



# GENDER AND PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The aim of humanitarian action is to address the needs and rights of people affected by armed conflict or natural disaster. This includes ensuring their safety and well-being, building on their strengths and capacities, and preventing further harm. To be effective, programmes must therefore be centred on the needs of individuals and communities. The best way to know their needs and solutions, and to design and assess programmes, is through direct dialogue with persons targeted for humanitarian action — women, girls, boys and men — and involving them in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

## WHY IS PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

The active participation of people affected by crisis in identifying needs and designing and implementing relief programmes to address those needs substantially improves programme effectiveness and sustainability.

## PARTICIPATION MATTERS

If people do not participate, they experience:

- loss of dignity
- feelings of worthlessness
- feelings of powerlessness
- increase in mental/psycho-social illness

Decisions on *who* participates, *how* they participate and *for what purpose* also shapes the impact of humanitarian action. When sufficient consideration is given to these decisions, participation becomes an extremely effective tool to:

- minimize the risk of exclusion of certain groups during the design and delivery of goods and services;
- recognize the power dynamics among groups (political, social, economic, gender, etc.) with control over resources and those without;
- allow for a more holistic understanding and subsequently more effective response;
- enhance accuracy of needs assessment data;
- help individuals and communities to identify actions to take on their own behalf;
- set the foundation for greater self-sufficiency, safety and protection among individuals and communities, and more sustainable programme results in the long term; and
- ensure that the participation is meaningful and effective for the individual and the humanitarian actor.

## Who should participate?

Any approach should consider the categories of participants and relevance of their engagement to the humanitarian action, such as:

- **Individuals** — women, girls, boys and men, for example through focus groups, random surveys, camp walkabouts, registration exercises;
- **Community at-large** — for example through “representative” collectives such as elders, traditional decision-makers, teachers, health care workers, national authorities;
- **Local networks/organizations** — such as local non-governmental organizations, informal youth or women’s networks. These may be engaged in service delivery, human rights monitoring, community awareness or sharing issues of common interest.

## What is the policy on gender and participation?

The **IASC Policy Statement on Integration of a Gender Perspective in Humanitarian Operations** (Policy Statement) commits as a *priority* to “the participation of women in the planning, designing and monitoring of all aspects of emergency programmes.” The statement singles out women in recognition of their particular needs and contributions in humanitarian crises, and seeks to better ensure their equal access to programme and policy decision-makers. Women typically have less access than men to decision-makers — due to factors such as literacy or language skills (which can affect their ability to communicate with service providers), community leadership (typically male representatives in the *formal* decision-making spheres), mobility and time (women and girls undertake childcare or household duties). If not recognized and addressed appropriately, these obstacles can also restrict

women’s ability to participate effectively in all aspects of humanitarian action.

Since issuance of the Policy Statement and focus on women’s participation, more is also understood on the importance of creating *integrated* approaches which benefit all and which include the participation of the range of persons impacted by the intervention — women, girls, boys and men, including the elderly. Promoting young people’s participation in organized activities, for example, will give both adolescent girls and boys a meaningful activity and way of contributing to the community.

The Policy Statement is also committed to “integrating capacity building of women’s organizations in humanitarian response and rehabilitation and recovery phase.” As described below, there are different ways to use participation as a means of enhancing the capacity of local organizations in humanitarian response.

### THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE AND THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

The international human rights framework includes the right of those affected by key decisions to participate in the relevant decision-making processes. The right to participate is reflected in numerous international instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Declaration on the Right to Development, which states “a policy or programme that is formulated without the active and informed participation of those affected is most unlikely to be effective,” and the UN Economic and Social Council: Poverty and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (10 May 2001). Participation in humanitarian action is also linked to a person’s rights and related to the use of and access to information. This is enshrined in international instruments, for example:

**The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948) states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

**The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (1966) states: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

**The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women** (1979) states: “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right: (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.”

**The Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) states: “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.”

**The UN Declaration on the Right to Development** (1996) states: “The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.”

**The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement** (1998) states: “At the minimum, regardless of the circumstances, and without discrimination, competent authorities shall provide internally displaced persons with and ensure safe access to: (a) essential food and potable water; (b) basic shelter and housing; (c) appropriate clothing; and (d) essential medical services and sanitation. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of women in the planning and distribution of these basic supplies.”

**UN Security Council Resolution 1325** (2000) reaffirms “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and [stresses] the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.”

**The Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response** has a Common Standard on Participation to ensure “the disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme.”

