Accountability to affected people (AAP)

26 September 2025

Key points

- AAP is an essential component of emergency preparedness and response. All emergency responders are accountable to persons with and for whom UNHCR works.

- AAP is not new or additional work: it is at the centre of UNHCR's protection mandate, and implemented through community-based, participatory approaches that are already well-established.

- Participation, inclusive approaches, and feedback and response mechanisms should be prioritized and reflected in all strategies, plans and programmes from the start of an emergency.

- Critical information on rights, entitlements and targeting criteria should be systematically shared through channels of communication preferred and trusted by the people UNHCR works with and for, including digital tools where they are preferred by communities.

- Programming decisions and actions should be informed by the expressed priorities, needs, capacities and views of all persons with and for whom UNHCR works.

1. Overview

AAP is a commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organizations seek to assist[1].

This includes enabling affected people to meet their different needs, address their vulnerabilities, build on pre-existing capacities and drive programme adaptation through:

- Systematically sharing timely, relevant and actionable information with communities;
- Supporting the meaningful participation and leadership of affected people in decision-making, regardless of sex, age, disability status and other diversities;
- Ensuring community feedback systems are in place to enable affected people to assess

and comment on the performance of humanitarian action, including on sensitive matters such as sexual exploitation and abuse, fraud, corruption and discrimination.

As an international humanitarian organisation, with protection at its core, UNHCR recognizes that the views of women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds need to inform all interventions. In its Policy on AGD, UNHCR commits to include the expressed needs, concerns, capacities, and views of forcibly displaced and stateless people regardless of their age, gender and diversity, and to remain answerable for organizational decisions and staff actions, in all protection, assistance and solution interventions and programmes. A commitment to AAP is also included in UNHCR's Strategic Directions (2022-2026).

UNHCR's commitments are expressed in the following core actions:

- Participation and Inclusion
- Communication and Transparency
- Feedback and Response
- Organizational Learning and Adaptation

1 IASC Strengthening Accountability to Affected People

2. Relevance for emergency operations

- The need for transparency about protection services and assistance is often at its highest in emergencies, when risks, uncertainty and mistrust are amplified.
- Participation is necessary and must be meaningful. AAP recognizes affected people's dignity and their consideration as active agents in decision-making, not passive recipients.
- Emergencies create high risks of SEA and fraud. Clear communication and feedback mechanisms help mitigate and respond to these risks.
- It is crucial to build trust at the beginning of an emergency. Frequent in-person contact and two-way communication fosters trust, contributes to preserve dignity and mitigate anguish, and reinforces credibility of humanitarian actors. It also contributes to counter rumours and misinformation. Trust is very difficult to rebuild once lost, or when it has not been fostered from the get-go of the emergency response. At a time when we must prioritize limited time and resources, AAP enhances the relevance and efficiency of interventions by aligning them with community needs and priorities. It also enables quick identification and correction of gaps. After a response has been defined without community participation, further adjustments become very difficult.

3. Main guidance

3.1. When and for what purpose

AAP is a core organizational commitment which should be prioritized throughout the displacement cycle— it is not an optional add-on. UNHCR is committed to placing people at the centre of its work, ensuring they can meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their lives.

This means drawing on the experiences and aspirations of all community members and being accountable by listening and responding to their needs. AAP requires direct, ongoing engagement with affected communities.

UNHCR conducts participatory assessments, and their outcomes inform annual and emergency response plans, shaped by the priorities and capacities of displaced and stateless people. Responses are more effective when based on community input gathered through assessments, feedback systems, and engagement channels. Listening to community members helps identify and integrate their priorities, reducing exclusion risks. Strong participatory processes also foster community ownership and enable them to guide monitoring and course corrections.

AAP starts in the emergency preparedness phase. It is essential to integrate it into contingency plans, to map and engage community structures, pre-position communication tools, start establishing feedback systems, train and sensitize staff and partners and ensure interagency coordination and commitment.

At the beginning of an emergency, it is important to start small but consistent, ensuring quick ways to communicate clearly, listen and act on feedback, and grow progressively as time, information and resources become more available.

Communicate openly about constraints and decisions to maintain trust. Be honest and humble. Most communities understand our limitations if communicated transparently.

3.2. How to implement this at field level?

The four AAP core actions are closely linked to each other and to other community-based participatory approaches.

1. Participation and inclusion

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

Engage in a structured manner with people of different ages, genders, and diverse characteristics throughout UNHCR's programming.

- Engage communities of different ages, genders, and diverse characteristics during **participatory assessments, monitoring and key activities such as development of targeting criteria for multipurpose cash assistance.** Ensure that potentially marginalized groups are included
- Understand decision-making processes and power dynamics among local actors including local authorities and community-based organizations. Ensure that displaced persons have equal and non-discriminatory access to protection, assistance, and solutions.

More detail on participatory approaches can be found at the EHB entry [Community-Based Protection (CBP) | UNHCR](#) .

