

## FAQs on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)

These FAQs provide an overview of what AAP is and why it is important. They answer questions on the five [Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations \(CAAP\)](#) and provide practical advice on how they can be implemented, including references to key tools. The commitments overlap to a large extent with the commitments of the [Core Humanitarian Standard \(CHS\)](#). The [CHS Guidance Notes](#) provide the most up-to-date resource to put accountability commitments into practice. More specific questions can be directed to our pool of experts by emailing [helpdesk-aap-psea@unhcr.org](mailto:helpdesk-aap-psea@unhcr.org).

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## **Basic Questions**

### **1. What is Accountability to Affected Populations in humanitarian action?**

Because humanitarianism is founded upon the fundamental principles of human dignity and solidarity, the idea of accountability in humanitarian action should by definition be intrinsic and inseparable from all humanitarian work. It should be obvious that to undertake humanitarian work without first consulting project participants is to deny crisis-affected people the respect that they deserve. Arguably, if humanitarian projects are planned and implemented in a manner that does not respect the views and capacities of crisis-affected communities, it can better be described as “charitable” rather than “humanitarian” in nature. Unfortunately, many humanitarian organisations still tend towards servicing the accountability needs of those in power rather than those in need.

AAP offers a people-centred and rights-based framework that is concerned with respecting the rights, dignity and safety of people affected by disaster and conflict. The women, men, girls and boys receiving humanitarian assistance are the primary stakeholders of any humanitarian response and have a basic right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, receive the information they need to make informed decisions and to complain if they feel the help they receive is not adequate or has unwelcomed consequences.

### **2. The UN is already accountable to its donors. Isn't that enough?**

Humanitarian organisations should be held accountable by all their stakeholders, including donors, staff and relevant authorities. However, because crisis-affected communities are typically among the least able to demand accountability, organisations should make an especially concerted and conscious effort to be accountable to crisis-affected populations. This is not to say that organisations should ignore the legitimate interests of others, but rather that they first attempt to ensure that due account is taken of the needs, views, and capacities of crisis-affected people. They are, after all, the prime reason why humanitarian organisations exist in the first place.

### **3. Are there any ongoing developments that aim to make the UN more accountable?**

In 2005, a humanitarian reform process was initiated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\)](#) – the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance – to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response through greater predictability, accountability, responsibility and partnership. In December 2011, this process led to the agreement of the [Transformative Agenda \(TA\)](#) by the IASC Principals – the heads of all IASC member agencies or their representatives. Following the creation of the TA, the Principals agreed on the TA Protocols, which set the parameters for improved collective action in humanitarian emergencies. One of the eight TA Protocols focuses on Accountability to Affected Populations.

Moreover, the Principals endorsed five Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (CAAP) in December 2011. The five commitments are 1) leadership / governance, 2) transparency / information sharing, 3) feedback and complaints, 4) participation, and 5) design, monitoring and evaluation. They agreed to incorporate the CAAPs into policies and operational guidelines of their organisations and to promote them with operational partners, within the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and amongst cluster members.

### **4. What is the difference between AAP and CwC (Communicating with Communities)?**

The CwC movement has highlighted the issue of life saving information, the role and capacities of the local media, and the concept of information as a critical form of aid delivery. The groups active on these issues draw on a vast body of technical, communications and media expertise that have added more richness and depth to the discourse on communication with affected communities.

In an AAP context, and looking at the IASC CAAP, communicating with communities is one focus area among a number of others such as leadership/governance, feedback and complaints, participation, and design, monitoring and evaluation. CwC overlaps strongly with CAAP Commitment 2 (transparency), which is all about information provision and two-way communication.

Taken together, AAP and CwC create a rich and comprehensive picture of information provision and two-way communication, with, in summary, CwC providing greater technical expertise and depth on the subject matter, and AAP providing a broader rights-based framework within which to locate and guide the work.

