

# Participatory approach / Community involvement

## Work with refugees through a community-based approach and promote selfreliance

In order to ensure that the assistance provided to refugees is appropriate, the refugees must be involved from the outset in the measures taken to meet their protection and assistance needs. In addition, all components of the operation must be planned in such a way as to promote their self-reliance. Obvious as this principle is, the pressures of an emergency often make it easier to organize an operation from the outside for, rather than with, those whom it is to benefit.

If the emergency operation involves the refugees in this way from the start, its effectiveness will be greatly enhanced. Furthermore, such an approach will allow the refugees to maintain their sense of dignity and purpose, encourage self-reliance and help avoid dependency. In emergencies, refugees are often regarded as helpless and passive recipients of external assistance. In the long term this approach by humanitarian workers sets a pattern of dependency. Refugees must be encouraged to help themselves by using their own skills and resources from the beginning of an emergency. Community services staff are essential actors in supporting the mobilization of the community and facilitate a participatory process.

Refugees are often most able to help themselves, and thus be least reliant on outside assistance, if they are not grouped together in highly organized camps, but rather reside in small, less formal groups.

The interests of refugees with specific needs, such as persons with disabilities are better cared for and such efforts are more sustainable if community support and involvement is harnessed right from the start. In addition, refugee involvement helps ensure that the emergency response addresses social, human and emotional needs, and goes beyond the provision of material relief.

It is essential to understand socioeconomic factors, including gender relations, when planning and implementing the emergency response to avoid unintentionally depriving some refugees of the benefits of assistance and inadvertently exposing them to protection risks. This is often true for women, children, older persons and the disabled. UNHCR pays particular attention to the needs of these groups, especially in emergencies. It is important that groups with specific needs are identified at the outset and that meetings are held with them to determine needs and responses. Thus, in the planning and implementation of an emergency response, groups with specific needs must be monitored systematically to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged and targeted measures should be taken to meet their particular needs. In an emergency, health staff should spend time with women, girls, boys and men to identify patterns of SGBV and establishing prevention and response mechanisms

Even in an emergency, refugees are likely to have some form of representation, through a community or group organization.

It is also through an effective use of their active participation and equal representation (women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds) that refugees' rights can be better promoted. However, be aware that leaders may sometimes not be representational, or may have an agenda or objectives which could have adverse consequences on other refugees, hence, the importance of meeting with different members of the community and working with the leadership to promote effective communication with the whole community.

**It is important to ensure refugee participation; women, men, adolescents, boys and girls at all stages of planning, implementation and monitoring.**

**Be aware of social and economic roles and identify groups at specific risk. It is crucial to plan and manage an emergency response effectively by undertaking participatory assessment with groups of affected population to identify and analyse the changing social and economic (gender) roles of women, men, boys and girls. This will enable emergency interventions to meet assistance standards and promote gender equality.**

**It is important to find out exactly what kind of leadership structure exists and what measures are taken to ensure the views and voices of women and children are represented in the forum. Specific measures must be instituted to ensure equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes.**

## **Participatory assessment**

By undertaking an initial participatory assessment, UNHCR and its partners can, in systematic and rigorous way, collect information with the active participation of the community and thereby gain a better understanding of issues concerning their protection and well-being. This is a crucial step in understanding, developing and implementing any protection strategy – including on issues such as access to asylum, camp planning, distribution of assistance, provision of services including education and health, physical security including SGBV and even durable solutions. Participatory assessment should be an activity jointly undertaken by multifunctional teams comprised of staff from UNHCR and other UN agencies, NGOs and the government.

Sources of information must be developed and direct communication with refugees through participatory approaches established in the field to ensure that UNHCR is quickly informed of any new influx or protection problem. This information should be systemized and used for defining protection strategies and the emergency assistance response. Such open lines of communication, including those with local authorities are important in particular for border regions which are remote from the capital, and where UNHCR may not yet have a local presence.

Sources of information in addition to refugees and others of concern include:

- i. Local or central government authorities (including military officials)
- ii. Community and religious leaders
- iii. Host community
- iv. National and international NGOs
- v. ICRC
- vi. Other UN and international organizations
- vii. National (particularly local language) and international news media

If possible the central authorities should participate in fact-finding missions, as this reduces the risk of misunderstanding between UNHCR and the central authorities and between the central and local authorities.

### **Key Actions to be undertaken using a multi-functional team approach**

The implementation of a community-based approach means placing refugee women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds at the centre of decision making for how protection and assistance will be provided at the outset of the emergency phase. This will ensure that protection strategies and the delivery of assistance are adapted to the specific culture, traditions and structures of the refugee community. This approach will enable each community to participate directly in the decisions affecting their future, to regain control of their lives and support their empowerment. A community-based approach seeks to build trust and mutual respect between UNHCR, its implementing partners and the people of concern. In order to facilitate and promote participation and decision-making as well as to obtain a good understanding of the dynamics within the community, the delivery of services must be developed and monitored together with the different members. A constant information exchange should be maintained between the community and service providers on the quality of the services and to monitor that all groups, particularly those with specific needs and those who might be excluded traditionally such as single women, are benefiting from the assistance.

Refugees need to know that they should contribute to the decisions, what they can expect, what our limitations might be, the time frame for assistance and based on this information, participate in decisions to prioritize the assistance and its delivery.

## **Principles of empowerment**

**Awareness raising and critical analysis of the situation:** Awareness raising with women and men of concern is a process of critical analysis of their situation and their roles and contributions in resolving protection risks and

**Implement a community-based approach, including participatory assessment, in the emergency operation to ensure that the follow-up phase supports communities to regain control of their lives as quickly as possible.**

exercising their rights. The impact of emergency activities should be analysed carefully with both women and men to ensure that they promote empowerment and gender equality and that solutions are identified.

