed situations", contact the Partnership and Coordination Service in the Division of External Relation (DER), to determine the best coordination and delivery arrangements.

1. Overview

The humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) is an operational framework developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in the context of the Transformative Agenda. It sets out the sequence of actions that should be taken to prepare for, plan, manage, deliver and monitor collective humanitarian responses. It applies directly to inter-agency responses in situations involving internally displaced persons (IDPs) and in emergencies linked to natural disasters, including system-wide scale-up activation. The IASC has prepared a HPC reference module.

The HPC has five elements, coordinated in a seamless manner: each step builds logically on the previous step and leads to the next. Its successful implementation depends on emergency preparedness, effective coordination between national and local authorities and humanitarian actors, and information management.

The process for implementing the HPC is a new way of working that builds on what humanitarian organizations have learned. It focuses on taking better decisions and improving outcomes at field level, rather than preparing well-designed ‘appeal' documents for donors and headquarters. This
requires a shift from past practice. The model is driven by collectively owned, evidence-based plans, direction by humanitarian country teams (HCTs) led by a humanitarian coordinator (HC), and accountability for results. Its process and tools focus on humanitarian actors working at national and subnational level in the field, not on external audiences.

**Note.** The HPC does not apply in refugee emergencies, which are covered by the UNHCR refugee coordination model (RCM), a framework for coordinating and delivering protection and relief services for refugees and host communities. UNHCR leads the entire cycle during a refugee response, including inter-agency contingency planning, needs assessment, information management, response, and resource mobilization. In mixed situations (where operations to assist IDPs and refugees occur side by side), the UNHCR’s and OCHA’s [Joint Note on Mixed Situations; Coordination in Practice](https://ocha.un.org/coordination/in-practice/joint-note-on-mixed-situations-coordination-in-practice) describes the respective roles and responsibilities of the UNHCR representative and the HC, ensuring that coordination is streamlined, complementary and mutually reinforcing.

2. **Relevance for emergency operations**

The HPC is a component of the IASC [Transformative Agenda](https://transformativeagenda.org/) (TA). It operationalizes the accountability pillar of the TA by introducing a model of action with which all humanitarian actors cooperate to achieve collective results. The HPC defines the standard for inter-agency joint programming in humanitarian emergency situations.

**Underlying principles**

**Protection.** Protection of human rights and of people affected and at risk should inform the HPC and all operational activities. In practical terms, this means that agencies should identify who is at risk at the outset of a crisis, and determine how they are at risk and why, taking underlying vulnerabilities into account. The model requires agencies to analyse and prioritize protection needs; adopt a rights-based and participatory approach to collective action; and respond promptly to human rights violations (‘rights up front’). See IASC, [Statement on the ‘Centrality of Protection’](https://transformativeagenda.org/policy-and-practice/statement-centrality-protection) and IASC, [Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action](https://transformativeagenda.org/policy-and-practice/policy-protection-humanitarian-action) (2016).

**Accountability to affected people.** The HPC requires humanitarian actors to listen to, communicate with, and involve affected populations throughout an emergency. They are expected to establish a direct, responsible and respectful relationship with affected communities and ensure that, during planning, implementation and monitoring, affected communities participate in and provide feedback on decisions and activities that affect them. Complaint mechanisms should be established. Where their needs cannot be met or planned for, affected communities should be informed; and they should regularly receive programme updates. Good communication between humanitarian workers and affected communities improves trust and dialogue and strengthens agencies’ understanding of needs and concerns, thereby improving the quality of the response. See Revised [IASC, Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (AAP/PSEA) 2017](https://transformativeagenda.org/policy-and-practice/commitments-accountability-affected-populations-protection-humanitarian-action).

