

Advocacy in emergencies

31 March 2025

Key points

- Advocacy, as part of a protection strategy and complement to programming, is a critical tool that can be used, often in combination with other interventions, to advance protection outcomes in the short and long term
- Advocacy represents a spectrum of approaches and tactics, including those that are more public-facing and those that are private and conducted behind closed doors. The specific advocacy actions pursued should reflect a rigorous risk assessment as well as the mandate and value-add of UNHCR and be grounded in an overarching strategy or plan
- Advocacy is often the most effective when it is done in collaborative ways. This includes ensuring coordination with partners and allies, building alliances and networks, and taking forward joint or complementary advocacy initiatives that leverage the roles, voices, and strengths of different stakeholders, including affected communities, civil society and human rights partners and other protection allies
- Ensure evidence-based and participatory approaches to advocacy that are grounded in robust data and reflect the experiences and priorities of the communities, people, and partners we are working with and for
- Adhere to pertinent sign-off procedures with management and involve relevant colleagues and partners at the country, regional, and global levels. Additionally, ensure ongoing monitoring and feedback in relation to advocacy actions, to feed into adaptive strategies and ongoing risk assessment

1. Overview

UNHCR considers 'advocacy' to be a set of coordinated and strategic activities that seek to contribute to the protection of displaced and stateless persons by promoting changes that bring policy, practice, or law into line with international standards. UNHCR and its partners undertake

advocacy of various kinds, utilizing approaches of persuasion, mobilization, and denunciation, as relevant. Specific advocacy actions can include media campaigns, public and private events and advocacy products, commissioning and publishing research, and lobbying decision-makers, amongst others. In emergencies, evidence-based advocacy plays a vital role in efforts to influence decision makers and stakeholders to adopt practices and policies that will protect refugees, internally displaced people, stateless persons, and other affected populations. It is and should remain a central element of comprehensive protection and solution strategies.

Combined strategically with other protection activities, including programmatic interventions, sensitization efforts and negotiations with duty bearers, advocacy can help to transform attitudes, systems and structures that put displaced and stateless persons at risk. Advocacy is often the most effective when it is done in collaborative and complementary ways with diverse partners and allies. This involves developing shared advocacy objectives and joint plans that leverage the different mandates, relationships, and strengths of allies, bringing greater credibility and impact.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Advocacy helps raise awareness about the humanitarian situation, leading to increased support and resources from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international community. This support is **essential for funding and sustaining emergency response efforts**.

Advocacy is critical in emergency contexts, enabling UNHCR and partners to urgently raise protection risks with key decision-makers and mobilize needed actions. Such advocacy may be needed for UNHCR as an agency and cluster-lead within the humanitarian system, including in ensuring the Centrality of Protection across humanitarian action, or it may be needed with duty bearers within different levels of government, with armed actors, community leaders or other relevant stakeholders.

Irrespective of the coordination framework, whether it is within the framework of the Refugee Coordination Module (RCM) in refugee situations, mixed settings covered by the [Joint UNHCR and OCHA Note on Mixed Situations: Coordination in Practice](#), or within the IASC cluster framework, UNHCR plays a crucial and often leading role in advocacy to achieve protection outcomes.

When clusters are activated as part of an international emergency response, in situations of internal displacement and/or natural disasters, all Clusters, including the Protection Cluster, have a responsibility to advance advocacy efforts as one of six core Cluster functions, as outlined by the IASC. This includes informing Humanitarian Country Teams of priority protection risks and needed actions based on protection analysis as well as advancing advocacy with and on behalf of Cluster members and affected communities.

3. Main guidance

Protection Objectives:

- To reduce protection risks and end human rights violations. This includes the necessary respect and positive observance of human rights by encouraging stakeholders to fulfil their legal obligations and protection responsibilities (including among local and national authorities, parties to the conflict, and peacekeeping missions).
- To ensure that stakeholders deliver humanitarian assistance to those experiencing the greatest vulnerability in a safe and dignified manner, on the basis of humanitarian needs, with protection as central and without discrimination of any kind.
- To ensure that stakeholders make funds and resources available to meet the needs of affected people.
- To bring policies, practice, and laws into compliance with international standards (notably refugee law, humanitarian law, human rights law, guiding principles on IDPs, international standards on prevention of statelessness and protection of stateless persons).
- To promote greater acceptance of displaced and stateless persons by host communities and to combat discrimination and xenophobia.
- Advocacy efforts can contribute to gaining access to affected populations in conflict zones or other challenging environments. By engaging with relevant authorities and stakeholders, advocacy may help ensure safe and unimpeded delivery of protection and aid to those in need.
- Advocacy can be a tool used as part of humanitarian diplomacy efforts, seeking to strengthen engagement and cooperation with governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders. This kind of engagement and advocacy can help overcome political, bureaucratic, and administrative impediments, facilitating more effective protection and humanitarian responses.

Key principles and considerations:

- **Evidence-based:** Advocacy efforts should be grounded in robust data and analysis, to ensure credible and effective influencing. In an emergency setting, nevertheless, it may sometimes be appropriate or necessary to initiate advocacy before detailed evidence has been gathered and confirmed. (For example, it might be appropriate to issue an advocacy message on GBV, certain that incidents have taken place but before comprehensive evidence is available.)
- **'Do no harm'.** Ensure that advocacy efforts are grounded in an ongoing risk assessment to identify any potential negative impacts for communities, partners, staff, and operations and put in place measures to effectively mitigate them. The interests and risk considerations for affected populations are best understood by affected populations themselves and (wherever possible and relevant) they ought to be engaged in advocacy plans and risk assessments.
- **Engagement.** Most advocacy efforts undertaken by UNHCR are using forms of persuasion and mobilization, focused on developing constructive dialogue and relationships with key advocacy targets and stakeholders. When denunciation or other forms of a conflictual approach are being considered, this should be done with additional risk assessment and close consultation with leadership.

Post emergency phase

Advocacy efforts should be aligned with specific objectives that reflect particular protection risks

and phases of crisis but ultimately, it is an ongoing activity that forms a critical dimension of any protection strategy. In the post-emergency phase, advocacy objectives may shift to longer term aims more focused on remedial and environment building actions, while remaining responsive to urgent protection risks and response needs. During the post-emergency phase, after-action reviews of relevant advocacy actions taken during the emergency response can be very helpful in terms of understanding contributions to change as well as how to strengthen ongoing advocacy (including needed partnerships and collaboration) going forward.

Checklist

- Determine your advocacy objective, based on protection analysis and other evidence.
- Identify key allies and partners to collaborate with on shared advocacy objectives to amplify your influence and impact.
- Conduct a stakeholder and power analysis to identify who you are trying to influence and what their interests and motivations are.
- Ensure rigorous and ongoing risk assessments and put in place related mitigation strategies.
- Develop and implement your advocacy approach (i.e. public, private etc.), tactics and messages, reflecting the stakeholders you are targeting and your risk assessment.
- Follow relevant sign-off procedures with management and ensure relevant country, regional, global colleagues and partners are involved.
- Ensure ongoing monitoring of your advocacy efforts to understand contributions to change and to help refine your strategy going forward.

4. Policies and guidelines

5. Links

[Global Protection Cluster, Protection Advocacy Toolkit](#)

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.