Overview Persons at Risk

27 January 2025

Key points

- Do not assume that persons with specific needs are visible; actively identify them

- Consult persons with specific needs to assess the threats they are facing, their needs and capacities and identify shortcomings in protection and assistance programmes

- Consider that persons with specific needs may face specific forms of discrimination and violence and that these may vary based on their age, sex and other characteristics

- Consult persons with specific needs in order to decide what their food and non-food assistance should contain, and to make sure they can access distribution mechanisms

- Keep in mind that individuals and groups with specific needs are often the least likely to come forward to make their needs known

1. Overview

In every emergency, some refugee or IDP individuals and/or groups face heightened protection risks because of their circumstances or the context. Those at higher risk include persons commonly known as 'persons with specific needs' who face specific barriers due to discrimination, their identity, or other factors that prevent them from fully enjoying their rights or accessing services they need. (See UNHCR, Guidance on the Use of Standardized Specific Needs Codes Annex 2 IOM 030-FOM 030-2009.doc (live.com). Please note that this Guidance does not reflect the updated codes on Disability (DS), already available in proGres. Please refer to the UNHCR Specific Needs Codes – Disability Guidance | UNHCR for this purpose)

As defined in Chapter 3.4 of the Guidance on Registration and Identity Management, 'a specific need is an attribute or situation that requires particular notice, intervention or follow-up. The term 'person with specific needs' is often used in UNHCR, but should be avoided to the extent that it has a disempowering connotation. It is important to note that not all persons categorized

as having specific needs require specialized assistance because of an individual situation or condition. For example, [persons with disabilities](#) experience obstacles when they try to access their rights, but in many cases the challenges they face are primarily due to social, cultural, physical, economic, or political discrimination, including intended or unintended discrimination by humanitarian practitioners.

In non-emergency situations, social services and community structures may meet some of the needs of those at risk. In an emergency, however, many of these safety and support networks break down or even become a source of new risk. An emergency response can also overlook or fail to identify groups or individuals who need specific forms of protection. It is therefore vital to take steps to promptly identify all groups and individuals at heightened risk, and provide them appropriate protection and assistance.

Individuals in the following categories are generally considered to be at heightened risk to be prioritized at registration, noting that additional groups may be relevant as regard to the context: [girls and boys](#), including unaccompanied and separated children; persons with serious health conditions; persons with special legal or physical protection needs; single women; women-headed households; [older persons](#); [persons with disabilities](#); and persons of diverse sexual orientation gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics ([LGBTIQ+ persons](#)).

It is important to remember that not every individual in the above categories has specific needs. Moreover, their needs may change over time and will be influenced by the environment they are in. Rather than target 'labelled' groups with a standard package of assistance, it is essential to understand how [age, gender and diversity](#) characteristics intersect in shaping individuals who are unique in their capacities, risks and needs. UNHCR staff should therefore analyse the protection and assistance risks that individuals and groups face and assess their needs by means of a targeted protection assessment, a needs assessment, or both.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

The identification and response to persons at heightened risk is crucial during emergencies. Heightened risk often appears at the junction between social discrimination, pre-crisis conditions and protection risks directly linked to the emergency. As an instance, GBV is often used as a weapon of war against women belonging to indigenous or minority ethnic groups. Thus, the early identification of these individuals or groups is crucial to ensure the most acute protection problems and needs are adequately targeted for preventive actions, risk mitigation and response.

Persons at heightened risk and their protection patterns are often difficult to identify. This is often due to social discrimination, pressures not to seek help and the complexities of some pre-crisis discrimination patterns. This is why dedicating adequate resources, from day one, to understanding and responding to these patterns is crucial in any emergency.

3. Main guidance

Protection objectives

- To systematically identify individuals and groups at heightened risk at the start of an emergency and ensure their needs are regularly assessed using participatory approaches.
- To set up mechanisms that quickly identify and refer persons at heightened risk, particularly those who are less visible to humanitarian actors, in cooperation with communities and their structures.
- To design and implement protection responses and assistance programmes jointly with persons at heightened risk and their communities.
- To prioritize individuals and groups at heightened risk, with the urgency required, in all protection and assistance responses (including reception, registration, assistance mechanisms, [refugee status determination](), and resettlement).
- To develop partnerships and referral mechanisms with other protection and assistance actors (including national partners) who have relevant expertise and adequate capacity to support groups and individuals at heightened risk.
- To establish and maintain a confidential individual case management system (using the proGres database) to register and track persons at heightened risk, and record the protection and assistance they require and receive. For more information on recording specific needs in proGres 4, please see [Baseline SOP for the Registration Module]() (accessible to UNHCR staff only).