#### **5. What's the difference between organisational and collective accountability?**

Organisational accountability is about the power relationship between one organisation and the people it assists (see question 1 for more on this). Collective accountability, however, is about the responsibility of all humanitarian organisations active in a response for giving high quality assistance and achieving humanitarian goals. To ensure that the humanitarian response focuses on the most acute needs, it is crucial that the humanitarian system in its entirety – and more specifically high-level decision and coordination mechanisms such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the cluster system – is held accountable for its decisions.

#### **6. What makes a humanitarian organisation accountable to affected populations?**

Among other things, an accountable organisation consults early on with local communities and project participants (see FAQs on Participation), shares key information on the humanitarian response with them (see FAQs on Transparency), and provides a confidential and effective mechanism for handling feedback and complaints (see FAQs on Feedback and complaints). Furthermore, it focuses on learning and continual improvement and ensures that lessons learnt from monitoring, evaluation, and the handling of feedback and complaints are incorporated in all current and future projects (see FAQs on Design, monitoring and evaluation).

#### **7. Is it okay for humanitarian workers to be less accountable during acute emergencies? After all they are busy saving lives.**

If being accountable means making a dedicated effort to manage the quality of humanitarian action through ensuring that due account is taken of the needs, views, and capacities of the crisis-affected population, then the answer must be an emphatic “No”! Good intentions alone are an insufficient basis for designing effective humanitarian operations. The earliest possible consultation with crisis-affected people will generate the greatest benefits in terms of improved humanitarian outcomes. Conversely, the longer organisations postpone such consultations, the greater the share of waste and inefficiency in their work, and, more importantly, the less the dignity of crisis-affected people is respected.

#### **8. To whom should my organisation be most accountable?**

In general, organisations should be accountable to all their stakeholders, although special attention needs to be given to people and groups with little or no power in or influence on the governance of your organisation. Most crisis-affected populations will qualify for special attention on these grounds alone. Particular groups (e.g., people with disabilities, elderly people, children, women, and members of political, ethnic or religious minorities) will often be visible in media images but paradoxically become politically invisible and without a voice in the processes that plan, allocate and coordinate humanitarian projects, unless that is, the organisations themselves ensure that they are consulted. Consultation with affected populations is a fundamental characteristic of genuine humanitarian action, on the grounds that people whose lives may depend upon an organisation's decisions and actions must surely have the chance to offer their informed consent, at least to those

elements of an organisation's operations that may have a direct impact on their welfare and safety, and indeed, their prospects for survival.

#### **9. How can my organisation become accountable?**

Although it is quite easy to identify and formally commit to codes, principles and standards, truly accountable organisations can achieve this status without such formalities. An organisation that is built upon and that nurtures a 'culture of accountability' will, through experience and common sense, place a high value on the views and capacities of its stakeholders, especially those with little or no formal power. As a consequence, it will listen to, learn from and explain its intentions and its performance to all those significantly affected by its actions.

#### **10. What are the specific laws that relate to accountability?**

International legal instruments established to protect the rights of people we seek to assist in humanitarian and development work can be used as a reference for accountability. In particular, the bodies of international law that are relevant for accountability commitments are: international humanitarian law (when applicable, i.e. primarily in a situation of armed conflict), international human rights law, and international refugee law. As organisations should be working within the law of the land, national law is also directly applicable to NGO personnel. The CHS is based on fundamental humanitarian principles and broader accountability principles.

## **Leadership / governance**

Leaders of humanitarian organisations will undertake to demonstrate their commitment to accountability to affected populations by ensuring feedback and accountability mechanisms are integrated into country strategies, programme proposals, monitoring and evaluations, recruitment, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, partnership agreements, and highlighted in reporting.

Tools related to leadership and governance can be found [here](#).

#### **1. Why is leadership on accountability important?**

Without the support of senior management, accountability to affected populations is very difficult to implement within your organisation. With the support of senior management, key documents such as country strategies and programme proposals, as well as key processes such as monitoring and evaluation, staff training and performance management, and reporting, should be changed to include accountability to affected populations.

