Community-based protection

Key points

- Involve all relevant actors in CBP activities: local institutions, State agencies, civil society and community-based organisations, and persons of concern, including persons with specific needs. Coordinate with other national and international actors and avoid over-assessment.

- Identify community structures; build on the community's existing capacities; make use of community members' sense of volunteerism. Avoid creating parallel structures.

- Every community that faces threats finds ways to protect its members. These may or may not be effective, but it is important to identify and map them.

- Do not assume that all protection problems are due to displacement. Some, including domestic violence and ethnic and religious discrimination, are likely to have a longer history.

- Do not rush the process of building trust and engagement. It requires regular and consistent involvement and communication with the community.

- Do not make any promises to the community that you may not be able to keep.

1. Overview

Displaced and stateless communities are in the best position to know the threats they face; they are equally familiar with the causes and effects of those threats, and can help to address them. Humanitarian actors therefore need to understand and listen to the communities they serve, to ensure that their programmes do not inadvertently leave people and communities worse off.

Protection concerns often pre-date and are exacerbated by humanitarian emergencies. Relevant problems include: harmful practices, domestic violence, public violence and criminal behaviour, neglect of persons with specific needs, and exclusion or discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and other grounds. While it is important to understand, it is therefore also vital to examine critically the life of communities, recognizing that they are sources of support and
assistance but potentially also of threats and harm.

Further, humanitarian organizations need to learn how communities protect their members. Protection may involve sophisticated responses, for example negotiation with armed groups, or simple and pragmatic actions, such as collecting firewood in groups. A community’s strategies may or may not be effective; but we must understand them before introducing new protection measures that might undermine their usefulness.

UNHCR endeavours to harness the knowledge and resources of communities and to strengthen their capacities. If communities affected by crises are empowered, they are in a stronger position to protect and support their families, promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence with host communities, respond to the aspirations of young people, and rebuild their lives.

**Community-based protection (CBP) puts the capacities, agency, rights and dignity of persons of concern at the centre of programming.** It generates more effective and sustainable protection outcomes by strengthening local resources and capacity and identifying protection gaps through consultation.

UNHCR takes a community-based approach in all its work with the people it serves. Through consultation and participation, communities engage meaningfully and substantively in all programmes that affect them, and play a leading role in change. UNHCR recognizes that, without the engagement of persons of concern, external intervention alone cannot achieve sustained improvement in their lives.

CBP is therefore more than a matter of consulting communities, or their participation in rapid assessment or information-gathering. It is a systematic and continuous process of engaging communities as analysts, evaluators and implementers in their own protection.

### 2. Main guidance

#### When and for what purpose

Accordingly, CBP should be integrated in all phases of humanitarian response programmes, across all sectors and in all humanitarian contexts. It is relevant to all humanitarian actors, including those working in the delivery of WASH, shelter, health, as well as core protection activities such as registration, SGBV prevention and response, and [child protection](#).

When you come to decide what community-based protection strategies are most effective, consider the context. Try to understand how the character of the emergency in which you are working influences the ability and willingness of communities to participate meaningfully.

Whatever the context, a significant level of community participation is possible and highly desirable.

CBP aims to ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and can participate fully in decisions that affect them.
A CBP approach promotes community involvement in each of the following programme elements:

- Preparing situation analyses (both the initial analysis and subsequent analyses).
- Setting priorities.
- Designing and implementing responses and interventions.
- Monitoring implementation and adjusting interventions as needed.
- Evaluating and reporting results.

In life-threatening emergencies, quick action is needed and little time is available to consult and negotiate. Because conditions are always changing and assessments must be updated frequently, it is important to balance the time spent on situation analyses (including participatory assessments and community mobilization) against their useful lifespan. Spend as much time as possible in the community; take every opportunity to meet persons of concern. Use a range of participatory methodologies to reach members of the community who are less visible. Though you will not have time to meet every group, make sure that your assessments include representatives from across the community. Do not rely solely on respondents who are easy to reach and more vocal, such as leaders, or young men, or individuals who can speak languages familiar to humanitarian workers. Talk as often as you can with women, girls, boys and men of different ages and diverse backgrounds to gain a fuller understanding of their situation.

Summary of guidance and/or options

Twelve principles underpin community-based protection.

1. **CBP is a process, not a project.** It cannot be accomplished through brief meetings with community groups. It requires a systematic approach that is sustainable and makes communities the drivers of change. Take the time required to build trust with the community.

2. **Select community counterparts with care.** Practicality requires us to work with a small group of community members. Ensure that the views of marginalized groups are represented. A poorly designed process is likely to increase inequality and insecurity.

3. **Communities are well placed to identify their protection challenges, but external partners also have an important role.** Acknowledge that the community may not recognize some threats that external professionals consider to be urgent. The community's priorities must be balanced against the judgements of protection professionals.

4. **Effective protection interventions require accurate diagnosis.** Do not assume that all problems are due to displacement. Work with the community to decide which approaches fit the context best.

5. **Communities already have ways to protect their members.** Do not adopt new measures that displace existing practices which work well. Address negative coping strategies.

6. **Community work requires expertise and training.** Staff need to be skilled in protection, and able to work sensitively and respectfully with people from very different societies.

7. **Supportive supervision is essential.** If they are not familiar with community-based approaches, supervisors may need to be made aware of their value.

8. **Focus on protection.** The community may prioritize concerns that do not involve protection.
Explain UNHCR’s mandate. Work with the community to identify and address its protection needs.

9. **Promote sustainability from the start.** A strong sense of community ownership will improve the sustainability and effectiveness of protection programmes.

10. **Support and work with community and national structures.** It is almost always better to work through existing institutions and programmes than to establish new or parallel systems.