**Meaningful participation:** Participation refers to the full and equal involvement of men and women of all ages and backgrounds in all decision-making processes and activities in the public and private spheres that affect their lives and the life of their community. As women are traditionally disadvantaged and excluded this often requires taking positive action to support women's access to decisionmaking processes, especially in emergencies.

**Mobilization:** Mobilization is the process of bringing men and women together to discuss common problems and establishing community responses with the support of the humanitarian workers. This can lead to the formation of women's groups, organizations, and networks, and to public lobbying for the recognition of women and men's rights.

**Access and control:** Access and control refer to the opportunities and rights available to women and men to be able to have access to or have control over services, resources, and the distribution of benefits. In the context of an emergency, problems of access and control can have devastating consequences on those excluded and lead to heightened protection risks. Staff need to monitor closely who has access to and control of services that are established. If any excluded groups are identified, such as minority groups, or unaccompanied and separated children, staff will need to work with the community and aid workers to change any discriminatory patterns through empowerment and improved service delivery.

## Actions

Obtain a good understanding of the operational context through a review of documents and reports on the social, cultural, economic and legal context, including the position of women and gender roles.

- Undertake initial participatory assessments with women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds by engaging in informal discussions with as many different focus groups as possible.
- Find out who does what by sex and age, i.e. what activities do women and girls undertake and where? What activities do men and boys undertake and where? Who controls resources in the community? Who takes decisions? Consider the specific needs of particular groups such as older persons living alone, persons with disabilities and child headed households and discuss with the community how they are being cared for and protected?
- Systematize the information to build a picture of the population profile, those most at risk, the overall context, the roles assumed by women, girls, boys and men, and the background and diversity of the people of concern as well as the host population. Incorporate findings into the emergency programme and work with the programme officer to ensure these aspects are budgeted
- Identify relevant key actors such as local authorities (in particular Ministries for social welfare/services, family, gender, etc.), religious leaders, traditional leaders, teachers, political leaders, landowners, implementing and operational partners, or other important stakeholders and make sure that their opinions are reviewed with community members (women and men) and taken into consideration.
- Together with the community, identify and assess resources within the community, such as skills, equipment, tools or existing social projects and initiatives.
- Follow up with regular participatory assessments<sup>8</sup> because in an emergency, the situation is often rapidly changing as people might move from one place to another, the security situation may change and new people can arrive etc. These changes are likely to affect the environment, the relation to the host population and the power balance within the refugee community.
- Keep a continual dialogue with women, men, girls and boys to build trust and confidence and to ensure active participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of service delivery.
- Mobilize the community to form organizations and claim their rights by: ; meeting with them regularly and making sure specific information campaigns are held for women and those who cannot leave their homes; visiting schools and health centres to exchange information; ; informing people of the assistance programmes; informing people who will do what amongst the agencies; informing people how their views have been reflected in any

actions taken and then reviewing the effectiveness of the decisions taken; and Supporting the development of appropriate community management structures, including mechanisms to ensure the meaningful participation of women, children and groups with specific needs.

- Discuss with the community the overall goals of the operation, as well as constraints based on finance, duration of support and personnel.
- Adapt activities to the time and availability of persons of concern.
- Keep a focus on the long-term sustainability and impact of the operation and provide protection and assistance with the aim of self-help and self-reliance.
- Coordinate with local authorities and host communities to set up a framework for peaceful partnership between the refugee/IDP community and the host population.
- Ensure coordination with other agencies to draw their focus to refugee hosted areas in order to support the host community to cope with the influx of refugees.

**Support the re-establishment and/or development of refugee community-based structures which are representative of the population from an age, gender and diversity perspective and respect international legal standards**

### **Involving the community in assistance distribution**

Every community has its own system and mechanisms to solve problems. In an emergency situation it is vital to seek to enhance and improve existing positive coping mechanisms which may include family relationships, mutual assistance among neighbours, local, social and economic organizations, community leaders, religious institutions and practices, traditional ceremonies, festivals and traditional healers.

Assistance should be channelled in a way that enhances already existing structures and mobilizes resources within the community. It is however important to recognize that existing structures and systems are not necessarily fair and do not always respect human rights, particularly women's rights and children's rights. The arrival of humanitarian assistance can exacerbate discriminatory practices like the exclusion of minority groups from accessing services, resources and decision-making processes and lead to heightened protection risks. It is therefore vital that community structures are analysed in this light and strengthened to ensure fair representation of the community and that they enable meaningful participation of women, adolescents and groups with specific needs.

### **Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of response**

This will require sound monitoring, reporting and evaluation systems, including sex and age disaggregated data and indicators, to detect deterioration or change. Also, a continuous review of the aims of UNHCR's assistance, both in terms of bringing the emergency to an early end and for the promotion of a durable solution, is necessary.

**It is essential that the effectiveness of the response be kept constantly under review through continued participatory assessment and action adjusted as necessary and in time.**

Such monitoring must also ensure that the funds provided voluntarily to UNHCR by governments and others are being used to the best advantage. This is inherent in the principle of appropriate response. It should be borne in mind that whatever funds may be available in the early stages of an acute humanitarian emergency, the passage of time will produce financial constraints. Thus it is important that actual and potential donors see that the action proposed is indeed essential, and that its impact is effective.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation should not be considered as time consuming detractions from protecting and assisting refugees, but as important tools in an emergency to ensure that activities being carried out retain their relevance in rapidly changing situations, and continue to address the most urgent problems. The different circumstances of women, children, and adolescent boys and girls; and groups with specific needs such as older persons and minority groups should be identified and monitored closely. Their circumstances could and should be used as benchmarks for monitoring the effectiveness of the overall operation.