

Accountability to affected people (AAP)

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Key points

- All responders working in an emergency response 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, 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 response 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 people, and use them to inform affected people 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 with and for whom UNHCR works

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's dignity, capacity, and ability to be independent. As an international humanitarian organization, with protection at its core, UNHCR is committed to 'putting people first' and drawing on the rich range of experiences, capacities, and aspirations of forcibly displaced and stateless women, men, girls, and boys. In addition, it is committed to being accountable to the

people it works with and for by listening and responding to their needs, perspectives, and priorities.

Additionally, [UNHCR's strategic directions \(2022-2027\)](#) outline UNHCR's commitment to strengthen accountability to the people we work with and for among the eight areas for additional, accelerated and targeted action, among them.

UNHCR is a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Accountability to Affected People (AAP) - also known as Task Force 2. Its goal is to create a system-wide culture of accountability by institutionalizing AAP, in the functions and resourcing of each humanitarian organization, alongside system-level cohesion, coordination, and learning.

UNHCR's efforts on accountability to persons with and for whom we work 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 Tool for Participatory Assessments in Operations (2006), its Accountability Framework for Mainstreaming (2007), the manual 'A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations' (2008) and its guide on [Using Social Media for Community-Based Protection](#). AAP is also reflected in UNHCR's AGD Policy (2018), which aims to ensure that all forcibly displaced and stateless persons have equitable and non-discriminatory access to protection and assistance programmes, and a say in decisions that affect their lives. In 2022, UNHCR launched an ambitious five-year plan to strengthen Accountability to Affected People – this includes a focus on strengthening UNHCR's AAP in emergency contexts.

2. Main guidance

When and for what purpose

UNHCR is accountable to affected people from the outset of an emergency until durable solutions are achieved. This requires direct and continuous work with affected communities for the duration of their displacement, to make sure that they are able to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them. UNHCR systematically involves affected people in participatory assessments. The outcomes of assessments are reflected in the annual and emergency response plans of country operations, informed by the priorities, needs and capacities of forcibly displaced and stateless people, and engaged in programme design, implementation, 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 AGD 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.

How to implement this at field level?

The following key components of accountability to affected people are intrinsically linked and built 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 plan-get-show phases. The arrangements should be accessible to all groups in a community and communicated to all affected people. In particular, ensure that potentially marginalized groups are included, such as minorities, people with disabilities, older persons and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Ensure that all forcibly displaced and stateless persons 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 forcibly displaced and stateless persons and develop protection, assistance, and solutions programmes to meet them.
- Identify local actors present in the area, assess their capacity, and understand ways to meaningfully engage them in response planning, implementation, and monitoring (e.g., community-based organizations).
- Understand decision-making processes and power dynamics among local actors including local authorities in operation.

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, (ii) the programmes of UNHCR and its partners and (iii) UNHCR and partners' contact information.

- Assess forcibly displaced and stateless people's information needs and preferred and trusted online and offline information and communication channels; engage with communities through preferred channels, safely meeting people where they are and facilitating their accessibility needs, offering alternative channels for appropriate communication should the need arise.
- Facilitate communication and dialogue between UNHCR, its partners, and forcibly displaced and stateless persons at key stages throughout the plan-get-show phases.
- Share information and communicate in languages, formats, and media that are culturally appropriate for, and accessible to, all groups in a community.

- Ensure that feedback from communities informs all communications initiatives – and make adjustments accordingly.

Feedback and response

Formal and informal feedback from forcibly displaced and stateless people is systematically received and responded to, and corrective action taken when appropriate.

- Establish and maintain secure and effective feedback systems (including comments, suggestions, and complaints), using a variety of communication channels that are accessible to all affected people and that are appropriate for both sensitive and non-sensitive feedback.
- Allocate human and financial resources to ensure that feedback from forcibly displaced and stateless people 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) - actively working towards collective approaches to receiving, responding to, and analyzing feedback.

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 affected communities 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 affected people through assessments of organizational performance on accountability.
- Include forcibly displaced and stateless persons as partners throughout the plan, get and show phases, 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 with and for whom we work. Accordingly, involving communities through effective, inclusive, and consistent communication is central to the AAP framework.

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 groups 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. Emergency responders should consult communities to determine what communication channels 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; literacy levels; what languages are spoken; assess connectivity and digital tools; the community's (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, rapid needs assessments, sector assessments can also 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 information sharing, 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 on roles and responsibilities, internally and at interagency 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. If so, additional actors may need to be invited to join (for example, from the local media, community-based organizations and telecommunications companies) to ensure that the group 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 or information is expected in return. Be sure to address information gaps highlighted by the information and communications needs assessment (or alternative assessment source). 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 that new communications opportunities arise; 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. Misinformation and rumours spread widely when there is lack of information, and hence cannot 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, and proactively providing factual and verifiable information through trusted channels. Consider also that humanitarian actors may not be trusted in certain contexts, so the information shared may be devalued. In such contexts identify individuals/groups as social influencers (online and offline) to help share information and counter rumors.

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 (including community-based organizations) 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, groups for persons with disabilities, women's associations, adolescents. Brainstorm solutions that will overcome the identified 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; and people are becoming more and more connected. Technology can help reach remote populations, help to scale up certain interventions, and 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?
- Accessible. Does the channel and content consider diverse needs and opportunities?

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 organizations or colleagues to help you reach out more effectively to the diversity of your audiences. Design and test communications products with the intended audience.

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 (primarily 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.
- Do not 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 two 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 thirty 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.

3. Policies and guidelines

[UNHCR, Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, 2018](#)

Annexes

[UNHCR, Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected People \(AAP\), 2020](#)

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

[UNHCR, Using social media in Community-Based Protection, 2021](#)

[UNHCR, Digital Transformation Strategy 2022 – 2026](#)

4. 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...](#)

[Age, Gender and Diversity \(accessible to UNHCR staff only\)](#)

[Working with persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement \(accessible to UN...](#)

[Community-based Protection \(CBP\) \(accessible to UNHCR staff only\)](#)

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

6. 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 Regional Asst./Dep Rep (Protection) and/or Snr. Regional Protection 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.