

Community-Based Protection (CBP)

27 January 2025

Key points

- Involve all relevant actors in CBP activities: local institutions, State agencies, civil society and community-based organisations, as well as forcibly displaced and stateless persons from all age, gender, and diversity (AGD) groups themselves. Coordinate with other national and international actors and avoid over-assessment
- Identify community structures, and community-led initiatives; support and build on the community's existing capacities; recognize and make use of the active roles leaders and community volunteers play in their community. Avoid creating parallel structures
- Every community that faces threats finds ways to protect its members. It is important to identify and understand community-led protection to support the positive protection mechanisms and mitigate any practices with harmful effects
- Do not assume that all protection problems are due to displacement. Some, including intimate partner violence and discrimination against some groups, are likely to have a longer history and hence require a combination of emergency responses and a long-term approach to address them
- Do not rush the process of building trust and engagement. It requires regular and consistent involvement and transparent communication with the community
- Spend as much time as possible in the community and use all opportunities to engage with diverse members and structures. Do not make any promises to the community that you may not be able to keep

1. Overview

Displaced and stateless communities are often the first respondents to crisis. They are in the best position to know the threats they face; 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 undermine the role of the community as agents of protection or inadvertently leave people and communities worse off.

Protection concerns often pre-date and are exacerbated by humanitarian emergencies. Relevant problems include: harmful practices, gender-based violence, public violence, neglect of marginalized groups, and exclusion or discrimination on the basis of, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, 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 organizing transportation to school or 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 each other and 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 forcibly displaced and stateless persons at the centre of programming. It generates more effective and sustainable protection outcomes by strengthening local resources and capacity and identifying protection gaps through regular consultation.

UNHCR takes a community-based approach in all its work with the people with and for whom we work. Through consultation and community action-planning, 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 forcibly displaced and stateless persons, 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. Relevance for emergency operations

Community members are often the first emergency respondents, thus it is vital to take a community-based approach to our work. Understanding and building on communities' own strategies will allow a faster and more efficient emergency response, that consider how Different individuals and groups in a population may be affected by an emergency in different ways. Community engagement will prove invaluable in understanding and responding to these factors in a timely way.

3. Main guidance

When and for what purpose

Community-based approaches 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 and health. Community-based protection works towards protection outcomes such as GBV prevention, risk mitigation, and response, and [child protection](#), and ensures communities play an active role in their own protection.

When you come to decide what community-based strategies are most effective, consider the context. Try to understand how the context 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.

A CBP approach promotes community involvement in each of the following programme elements:

- Preparing and contributing to 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 CBP is one of the most efficient and sustainable approaches to identify existing risks and acute needs. Because conditions are always changing and assessments must be updated frequently, it is important to balance the time spent on situation analysis (including full-fledged participatory assessment exercises) against their useful lifespan. Spend as much time as possible in the community; take every opportunity to engage forcibly displaced and stateless persons. 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 people of different ages, gender and diverse backgrounds to gain a fuller understanding of their situation and how they can be part of the response. It is important to validate assessments with the community, in order to create ownership and identify any gaps in the communities' self-identified needs. Map community dynamics, assets and capacities and include those as part of the response instead of creating parallel mechanisms.

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 and work towards increasing community engagement in a progressive and systematic manner.

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, and that information about the representatives that were identified, as well as their roles and responsibilities, is shared with the wider community. A process that is not participatory or well-planned 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 solely 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 coping strategies that have harmful outcomes.

6. Community work requires expertise and training. Staff need to have the necessary protection skills and be able to work sensitively and respectfully with people from different backgrounds and contexts.

7. Supportive supervision is essential, and supervisors in emergency situations should be aware of the importance of CBP.

8. Focus on protection. The community may not initially prioritize protection, and UNHCR's role is to 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. Establish monitoring and evaluation processes or systems that allow for the analysis and use of community feedback data to improve the quality of the response.

How to implement this at field level?

Assessing community protection risks

- when conducting assessments with forcibly displaced and stateless persons, map agencies, services, and community structures. Include representatives from displaced and stateless people in the multi-functional team (MFT) that plans assessments and analyses their results.
- Conduct initial short assessments to review protection risks and the incidence of human rights violations as early as possible before and during the emergency. Analyse root causes, applying an [age, gender and diversity](#) lens; take prompt remedial action to avoid

further human rights violations 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 and identifying data 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 when they discuss human rights violations.
- When conducting assessments, be mindful of individuals who may be exposed as a result of participating in assessments and may face heightened risks due to other AGD factors such as diver sexual orientation, membership to an ethnic minority, etc.
- Share the results of your assessments with the community for validation and ensure that the community is meaningfully involved in defining its priorities.
- Be alert to signs of existing and potential tension in the community and between displaced and host communities, and seek out the root causes of such tensions, as well as potential opportunities for social cohesion.