### SEEKING OUT VOICES: UNHCR'S PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE IN SIERRA LEONE

In Sierra Leone, UNHCR instituted a system of refugee participation in eight refugee camps to ensure that the views and concerns of all refugees were expressed to UNHCR, government and implementing partners. UNHCR invited its partners to solicit refugees' views on how they could best participate in camp management. Through regular discussions, it was realized that some important concerns were not being adequately addressed by the camp management or UNHCR staff — either because the issues were not reported or because they could not be properly addressed by camp management.

Refugee women stated that most decision-making was male dominated and that husbands collected and kept custody of household entitlements, including food and non-food items. A new representation system was established, comprising:

- a Refugee Executive Committee whose members were elected through universal voting and positions were reserved for women and youth;
- a Committee of Elders with advisory capacity to the Refugee Executive Committee, representing ethnic groups and religious denominations;
- a Grievance Committee to administer justice and by-laws; and
- revamping of the current system through subcommittees (e.g. on child protection, sexual and gender-based violence) to monitor implementing partner activities and advocate for refugee welfare.

The new system also facilitated wider refugee participation in camp management and promoted transparency and accountability in service provision. Some refugee subcommittees worked directly to address specific protection concerns. Refugees were made aware of their entitlements and rights and further empowered to govern their own issues. While the number of women in the camp committee was low despite community sensitization over two years, women did participate in subcommittees. Women's participation in camp administration and other sector activities increased to 45% in most camps. The Refugee Executive Committee is also engaged in UNHCR and partners' planning efforts through consultations in each camp, reviewing ongoing programmes and determining future priorities.

### How can we ensure effective participation?

#### Set the foundation

Participants bring information and solutions, but must also be given sufficient information or support in order to participate in a meaningful way. This is related to the ethics of participation and includes attention to:

- **How a request for participation is conveyed** — being clear on what we are asking and why. What is the relevance to the individual or group? Why are they sought out (as young mothers, ex-combatants, perceived marginalized group)?
- **Empowerment and leadership** — what information does the target group need (on existing issues, their rights, obligations or objectives of the humanitarian actor, role of national authorities) to help empower their participation and maximize relevance to and impact on both the participant and the humanitarian actor? Women might require different information from men; girls from boys; adolescents from the elderly. What special support do they need to participate (e.g. advance notice for meetings; transportation; child care; mechanisms of redress)? Who determines what information and support is needed, emphasizing the importance of local knowledge?
- **Building trust by providing information back** to the participants and the wider community. This demonstrates how the information was interpreted and applied by the humanitarian actor; how a regular mecha-

nism for feedback on results and expectations can be replicated; and shows that participants' involvement was meaningful and taken seriously. It is also important to verify with the wider community whether the type of participation and the selection of participants were appropriate (e.g. trusted by the community, took action such as disseminating information or raising the appropriate concerns and solutions). If done effectively, providing information back can help to encourage future participation.

#### THE 3 KEY INDICATORS FOR PARTICIPATION

1. Women and men of all ages from the disaster-affected and wider local populations, including vulnerable groups, receive information about the assistance programme and are given the opportunity to comment to the assistance agency during all stages of the project cycle.
2. Written assistance programme objectives and plans should reflect the needs, concerns and values of disaster-affected people, particularly those belonging to vulnerable groups, and contribute to their protection.
3. Programming is designed to maximize the use of local skills and capacities.

The Chapter also provides important **Guidance Notes** on achieving the indicators through *representation, communication and transparency; local capacity; and long-term sustainability*.

The Sphere Project (2004)

**Implement participation standards**

Ensuring the highest standard of ethics in participation is key to safeguarding the rights of participants. This can be achieved when it is clearly understood that participants are:

- not required to participate in the assessment if they prefer not to;
- not prompted to give information in public that embarrasses them, makes them feel uncomfortable or relive traumatic experiences or endangers their lives (i.e. take socio-economic status, class, race and gender composition of the group into consideration when organizing a consultation);
- told the purpose and process of the assessment and informed of its limitations, so that false expectations are not raised;
- aware of any potential risks or inconveniences associated with participation in the assessment (e.g. time away from family or job, reminders of traumatic experiences);
- told of the potential benefits arising from the assessment. The information they give might help improve certain conditions for others. However, they may not receive any direct financial or other personal gain from participating (except for possible compensation for travel expenses, if the meeting takes place some distance away from their normal residences);
- reassured that confidentiality of information sources will be respected. Individuals must not be exposed to protection risks because of their participation (e.g. victims/survivors of sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV) becoming known to the community, boys recruited by armed elements subjected to reprisals for discussing their difficulties, internally displaced persons suffering repercussions);
- permitted to express themselves freely without interruption and without having the information they provide challenged negatively (e.g. if parents say they cannot afford to send their children to school, they should not be asked why they never went to see the social worker). Empathy should guide all interactions with people of concern, facilitated by a balanced representation of women and men in the humanitarian staff allowing women, especially survivors of SGBV, to consult with female staff;
- given the names of contact staff or implementing partners with whom they can follow up in case they have personal questions; and
- kept informed of how the information they provide is being used and of any follow-up actions taken. They should remain involved in the process throughout.