#### **2. How can we ensure that the affected population knows about our accountability commitments?**

Your organisation should publish a statement of its accountability commitments, accessible in formats suitable for different stakeholder groups. The statement should demonstrate that your organisation is aware of its stakeholders and identifies the people it seeks to assist as key stakeholders. It should include clear reference to the accountability commitments of your organisation towards each stakeholder group and detail the specific commitments under each of the five CAAP. Finally, the statement should show the processes through which your organisation intends to implement, monitor and improve against its commitments.

## **Transparency / information sharing**

Leaders of humanitarian organisations will undertake to provide accessible and timely information to affected populations on organisational procedures, structures and processes that affect them to

ensure that they can make informed decisions and choices, and facilitate a dialogue between an organisation and its affected populations over information provision.

Tools on transparency can be found [here](#).

### **1. What do you mean by transparency?**

Being transparent means that an organisation ensures that the people it aims to assist and other key stakeholders have access to timely, relevant and clear information about the organisation and its activities.

### **2. Why is transparency important?**

Sharing timely, relevant and clear information saves lives and aids recovery, helps manage expectations, and empowers people to make informed decisions.

### **3. How can transparency be implemented?**

The first step is to assess the socio-economic, cultural and other key demographic characteristics of the affected population as well as the information needs of the different groups and people. To make transparency work, you'll need to collaborate closely with the local population and its different groups and make sure that they can explain what information needs they have and which communication channels they prefer.

Information should be presented in languages, formats and media that are appropriate for, accessible to, and can be understood by the people your organisation aims to assist and other key stakeholders.

### **4. What information should be shared?**

In the immediate aftermath of an emergency, you can begin communicating around key threats that the population may be facing. Then, once you have a better understanding of the affected population's needs and preferences, you can decide on your messages and how you'll deliver them. To be accountable to the affected population, your organisation should share information on your organisation's background, its accountability commitments, code of conduct, feedback and complaints mechanism, and relevant contact details. Moreover it should share information on its projects, people's rights and entitlements, the processes that affect them to ensure that they can make informed decisions and choices, the criteria for selecting target groups, and how your organisation has acted on community feedback.

### **5. What communication channels exist?**

Communication channels can be face-to-face meetings (which are good for building understanding and trust), megaphones, noticeboards, leaflets, radio, television, telephone hotlines, mobile phones, newspapers, the internet, etc.

## **Feedback and complaints**

Leaders of humanitarian organisations will undertake to actively seek the views of affected populations to improve policy and practice in programming, ensuring that feedback and complaints mechanisms are streamlined, appropriate and robust enough to deal with (communicate, receive, process, respond to and learn from) complaints about breaches in policy and stakeholder dissatisfaction.

Tools on feedback and complaints can be found [here](#).

### **1. What are feedback and complaints mechanisms?**

Feedback and complaints mechanisms enable the people your organisation aims to assist and other key stakeholders such as your own staff and partners to give feedback and raise complaints, and receive a response through an effective, accessible and safe process.

### **2. Why should we have such a mechanism?**

The creation of a feedback and complaints mechanism leads to an increased level of trust in your organisation, a more effective working partnership with the local community and more willingness to report issues. Problems are also identified before they become grave, and are dealt with more promptly, with better protection of the health, safety and dignity of the community, and the maintenance of the reputation, job satisfaction and security of your team.

### **3. What are potential barriers for affected people to giving feedback and complaining?**

Potential barriers to reporting include not knowing how to lodge a complaint, a lack of faith in the confidentiality or effectiveness of the system, shame and fear of reprisals.

### **4. What are the key elements of a functioning feedback and complaints mechanism?**

Feedback and complaints mechanisms need to be *accessible* – the special needs of elderly people, disabled people and children in this respect should be taken into account.