Community-based support and response

- Identify and support communities' self-protection measures; do not introduce new measures that might weaken the community's own protection capacity. Identify practices and coping mechanisms with harmful protection outcomes and work with the community to adapt or replace, these or mitigate their effects.
- Work with community leaders and other community structures, including conflict resolution mechanisms. 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. Where necessary provide resources to facilitate such efforts, including through funding (Read more on Grant Agreements below), training, technical support, advocacy, linking with other stakeholders and partnering with them.
- Identify and support community-led actions and projects including Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) or Community Support Projects (CSPs) that address community priorities promote community resilience, and build on existing capacities. Read more [here](#).
- 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 of protection incidents, in decision making processes. Give particular attention to women and girls, unaccompanied and separated children, [persons with disabilities](#), older persons, LGBTIQ+ persons, and other persons and groups who are marginalized.
- Support/set up community-based systems that provide protection and care for marginalized groups with specific needs e.g. community care arrangements for older people, or persons with medical needs.
- 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

inclusive provision of local services and work to give displaced communities access to them.

- Establish specific emergency response plans with partners and the community.

Outreach and information sharing

- Regularly visit people in their shelters and homes, as appropriate, and in partnership with community members who are already doing so. Make time to listen to people and communicate important information to them directly.
- In consultation with forcibly displaced and stateless persons, arrange for staff to be available at times that are convenient to forcibly displaced and stateless persons, to gather and exchange information. These exchanges should give attention to groups at heightened risk and across AGD groups, 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 and accurate information on assistance and other issues. Use multiple communication channels that members of the community prefer, and in local languages. 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 allow for safe reporting of protection incidents and providing feedback on organizational processes in addressing these incidents. Establish effective feedback and response systems at an early date in consultation with communities. These should be able to receive and promptly address issues that forcibly displaced and stateless persons raise, notably allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) or fraud.

Participation

- Ensure forcibly displaced and stateless persons of all ages, genders and diverse groups are able to participate in decision-making. Identify and address barriers to participation, particularly for marginalized groups.
- 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](#)). Regular consultation with community leaders and authorities, including of marginalized groups, on planned assistance is an important aspect of ensuring that supported services do not contribute to tensions and thus maintaining a conflict-sensitive approach.
- 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.
- Whenever possible, partner directly with community-based organizations, including those led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons. The [Grant agreement tool](#) (UNHCR internal link) can facilitate this by targeting non-profit, grassroots organizations that provide advocacy, protection, and assistance services at the community level. Grant Agreements can be awarded to organizations founded by individuals with lived experience of forced displacement or statelessness, or where such individuals hold primary leadership roles, and whose objectives focus on supporting forcibly displaced and stateless people and their host communities. Additionally, community-based organizations from host communities can receive Grant Agreements if their activities support forcibly displaced and stateless people.
- 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 people across ages, genders, and diverse groups. Agree ways to prevent and respond to gender-based violence ([GBV](#)).
- Working with the community, set up a mechanism for identifying groups and individuals who are at heightened risk of GBV.

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 forcibly displaced and stateless persons as well as staff are aware that arrangements made in an emergency situation may change.

Supporting Community Projects:

A community-led project is an initiative that is led by a self-organised group of refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, stateless persons, and/or host community members. A project may be of a small or a large scale. Community-led projects may also include or be referred to as Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) or Community Support Projects. It can also be in the form of a grant given to a community-led organization through the [Grant agreement tool](#) (UNHCR internal link). Some key aspects of community-led projects are (but not limited to):

- meant to enhance community resilience;
- respond to a priority identified by the communities;
- led and implemented by the community;
- build on the capacities in the community; and
- have a well-defined objective (e.g. peaceful coexistence) with a predetermined impact and target group, which produces results.

These projects should achieve one or more of the following objectives while adhering to the AGD Policy and the principles of do no harm:

- To address specific protection concerns or mitigate their impact on communities and individuals through community-led activities and action planning
- To benefit both displaced and host communities by addressing their protection concerns through specific interventions (such as livelihood support, reforestation, or skills enhancement).
- To strengthen local, public, and communal facilities and services by providing technical, logistical, and infrastructure support.
- To enhance the capacity of service providers to deliver health, education, water and sanitation services of good quality to forcibly displaced and stateless persons.
- To strengthen social cohesion and peaceful coexistence by addressing the root causes of social tension.
- See this practice on working with community protection structures in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) [here](#).

Post emergency phase

The post-emergency phase will allow for strengthening and deepening of CBP approaches and projects. This may also be the opportunity, when needed, to strengthen responses to individuals or groups particularly affected by the emergency. A relative stabilization of the situation may also allow for longer-term approaches to strengthen the capacities of community structures and organizations.

4. Standards

COMPASS indicators

Refer to the Core Outcome and Output indicators as well as the good practice indicators and their guidance under Outcome Area 07: Community Engagement and Women Empowerment

Annexes

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

[UNHCR, Protection Policy Paper - Understanding Community Based Protection, 2013](#)

5. Learning and field practices

Courses accessible to UNHCR staff only:

[Community-based protection online self-learning course](#)

[Social Media for Community Based Protection E-Course](#)

[Community-based Protection](#)

6. Links

[CBP Intranet page \(accessible to UNHCR staff only\)](#) [CBP Community of Practice \(accessible to UNHCR staff only\)](#) [Promising practices on AGD and CBP Accessible to UNHCR staff only - Engagement and partnership with Organizations ... 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 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.