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Introduction and overview

This section explains the background to the manual and outlines its aims, the intended audience and the manual's structure.

1.1 Background

In recent years, UNHCR has gradually shifted its focus from individual assistance in the area of community services to building on the knowledge, skills and capacities of people of concern¹ and their communities. This approach, as outlined in UNHCR's Community Development Policy of 2001,² is based on the understanding that by placing people of concern at the centre of operational decision-making, and building protection strategies in partnership with them, they will be better protected, their capacities to identify, develop and sustain solutions will be strengthened, and the resources available will be used more effectively. In a rights- and community-based approach, people of concern not only have the right to participate in making decisions that affect their lives, but they also have a right to information and transparency from UNHCR and partner staff.

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The Agenda for Protection, Goal 3, Objective 4 states that refugee communities should be empowered to meet their own protection needs and calls upon:

“States, UNHCR and other partners to put in place or mobilize community-based systems and networks, including in particular for the protection of women and children, at the outset of the emergency phase through to the attainment of durable situations.” UNHCR, 2003

This shift in emphasis requires that UNHCR and partner staff regard people of concern not as dependent beneficiaries who are to be “saved and assisted,” but rather as equal partners who have an active role in protecting themselves and organizing for their own basic needs, even in emergencies. A 2002 evaluation of the community-services function in UNHCR highlighted many of the institutional impediments to effective community work and the need for an attitudinal change within the Organization.³ The evaluation recommended revising community-services guidelines and manuals to reflect this changed perspective on people of concern and emphasize the critical relationship between community services and UNHCR’s protection mandate, and to clarify terminology.

This manual was developed as a follow-up to the recommendations of the 2002 evaluation and to support the implementation of UNHCR’s policy on community development, the Agenda for Protection, and the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Strategy.⁴ It should be used in tandem with UNHCR’s “Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations,” which is an important element of the community-based approach.

1.2 The aim of this manual

This manual is intended to support staff in implementing a community-based approach in UNHCR operations to ensure that people of concern are placed at the centre of all decisions affecting their lives.

The manual aims to:

- build a common understanding among UNHCR and partner staff of the community-based approach, its role in protection, its relationship to a rights-based approach, and the underlying principles of participation, inclusiveness and equality;

- improve staff capacity to develop a community-outreach strategy to mobilize and support community structures that represent women, girls, boys and men of all ages and backgrounds, and build community-based protection responses and sustainable solutions;
- provide practical guidance on how to implement a community-based approach so that all persons of concern can participate in developing common goals and action plans for protection, including assistance and solutions, and on how to jointly monitor and evaluate and establish confidential individual case-management systems for those at heightened risk; and
- encourage the strengthening of multifunctional teams in operations and highlight the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to implement the community-based approach.

There is no single blueprint for a community-based approach, since each situation of displacement is unique. UNHCR and partners will always need to conduct an in-depth analysis of each situation, with all community members participating, in order to agree on the best strategies.

1.3 Audience

This manual was developed for all UNHCR staff. A community-based approach requires the understanding, cooperation and coordination of staff at all levels, including senior management, programme, protection, community services, field, logistics, technical services and public information staff. The manual should be read and applied by everyone at policy, operational, advocacy and monitoring levels. It should be read in conjunction with other manuals that provide additional guidance for particular circumstances, such as UNHCR's *Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities* (May 2004). Partner staff might also find the manual useful in their work with UNHCR and affected communities, and as a complement to their own guidelines and tools.

1.4 Structure

The remainder of the manual is organized as follows:

Section 2: Context, concepts and guiding principles

This section describes the context in which we work, defines a community-based approach and explains its relevance to UNHCR operations, and highlights the underlying principles that should guide our interventions.

Section 3: Implementing a community-based approach

This section gives an overview of the different stages of the community-based approach, beginning with situation analysis, including stakeholder analysis and participatory assessment, and planning. It then explains the different aspects of community mobilization and empowerment, from mapping leadership and management structures to community-based protection, action planning, monitoring and evaluation. It also highlights the need to identify individuals at heightened risk and establish individual case management systems building on the work with the community. Practical “how-to” tips are also provided.

Section 4: Knowledge, skills, attitudes and multifunctional teams

This section outlines the most important knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by humanitarian staff and the way in which a multifunctional team, which combines different professional skills and functions, can strengthen the implementation of the community-based approach. It also provides practical guidance on how a team can first establish contact with a community.

Section 5: Considerations for specific contexts

This section offers guidance on applying a community-based approach in different contexts.

Examples and case studies are provided throughout the manual to illustrate points, warn of difficulties that can arise, and provide ideas and suggestions of good practice. The systematic development and use of a community-based approach is an ongoing learning process, and new examples will arise. These will be documented and incorporated in revised versions of this manual.

CD-ROM

The manual contains a CD-ROM with the following annexes to provide readers with easily accessible policy documents and tools.

Annex 1: Policy Documents

The annex contains key policy documents that are relevant to UNHCR's work in implementing a community-based approach, including its policy on "Reinforcing a Community-development Approach."

Annex 2: Toolkit

This annex contains a number of practical tools that can be used when working with the communities or by the communities themselves.

Annex 3: The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations

This tool is provided as participatory assessment is an essential part of a community-based approach.

Annex 4: The Heightened Risk Identification Tool (draft version)

A tool under development by UNHCR and partners to assist field staff in identifying who is most at risk in the community.

Annex 5: Reference materials and websites

A list of reference materials and some relevant websites is provided for further guidance.