2. Communication and transparency

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

Share critical and timely information with communities on rights, entitlements, targeting criteria, access to services and code of conduct of UNHCR and partners.

- Assess **communication preferences, information and communication needs, and information risks** (e.g. online risks, misinformation, lack of privacy) during rapid needs assessments.
- Establish **multiple communication channels -** face-to-face communication and where possible telephone/digital channels - designed in consultation with communities and tailored to different needs by age, gender, and diversity.
- Share information and communicate in languages, formats, and media that are culturally appropriate and accessible to all community groups.
- Ensure that all communication initiatives integrate community feedback.

3. Feedback and response

> Formal and informal feedback from communities is systematically received, and corrective action taken when appropriate.

Systematically and timely record, categorize, analyze, and respond to feedback and complaints from communities, including confidential complaints, through safe, accessible and inclusive mechanisms.

- Use a tool for feedback and complaints (incl. Excel, Kobo). Where resources permit, use **UNHCR's standard tool** that adopts the IASC approved standardized taxonomy for feedback and complaints.
- Refer cases, including fraud, corruption and misconduct complaints as well as incidents of SEA, through established referral pathways.
- Collaborate with partners in feedback referral and response processes (wherever appropriate) - actively working towards collective approaches to receiving, responding to, and analysing feedback.

4. Organizational learning and adaptation

> Interventions, planning, priority setting, and course corrections, are informed on an ongoing basis by the views of displaced communities.

Regularly adapt and correct humanitarian responses based on documented individual and

community feedback, reflecting communities' needs and concerns.

- Communicate with communities on any programme adaptations based on their feedback, offering opportunities for response.
- Monitor funded partners and ensure that they are adjusting their project workplan when necessary, based on documented feedback from communities.

Where UNHCR coordinates AAP at the inter-agency level, share aggregated feedback data regularly and systematically with humanitarian leadership (Donors/HAC/HCT/ICCG or equivalent) to support timely decision-making, course correction, and response adaptation.

3.3. Good practices when communicating with communities

Displaced communities have the right to be informed about decisions affecting their lives. Information is a form of assistance, enabling informed choices and accountability. Listening and engaging with communities is a fundamental part of humanitarian response, allowing people to make informed decisions and hold humanitarians to account.

Effective communication helps manage expectations about available assistance. Continuous dialogue using accessible, context-appropriate formats for all groups—including children and persons with disabilities—is crucial. Inclusive, consistent communication is central to the AAP framework.

Understand your context. Emergency responders should consult communities to learn which communication channels they use, trust, and prefer for engaging with humanitarian agencies. The habits and access levels of different AGD groups are key in choosing how to share information. This assessment can be led by UNHCR or done jointly with other actors. UNHCR's participatory, rapid needs, and sector assessments can include sections on communication needs. The information and Communication Needs Assessment (ICNA) tool is being revised—contact the AAP Unit in the Division of International Protection for updates and guidance.

Coordinating communication initiatives is essential, internally and at the interagency level. It reduces contradictory or duplicated messaging, promotes joint information sharing, and enables pooling and sharing of communication channels. Clear roles and responsibilities—defined internally and at the interagency level —are key to managing community feedback. Responders should draft SOPs outlining commitments, follow-up timelines, and responsibilities. Existing coordination mechanisms, such as AAP or community communication working groups, may already be active and should include diverse actors like local media or community organizations. In refugee contexts, AAP working groups can function under the Inter-Sector Working Group (ISWG) to foster inclusive, two-way communication. Depending on the setting, AAP may also be coordinated via the Refugee Coordination Forum, or a separate working group.

Provide clear, actionable information to help people make informed decisions. Collaborate across sectors to define what to share and what response is expected. Address gaps identified in communication needs assessments. Agree on procedures for creating and approving new messages—especially for sensitive content—with all stakeholders**.**

Use diverse communication channels to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. More channels reduce the risk of missing communities due to failure or disruption. Adapt to change, using new opportunities for communication, repairing broken channels, adapting to changing information needs and considering how different groups are affected.

Leverage corporate tools for information-sharing, communication and feedback, which are safe and secure and support standardization. This includes [UNHCR HELP website](#)**,** [messaging apps service](#)**, and** [Digital Gateway Contact Centre Solution](#). The **Gateway Contact Centre Solution** is UNHCR's standard tool for call and contact centres[2]. It adopts **the IASC Standards on Collective Feedback Mechanisms.**

Adopt **[the IASC standards and principles on complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFM)](#)**.They provide a framework for collective feedback in humanitarian settings, helping responders use community input to boost accountability and improve the response in real time. UNHCR has updated its internal guidance and tools on complaints and feedback based on the IASC standards.