**Note.** IASC Preliminary Guidance Note on [Protection and Accountability to Affected Populations in the Humanitarian Programme Cycle](https://transformativeagenda.org/policy-and-practice/guidance-protection-accountability-affected-populations-humanitarian-programme-cycle) sets out actions to be undertaken
throughout the HPC to fulfil commitments on accountability to affected populations (AAP) and ensure that protection is central to humanitarian response. The guidance note is intended to accompany the IASC's HPC Reference Module (2015) and the tools and guidance on protection mainstreaming developed by the Global Protection Cluster (GPC). Protection mainstreaming is the process of incorporating protection principles and promoting meaningful access, safety and dignity in humanitarian aid. Accountability is one of the four key elements of protection mainstreaming, alongside participation and empowerment, meaningful access and providing safety and dignity and avoiding causing harm. Priorities and desired protection outcomes should be identified, pursued and achieved collectively across sectors/clusters and with communities through meaningful participation. Meaningful participation reinforces a rights-based approach, empowers communities, recognizes differences in age, gender and diversity, guarantees transparent responses to community feedback, and leverages the complementary roles, expertise and mandates of humanitarian actors.

**Cross-cutting issues: inclusion and data disaggregation.** Affected people are not a homogeneous group and humanitarian organizations acknowledge differences of experience and need due to sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, and other social markers of exclusion. These differences should inform the implementation of a response. Cross-cutting issues such as gender, age, disability, and HIV/AIDS should be recognized and mainstreamed. Gender equality is of particular importance; data disaggregated by sex and age should be collected in support of gender analysis, and the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian programmes must take into account the implications for women and men, as well as other dimensions of diversity that can lead to exclusion. See IASC Reference Group on Gender and Humanitarian Action, *Gender Handbook on Humanitarian Action* (IASC, 2018). Similarly, disaggregated data on disability should be collected on the same grounds, to support inclusion of persons with disabilities in every aspect of the humanitarian programme cycle. See IASC, *Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* (2019).

**Environment.** Humanitarian action must take the environment into account. Environmental issues underlie and contribute to humanitarian crises, and humanitarian action can damage the environment, harming affected people and host communities. Reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian interventions can ease the transition into sustainable recovery and help to strengthen the resilience of affected communities.

**Exit and early recovery.** Plans for recovery should start when a crisis begins. A response should address recovery needs that arise during the humanitarian phase using humanitarian mechanisms that align with development principles. This approach enables affected populations to use the benefits of humanitarian action to create development opportunities, strengthens their resilience, and establishes a sustainable pathway to recovery. For humanitarian organizations, it provides a pathway to durable solutions and an exit strategy. On both grounds, programmes that promote sustainable long-term solutions, including greater system and community resilience, should be integrated in the HPC and explicitly identified in humanitarian strategies and planning.

**Under the HPC, all partners:**
Support the national authorities, who have the primary responsibility to assist and protect populations affected by disaster.
Promote the participation of affected populations.
Operate under the leadership of the HC (or Resident Coordinator, if an HC has not been appointed).
Accept the direction of the HCT (or UN Country Team if an HCT has not been created).
Support inter-cluster or sector coordination and cooperate with clusters or sectors (when they are activated).
Welcome and include a broad range of actors, including at sub-national level.

3. Main guidance

Underlying process - how does this work?

Pre-emergency
The HPC recommends that agencies should take a broad range of actions to promote emergency response preparedness (ERP). These make it possible to respond more quickly, more appropriately and more efficiently when a disaster strikes; and to take decisions on the basis of more reliable information. The HC is responsible for leading the ERP process, for creating an effective and coherent HCT (or similar in-country mechanism), and for coordinating with national structures and plans. The HC is expected to work closely with the HCT, clusters/sectors, national authorities, and NGOs.

HPC in sudden-onset emergencies - system-wide scale-up protocols
In November 2018, IASC introduced new protocols for humanitarian system-wide scale-up. These strengthened the coordination of emergency responses and replaced arrangements for 'humanitarian system-wide emergency activation' (L3) which had been in place since 2012.

The IASC Principals have agreed that, when major sudden-onset crises occur, or a humanitarian situation deteriorates significantly as a result of natural and human-induced hazards or conflict, justifying system-wide mobilization, IASC will declare a humanitarian system-wide scale-up activation (henceforth referred to as ‘scale-up activation’). This exceptional measure will last for a time-bound period of up to six months in circumstances where the gravity of the humanitarian situation justifies the mobilization of system-wide capacities and resources, beyond standard levels, to respond to critical humanitarian needs on the ground. A single three-month extension may be considered, but only in exceptional situations.