**What are the entry points for participation in humanitarian action?**

Humanitarian action has many components. Each component presents different opportunities for people affected by the crisis to participate and will have an impact on the method of their participation. Entry points for participation in humanitarian action include:

- conducting assessments;
- setting priorities with communities and households;
- carrying out programme planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities;
- designing leadership and decision-making structures;
- undertaking advocacy, awareness and education initiatives in communities; and
- establishing committees, subgroups and others structures for information gathering, decision-making and implementation.

Through each of the points of entry, agency personnel should include the participation of a broad range of community members — women, girls, boys and men — as each population has specific needs and contributions based on their age and gender.

**Conducting assessments:** Participation and outreach should be undertaken in the early stages of a crisis. Assessments should build on what is known in a crisis and be anticipatory, considering needs as well as risks. Assessment teams should be gender balanced. Team members should have the requisite technical capacity and language skills required to carry out the mission objectives. Ideally, members should have local knowledge and experience in the country or region of disaster. The gender balance and language considerations are particularly vital in ensuring outreach to persons who otherwise lack access to decision-makers due to language or literacy barriers (such as the elderly, illiterate or non-English speaking; minority groups) or, for women, the preference and greater comfort in speaking with females rather than males.

**Community-based approaches:** Community-based approaches seek to motivate women, girls, boys and men in the target community to participate in a process that allows them to express their needs and to decide their own future with a view to their empowerment, owner-

ship and sustainability of well-being. It requires recognition that they are active participants in decision-making. It also seeks to understand the community's concerns and priorities, mobilizing community members and engaging them in protection and programming. The focus is on supporting target populations to organize themselves to solve their own problems. The role of the humanitarian assistance community is to build, rebuild or strengthen the community's capacities to respond to and prevent protection risks and to make decisions over access to and use of resources. This should incorporate informing communities about their human rights, the obligations of national and international authorities and appropriate avenues for redress when violations of their rights occur.

**Identify local groups, networks and collectives:** There are many missed opportunities for building capacity of groups. Identifying even informal networks of women or youth groups from the outset of humanitarian action is an important element of building capacity. As local groups are identified, humanitarian actors can better understand their immediate needs and consider ways to support their participation in programme delivery and monitoring, as well as community advocacy. For example, including representatives in training and information exchanges (see below) can be a means of empowerment and knowledge transfer; providing small grants can enhance current activities and bolster local groups' reputation in the community; encouraging expansion of the network to other camps or communities through providing transportation or occasional fora for information sharing can be a good way to broaden the impact of a project.

**Training and information exchanges:** Representatives of local groups and networks should be included in training and information exchange networks as a means to enhance their ability for meaningful participation as well as to enrich the training received by humanitarian actors. Such inclusion should reflect the groups' sectoral expertise (women's groups are traditionally in health and education; youth may focus on sports or informal education) as well as broader issues such as codes of conduct, op-

erational guidelines and community mobilization. Such joint sessions can be used to build trust, establish common goals and responsibilities and set the groundwork to support local networks over the long term.

**Meetings:** The World Food Programme (WFP) booklet on participatory techniques suggests that meetings focus on the following elements:

- **Time:** Have a set time for the meeting, advertised as far in advance as possible. Ensure that the time is convenient for those who have been invited. Knowing the daily schedule of the community, especially in terms of gender differences, will have a lot to do with the number of women, men and adolescents who will attend.
- **Venue:** The place where the meeting will be held should be comfortable for the number of people expected, convenient to get to for those invited and available.
- **Community meetings.** These must be well planned, and properly facilitated to be successful. Points to remember:
  - follow local meeting conventions such as opening with a prayer or having the local authority open the meeting;
  - have a clear purpose to the meeting, and clarify this purpose when opening and closing the meeting;
  - advertise the meeting through local authorities well in advance and follow up a few days before with reminders.