For persons at heightened risk who require individual case management, protection incidents and interventions can be recorded in the proGres legal and physical protection module, the child protection module, or the GBV module. Bear in mind that information recorded in the GBV and child protection (CP) modules is accessible on a need to know basis and can only be edited and viewed by those directly working on an individual's CP or GBV case management. Relevant parts of the file can be shared with Registration, RSD, Resettlement or any other programmes as needed and appropriate, and these processes should be outlined in each module's SOPs.

Aggregated information can be accessed on all individuals whose specific needs have been recorded via reports generated from the database.

Protection Risks

- If groups or individuals with specific needs are not identified early in an emergency, they may face heightened protection risks including discrimination, abuse, violence or stigma.
- If mechanisms to identify persons at heightened risk are not effective, some individuals in need of specific protection interventions may not be identified, particularly if their specific needs are not visible.
- If protection and assistance gaps for groups or individuals with specific needs are not addressed early on, they may become more severe over time.
- Communities play an essential role in identifying and supporting persons at heightened risk, including those with specific needs; they help to design and implement protection and assistance programmes. However, they can also sometimes be a negative force and the source of harm. Harmful traditional practices may (re-)emerge during displacement; marginalized and vulnerable groups may face more extreme exclusion or exploitation; power imbalances can be exacerbated, etc.

- Systems that simplistically prioritize persons with specific needs based on individual characteristics alone, without considering additional risk factors in the environment and without engaging communities in this process, may create misinformation and tensions in the community. For this reason, regularly review specific needs and their prioritization in consultation with communities as the emergency context evolves.

Key actions

Identification

General

- Make sure that persons with specific needs are identified and registered as early as possible.
- Particularly in non-camp settings, identify partners and establish an outreach programme to ensure that individuals with specific needs are identified and informed of their entitlements.
- Identify groups or individuals with specific needs who require immediate attention. Prioritize groups identified at risk according to the context. Also identify those whose needs require medium-term follow-up.

Registration

- Provide a 'fast-track' queuing system for groups or individuals with specific needs, so that they can register and receive assistance and protection promptly. Prioritize them according to the gravity and urgency of their needs and the risks they face. In larger operations, you might ask a member of the reception team to monitor the reception area (and outside it) with the aim of pre-identifying and giving priority to persons with specific needs.
- It is a good idea to create a curated, shorter list of key specific needs codes that are most relevant and applicable to the situation, and to train staff to identify and record these codes rather than the whole list. Screening questions can also be provided to help staff with identification.
- Enter details of persons with specific needs into proGres. (If pre-registration is paper-based, flag specific needs in the physical record.)
- Ensure that UNHCR personnel or partners who work in Protection, [Child Protection](#) and [Community-Based Protection](#) are present at reception/registration facilities to assess immediately persons with specific needs who are referred by registration staff.
- Establish and maintain up-to-date records in the proGres database. Establish a simple periodic reporting system (by generating reports from proGres). Focus on the needs identified, the services provided, and statistical data.
- Take steps to make sure that interviews are accessible (e.g. providing interpretation, including in sign languages, if required) and not repeated unnecessarily. This can jeopardize confidentiality as well as increase the stress of those interviewed. To this end, ensure that case records are transferred whenever individuals with specific needs are moved.

[Community-based protection](#)

- Involve the community. Communities play a critical role in identifying and responding to the protection needs of persons with specific needs. This is especially so in areas that humanitarian workers cannot access.
- Undertake participatory assessments with groups or individuals with specific needs and take account of their opinions in operational planning. Make sure they can attend meetings, or conduct home visits to gather their views. Diversify your participatory methods and adapt them to the needs of the different groups you target.

Sensitization and training

- Ensure that staff, partners and public authorities recognize and know how to respond to specific needs.
- Train reception and registration staff to identify and refer persons with specific needs as appropriate. For more information on identifying specific needs codes and making referrals, see UNHCR's Guidance on Registration and Identity Management, specifically chapter 5.2 on Registration as an Identity Management Process, and section 4 on [identifying specific needs and referring concerned individuals according to SOPs](#).

Response

General

- Groups or individuals with specific needs should receive prompt protection and assistance: they should be prioritized at reception, registration, [refugee status determination](#), and resettlement, and in other response mechanisms and processes. See chapter 5.1 of UNHCR's Guidance on Registration and Identity Management on [prioritization of persons with specific needs at registration](#).
- Respond at once and adequately when specific needs are identified, and ensure day-to-day support is made available as required, including through community-based support mechanisms.
- Put in place appropriate systems to prevent, mitigate and respond to violence (including GBV), as well as exploitation and abuse.