Specifically, the declaration of an IASC scale-up activation is justified when it is necessary to respond to a sudden onset and/or rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in a given country, including at subnational level, and when the local or regional capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity and urgency of the crisis.

The procedure activates a range of mechanisms and tools. These ensure that (a) the
humanitarian system delivers effective support to national authorities that complements existing capacities, and monitors its own performance; (b) the humanitarian system puts in place adequate capacities and tools for empowered leadership and coordination; and (c) IASC member organisations and global cluster lead agencies install systems and mobilize resources that are sufficient to enable them to comply with their mandates.

Within 48 hours: Activation of a humanitarian system-wide scale-up.

Within 72 hours: The HC is designated and relevant clusters are activated.

Within 5 days: A flash appeal is launched.

By day 30: A flash appeal is issued; a humanitarian response plan (HRP) is prepared.

5 months: Review period.

6 months: The system-wide scale-up ends (subject to a single extension of 3 months).

12 months: An inter-agency humanitarian evaluation is commissioned.

UNHCR’s role and accountabilities

UNHCR performs a number of roles during the HPC.

As an IASC Principal, the High Commissioner takes part in decisions to declare a system-wide scale-up emergency response and is consulted on the activation of clusters.

As a member of the national HCTs, the UNHCR representative is closely involved in developing the overall strategic objectives of the emergency operation, and recommending which clusters should be activated.

At country-level, UNHCR is frequently the cluster lead for protection, shelter/non-food items (NFI), and camp coordination and camp management (CCCM), and in that capacity shapes cluster-level strategies and preparation of the HRP.

As an agency, UNHCR plays a key role in delivering services (according to the level of its engagement) and supporting agreed cluster-level strategies.

When UNHCR leads a refugee operation in a country in which an HRP is developed, it prepares the refugee chapter in the HRP, based on active and inclusive consultation with partners involved in the refugee response. See the Entry on Humanitarian Response Plan and Flash Appeals (IASC).
Considerations for UNHCR’s engagement at country level

When and how to engage in the HPC. UNHCR will fulfil its obligations with regard to clusters that it leads globally. When clusters are activated at national level, UNHCR will involve itself in all aspects of the HPC. In refugee emergencies, UNHCR will apply the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) for coordination and planning. See Note above. In "mixed situations", UNHCR will apply the RCM and the arrangements agreed in UNHCR's and OCHA's Joint Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice. See Note above.

Applying the HPC in non-refugee situations

Preparedness. Actively participate in shaping emergency response planning and related activities, for example by preparing risk profiles, establishing, early warning procedures, completing minimum preparedness actions, and drafting standard operating procedures (SOPs). Keep the Regional Bureau and the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS) informed of all initiatives and progress.

Assessment. Ensure that key staff members, especially cluster-related staff, are aware of inter-agency processes such as the multi-sector/cluster initial rapid assessment (MIRA). Provide personnel for inter-agency assessments.

Flash appeals (FA) and the HRP. Actively contribute to developing the HRPs and FAs. Participate in the inter-agency assessment team, and help to complete the planning process. Ensure that protection underpins every cluster plan and the HRP. Provide necessary support to coordinator(s) of clusters relevant to UNHCR and help develop cluster specific response planning.

Resource mobilization. Individual cluster plans determine the allocations of pooled funds, such as the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-based pooled funds (CBPF). Ensure that the actions prioritized by clusters that UNHCR leads are included in all available pooled funds.

Information management. Ensure that UNHCR cluster coordinators are supported by one or more information management officers, and that these feed information into OCHA's information management system (the humanitarian dashboard).

Annexes

Refugee Coordination Model

UNHCR-OCHA, Joint Note on Coordination in Mixed Situations

IASC Humanitarian Programme Cycle Module July 2015
4. Links

http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/.

5. Main contacts

- The Partnership and Coordination Service in UNHCR’s Division for External Relations.
- The global protection cluster.
  The camp coordination and camp management cluster.
The shelter cluster, via the DPSM, Shelter and Settlement Section, Global Shelter Cluster. At: HQShelter@unhcr.org.
The Division for Emergency Security and Supply (DESS). At: hqemhand@unhcr.org.