11. **Develop an advocacy strategy to achieve sustainable change.** Assist communities to develop their own advocacy plans. Play an accompanying role.

12. **Give attention to evaluation and reporting.** Sound measurement of progress depends on analysing challenges and outcomes from the start of a programme in close consultation with communities.

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**How to implement this at field level?**

**Assessing community protection risks**

- In the course of field assessments with persons of concern, map agencies, services, and community structures. Include persons of concern in the multi-functional team (MFT) that plans assessments and analyses their results.
- Conduct short early assessments to review protection risks and the incidence of human rights violations before the emergency and since it started. Analyse root causes, applying an [age, gender and diversity](#) lens; take prompt remedial action to avoid further abuses or displacement.
- Take the time necessary to map the diversity of the community and understand its power dynamics, hierarchies and other factors that influence decision-making. Identify ways in which the community protects its members, including negative coping strategies.
- Carefully consider the security of community members whom you consult. Individuals or groups communicating with aid agencies can become targets of resentment or even violence by other individuals or groups. Sources of information should therefore be kept confidential. When you work with local authorities in IDP contexts, take particular care to ensure that individuals or communities do not face repercussions because they discuss human rights violations.
- Share the results of your assessments with the community and ensure that the community is involved in defining its priorities.
- Be alert to signs of potential tension in the community and between displaced and host communities, and seek out the root causes of such tensions.

**Community-based support and response**

- Take immediate action to prevent family separation. Reunite families wherever possible, using family-reunification procedures when necessary.
- Identify and support communities’ self-protection measures; do not introduce new measures that might weaken the community's own protection capacity. Identify harmful
practices and coping mechanisms and work with the community to replace these or mitigate their effects.

- Work with community leaders and other community structures. Support structures that are already in place; avoid creating parallel systems. Ensure that the structures in place are fair, inclusive and reflect the community's diversity.
- Quickly identify a diverse group of community members who are able and willing to organize community support for those at heightened risk, including temporary care arrangements for unaccompanied children.
- Involve groups and individuals at heightened risk, and those with specific needs, in decision making processes. Give particular attention to unaccompanied and separated children, persons with disabilities, elderly persons without family, and other persons and groups who are marginalized or easily exploited.
- Set up community-based systems that uphold respect for individual rights and provide protection and care for groups with specific needs (see previous bullet point).
- Promote community ownership from the start. Create and strengthen links between displaced and host communities wherever possible.
- Prioritize and promote actions that reinforce social cohesion. Strengthen and support the provision of local services and work to give displaced communities access to them.
- Support communities' efforts to protect their members and meet their needs. Where necessary provide resources to facilitate such efforts.
- Establish specific emergency response plans with partners and the community.

**Outreach and information sharing**

- Regularly visit people in their shelters and homes. Make time to listen to people and communicate important information to them directly.
- In consultation with persons of concern, arrange for staff to be available at regular times to gather and exchange information. These exchanges should give attention to groups at heightened risk and with specific needs, answer questions, and offer counselling in a safe and confidential environment.
- Working with the community, put in place a two-way communication mechanism that ensures that everyone, including older persons, persons with disabilities, and other potentially marginalized groups, have access to relevant information on assistance and other issues. Use communication channels that members of the community prefer. Post notices in places where people are likely to meet, such as water-collection points, community centres, registration points, or where assistance is distributed.
- Work with community outreach volunteers to ensure that information is widely disseminated and reaches those at heightened risk.
- Set up mechanisms at community level to report protection incidents. Establish effective feedback and response systems at an early date. These should be able to receive and promptly address issues that persons of concern raise, notably allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).

**Participation**

- Ensure persons of concern of all ages and genders and from all diversity groups are able to participate in decision-making. Identify and address barriers to participation, particularly
for persons with specific needs.

- Respect community leadership structures, while ensuring that these are inclusive and representative of the wider community. Ensure that your interventions do not undermine the community's support for those structures, while proactively identifying and involving persons who are marginalized. Where necessary, establish quotas for representation in leadership structures (for example, of persons with disabilities, youth, older persons).
- Adopt a range of participatory methodologies to ensure that all members of the community are aware of and have opportunities to participate in decision-making.
- Introduce participatory monitoring methodologies and ensure that communities play a role in monitoring the delivery of programmes and the response.
- Train partners and service providers in CBP and ensure that project partnership agreements (PPAs) include activities that promote community participation in all programmes.
- When you run participatory assessments, visit members of different ages and gender and from different diversity groups at times in the day when they are most available. Where necessary, assist certain groups to participate (by providing child care, food, travel allowances, etc.). Report to communities on the results of assessments you conduct; validate with them the results of your analysis; and highlight programme priorities that the community identified.

**Prevention of abuse and exploitation**

- Working with the community, take steps at once to identify and analyse the protection risks that face women, men, girls and boys. Agree ways to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). (Add hyperlink to SGBV prevention and response page.)
- Working with the community, set up a mechanism for identifying groups and individuals who are at heightened risk of SGBV.

**Awareness raising and advocacy**

- Create community systems that uphold respect for individual rights, that identify groups with specific needs, and provide protection and care for them (see above).
- Do not form patterns of behaviour or relationships during the emergency that might be difficult to change later on. For example, do not communicate only with traditionally accepted community leaders, or exclude women, older persons, and youth. Review your consultation arrangements regularly. Make sure that persons of concern as well as staff are aware that arrangements made in an emergency situation may change.

### 3. Learning and field practices

### 4. Links

UNHCR, Understanding Community Based Protection (Policy Paper, 2013). Presents ... UNHCR.
5. **Main contacts**

As first port of call, contact the UNHCR Deputy Representative (Protection), the UNHCR Assistant Representative (Protection), or the Senior 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 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.