Use two-way communications. Communities want to ask questions and provide feedback. Do not send bulk SMS without planning for replies, leaving questions—and potential protection concerns—unanswered. Create platforms for dialogue to generate ideas and contextualize messages, such as in-person meetings, refugee-led Facebook groups or radio call-ins. Regularly test and refine communication efforts and consult disengaged communities to identify and address barriers.

Manage expectations, counter misinformation, and address rumours. These spread easily when information is lacking and must not be ignored. Responders should listen to community concerns and share factual, verifiable information through trusted channels. In contexts where humanitarian actors lack trust, engage credible individuals or groups—such as online/offline influencers—to help share accurate information. UNHCR's Information Integrity Toolkit supports a consistent approach to tackling misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech on digital platforms**.**

Avoid duplicating efforts. To ensure sustainability, build on existing local capacities and services. For example, integrate communication activities into schools, medical centers, or distribution points, working with teachers, parents, health staff, and volunteers already engaged with the community.

Identify needed resources to ensure you can implement, receive, and respond effectively. Based on your communication plan, emergency operations may require staff, tools, expertise, budgets, and technology. Consider sustainability and effective strategies. For example, if using feedback boxes, ensure they're accessible (location, language, writing materials) and that input is regularly reviewed and acted upon**.**

Considerations for practical implementation

Use technology but with your eyes open

Technology can enhance community engagement by opening new communication channels and

improving reach, scale, and efficiency. However, it's not always neutral—sensitive data must be managed ethically. To avoid digital harm, ensure responsible data practices and address key risks.

- Ownership: Is the channel linked to a specific interest or side in a conflict?
- Neutrality: Does the channel typically share biased content?
- Data Protection: How secure is the shared data? Have DPIAs been conducted? See Data and Information Management for details.
- Digital Divide: Does the channel exclude marginalized groups? Can access gaps be bridged?
- Appropriateness: Is the channel trusted and preferred by communities? Is the content contextually suitable?
- Accessibility: Do the channel and content reflect diverse needs and opportunities? See the Digital Accessibility Guidance Note for recommendations on inclusive digital ecosystems.

Be inclusive

Everyone obtains and uses information differently, so a **community-based approach** is essential for meaningful engagement and empowering communities as agents of change. For example, collaborate with carers or advocacy groups for persons with disabilities and use their channels. Apply an **age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach** to ensure equal rights and participation for all displaced people. AGD is integral to UNHCR's rights-based commitment.

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  For more information on the corporate solution and guidance on call centres and contact centres, please refer to **UNHCR's Approaches to Call Centres and Contact Centres**.

4. Standards

UNHCR's results indicators for AAP,[3] are provided below:

Outcome Area 7. Community Engagement and Participation

- **Core Outcome Indicator 7.1:** Extent participation of displaced and stateless people across programme phases is supported.
- **Core Output Indicator: 7.1.1** Number of people consulted through Participatory Assessments
- **Core Outcome Indicator 7.2.** Proportion of people who have access to safe feedback and response mechanisms
- **Core Output Indicator 7.2.1.** Number of people who used UNHCR-supported feedback & response mechanisms to voice their needs/ concerns/feedback (All country operations report on this indicator)

The UNHCR Programme Handbook details the **AAP key check points** in the programme cycle: PLAN for, GET, and SHOW results.

Please refer to the following for guidance and tools for UNHCR"s results indicators: Managing UNHCR's results indicators

5. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

UNHCR, Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, 2018

UNHCR, Compact Guidance for Senior Managers: Accountability to Affected People (AAP), 2020

UNHCR, Using social media in Community-Based Protection, 2021

UNHCR's Approaches to Call Centres and Contact Centres, 2025

6. Learning and field practices

Prevention from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

Community-based protection

Accountability to Affected People (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) (accessible to UNHCR staff o…

Using social media for community-based protection (accessible to UNHCR staff on…

Using social media for community-based protection (for partner staff)

Age, Gender and Diversity (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

Working with persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement (accessible to UN…

Community-based Protection (CBP) (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

Inter-Agency Collective Accountability to Affected People

7. Links

UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, 2018 UNHCR/OG/2020/02 Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected People (AAP… Compact Guidance for Senior Managers: Accountability to Affected People (AAP) (… AAP Operational Guidance and a Toolkit Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force 2 on Accountability to Affected Peop… Accountability to Affected People

[(accessible to UNHCR staff only)](#) [Using social media in Community-Based Protection: A Guide (accessible to UNHCR ...](#) [Digital Transformation Strategy 2022 - 2026](#)

8. Main contacts

As first port of call, the UNHCR Dep. Representative (Protection), UNHCR Asst. Rep. (Protection), and/or Snr Protection Officer in the country; or the UNHCR Head of Bureau (Protection and Solutions) and/or Snr. Regional Protection Coordination Officer at the regional office (if applicable); or the Snr. Regional Legal Advisor in the respective UNHCR regional bureau, covering the respective country region, who in turn will liaise as required with the parent unit at UNHCR DIP.