*Trust* is key and will be enhanced if the community feels ownership of the mechanism. This can be achieved through community consultation before the mechanism is set up, as well as through awareness raising and undertaking surveys of the level of satisfaction of the community with the mechanism.

The community may be able to *play an active part* in the operation of the complaints mechanism – community committees are one channel through which complaints could be lodged, for example. *Existing intra-community mechanisms* for resolving disputes should be taken into account when designing your mechanism.

### **5. Why is community trust in the mechanism important?**

If a community sees that complaints are dealt with consistently and efficiently, their trust in the mechanism will increase and it is more likely that community members will feel confident coming forward with complaints on sensitive issues. Good internal procedures for dealing with feedback and complaints are needed, and confidentiality must be maintained. The safety and wellbeing of complainants need to be ensured.

### **6. How do we ensure the affected population knows about the mechanism?**

Key information on the mechanism needs to be shared in a way which is relevant to the context and accessible by the communities. Language, literacy rates and the remoteness of the location of the community should be taken into account. It will be helpful to design and pilot the messages in conjunction with the community, to make sure that they acknowledge and respond appropriately to the local context. Consulting the community from the outset in your information sharing is more likely to lead to an enduring outcome.

### **7. We set up a complaints box but never received any complaints. Does this mean that our programmes are perfect?**

It is important that complaints are sought actively, along with more general feedback, ideally as part of your regular monitoring of work in the communities. It is not enough to put up a 'complaints box' and wait for the complaints to come to you.



What is also important is that the communities you work with know what they can expect from your organisation and staff. If they are not aware of your organisation's activities and staff code of conduct, how will they know when they're not receiving what they're entitled to, or the staff code of conduct is being breached? It is important to share this information with them, together with details about how they can give feedback and complain if they experience or witness misconduct by representatives of your organisation.

#### **8. Won't our staff feel threatened by a feedback and complaints mechanism?**

Your organisation's staff can sometimes feel that the feedback and complaints mechanism is being introduced to check up on them. It is important that they, along with the community, are involved from the outset to ensure that they feel ownership of the mechanism. Training can help staff understand the value of a feedback and complaints mechanism as a contribution to programme quality and to safeguarding the people we aim to assist, so that they are receptive and perceptive in receiving feedback and complaints.

## **Participation**

Leaders of humanitarian organisations will undertake to enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practices to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.

Tools on participation can be found [here](#).

#### **1. What do you mean by participation?**

Participation means that your organisation listens to the people it aims to assist, incorporating their views and analysis in programme decisions. This is achieved through the active engagement by community representatives in decision-making processes throughout the project cycle, while particular attention is paid to the most vulnerable individuals and groups.

If participation is ensured, project participants are empowered to actively exercise their right to informed consent (informed consent means that an individual or a community communicates its voluntary agreement to programme activity based upon an understanding and appreciation of a programme's outline and implications).

#### **2. What are the advantages of involving project participants in key decision-making processes?**

Involving project participants in key decision-making processes leads to a mobilisation of local leadership and skills, more effective programming, increases trust and co-operation, builds support for the project from affected populations, reduces complaints, increases efficiency by reducing waste and losses, encourages adaptive humanitarian responses, and improves recovery.

#### **3. How can participation be realised during a humanitarian response?**

A wide array of tools and processes can be used to strengthen the participation of project participants. The most effective way to realise participation is to include community representatives in all phases of the project cycle (assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation), to build your organisation's programmes and projects on existing local capacities, to set up feedback and complaints mechanisms in close collaboration with local communities, and to focus your monitoring and evaluations on the satisfaction of project participants.

## **Design, monitoring and evaluation**

Leaders of humanitarian organisations will undertake to design, monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives of programmes with the involvement of affected populations, feeding learning back into the organisation on an ongoing basis and reporting on the results of the process.

Tools related to design, monitoring and evaluation can be found [here](#).