Referrals

- Establish confidential referral systems to ensure that persons with specific needs have access to relevant service providers.
- Ensure that persons with urgent medical needs and chronic medical conditions are referred to health care providers for immediate treatment.

Accessibility and inclusion

- Make sure that programmes include persons with specific needs. Ensure that persons with specific needs receive information about programmes that concern them through a variety of accessible communication channels.
- Ensure that groups or individuals with specific needs are able to access assistance distribution points and are not neglected in the delivery of goods and services.
- If necessary, arrange separate queuing systems or deliver goods to persons who cannot

attend distributions. Monitor the distribution of goods to groups or individuals with specific needs to ensure they do not suffer discrimination and are not exploited.

- Remember that some groups may be subject to violence and abuse by other members of their community. If necessary, arrange for separate distribution and counselling hours.
- If individuals are unable to collect assistance on their own, designate and record an alternative collector. Monitor such cases to make sure the assistance reaches the individuals for whom it is intended. Consider community-based approaches to leverage the support of the community in accessing those facing difficulties to collect assistance.
- Monitor the construction of shelter, water and sanitation facilities to ensure that these are accessible and adapted to the needs of individuals with specific needs. When designing facilities, involve individuals with special needs.
- Provide transport for individuals with disabilities and older persons without support, women in late pregnancy, and persons in severe psychological distress who need transport to access medical and other services. Ensure that those who travel are accompanied by a responsible attendant (usually a relative) and that clear meeting points are identified to prevent separation from family members.

Community-based protection

- Identify active community structures and community self-protection mechanisms and take steps to address negative coping mechanisms.
- Identify and work with organizations of persons with disabilities, and other representative structures of marginalized groups. Ensure they are included in broader community leadership structures.
- Jointly with affected groups or individuals, as well as communities, establish mechanisms or processes to provide basic services, monitor their delivery, and implement follow-up actions.

Information, consultation and feedback

- Take steps to ensure that groups with specific needs are fully informed of protection and assistance measures that they are entitled to access, notably distribution systems.
- Take steps to ensure that information on services is available on accessible formats and languages used by affected communities, and that infrastructure are physically accessible to persons with limited mobility.
- Take account of language, access and accessibility needs when you craft your communication messages. Children, people from ethnic or linguistic minorities, injured people, people with communicable and/or chronic diseases, older persons, or persons with disabilities, will not necessarily obtain the information they need through regular channels. Adapt your communication strategy to meet such needs.
- Ensure feedback and response systems are in place and that persons with specific needs can access them, and act on feedback received.

Longer-term interventions

- Identify and strengthen local institutions that have facilities for care and treatment (clinics, schools, hospitals, recreational facilities, etc.).

- Where possible, provide vocational training and livelihood opportunities for those with specific needs, or their families, to help them to support themselves and find longer term solutions.

Key management considerations

- Resources and sufficient staff need to be in place to meet specific needs.
- Assess programmes regularly to ensure that [age, gender and diversity](#) (AGD) policies are implemented and that programmes are inclusive of all.
- Establish a monitoring mechanism and monitor all key steps.
- Establish a confidential feedback and response system and ensure it is accessible to persons with specific needs. The system should enable them to report protection concerns, including about sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Establish national partnerships to ensure that programmes and support for persons and groups with specific needs can be sustained.
- Implement [Community-Based Protection](#) and work with communities (including host communities) to identify and respond to the needs of persons with specific needs.

Resources and partnerships

Staff

Key sectors include protection, [community-based protection](#), and [mental health and psychosocial support](#).

Financial resources

Should be sufficient to plan and implement necessary services, programmes, and interventions.

Partners

National NGOs and government institutions, including relevant ministries.

4. Standards

Managing UNHCR's results indicators

UNHCR Results Monitoring Framework encourages disaggregation by age, gender, disability and other diversity considerations as relevant. Dedicated Good Practice indicators to monitor access to groups at heightened risk are also available under Outcome Areas 4, 5 and 7.

[Managing UNHCR's results indicators](#) - accessible to UNHCR staff only

Annexes

[UNHCR/HCP/2018/1 Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity](#)

[UNHCR Specific Needs Codes – Disability Interview Guide, 2022](#)

[UNHCR, Manual on a Community-Based Approach in UNHCR Operations, 2008](#)

5. Learning and field practices

[Community-based Protection](#)

6. Links

[Safeguarding individuals](#) [UNHCR Policy on age, gender and diversity](#) [Accessible to UNHCR staff only - Participatory Assessment Toolkit, provisional ...](#)

7. Main contacts

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.