**Coordination structures and mechanism:** Local groups and individual advocates (youth, women, elderly) should have a voice and a role in coordination. Depending on the context, they may be engaged as actors in coordination (arrange meetings with peers to discuss and resolve issues of concern); invited to coordination meetings — provided they are given sufficient information to participate and, in some cases, monitor coordination issues such as distribution systems.

## ASSESSMENT AND PROGRAMME DESIGN AND MONITORING: UNHCR'S PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT TOOL

UNHCR's Participatory Assessment Tool gives comprehensive information on methods for engaging community and individual participation in assessment, including how to:

- **Map diversity.** Better understand communities by breaking them down according to age, sex, ethnicity, caste/clan, religion, socio-economic status, level of education, whether urban or rural and any other social distinction, in order to gain a representative sample of the different people who live in the operational context. This process assists in identifying which groups may have been overlooked or might not have participated as yet. For example, use registration and data systems to ensure all are represented.
- **Ensure broad representation** by engaging the community in mapping exercises such as meetings and discussions through, for example, separate subgroups of women and men; meetings with groups or individuals with particular needs or risks; engaging existing leadership structures; and structured and semi-structured focus groups at both the community and household levels.
- **Use various methods of inquiry** such as observation, spot checks and informal chats at playgrounds, classrooms, firewood-collection areas, markets, transportation hubs, entrances to UN offices and queues for non-food items as a way to check conditions and better understand what individuals think about their situation, how they are organized and solutions they can offer to address needs and risks.

The Tool also gives guidance on incorporating the information gathered into programme design, delivery and analysis, such as:

- **selecting themes for analysis** through, for example, incorporating information gathered into country operations plans and budget planning cycles — to help guide the focus on identifying root causes and ensuring solutions are geared toward systemic, holistic and inclusive impact;
- **linking the information gathered and analysed to programme design, implementation and accountability of community and agency.** For example establishing “multisectoral teams” combining programme, community services and senior management to undertake the assessment, analysis and commitment for action rather than “focal points” on gender, women or children; timing the assessments with Country Operations Planning; budget planning; ensuring feedback and analysis with the community.

## CHECKLIST TO ASSESS EFFORTS TO ENSURE EQUAL PARTICIPATION

The checklist below is derived from the activities section in this chapter and provides a useful tool to remind sector actors of key issues to ensure gender equality programming. In addition, project staff should develop context-specific indicators to measure progress in gender equality programming. Refer to the sample indicators in the Basics Chapter.

### CHECKLIST TO ASSESS EFFORTS TO ENSURE EQUAL PARTICIPATION

1. Women and men of all ages affected by humanitarian emergencies receive information on the programme and are given the opportunity to comment during all stages of the programme cycle.
2. Balanced representation by women and men in all groups is achieved.
3. Programmes are based on the willing cooperation of the affected population.
4. Special fora exist for the participation of women and youth.
5. Programme objectives reflect the needs, concerns and values of all segments of the population affected by humanitarian emergencies.
6. Assessment results are communicated to all concerned organizations and individuals.
7. Mechanisms are established to allow all segments of the affected population to provide input and feedback on the programme.
8. Age- and sex-specific outreach is established for individuals who are marginalized, for example the homebound, disabled or others who may have problems accessing services.
9. Programming is designed to maximize the use of local skills and capacities, including the skills and capacities of women and youth.
10. Gender-sensitive programmes are designed to build on local capacity and do not undermine women's, girls', boys' and men's own coping or other strategies.
11. Programmes support, build on and/or complement gender responsiveness of existing services and local institutional structures.
12. Local and national governmental organizations are consulted in the longer-term design of gender-sensitive programmes.
13. Trainings and workshops are undertaken with the inclusion of representatives from the community and local groups and networks such as youth groups, women's organizations and other collectives.

## RESOURCES

1. Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). *ALNAP Global Study on Consultation and Participation of Disaster-Affected Populations: Practitioners' Handbook*. London, 2003. [http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/participation\\_study.htm](http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/participation_study.htm)
2. The Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. *The Sphere Handbook: 2004 Revised Version*. Geneva, 2004. <http://www.sphereproject.org/content/view/27/84/lang,English/>
3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations*. Geneva, 2005. <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/450e963f2.html>
4. World Food Programme. *Participatory Techniques and Tools — A WFP Guide*. Rome, 2001.