Accountability to affected populations

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
Women wait in line for an aid distribution at the Kutupalong refugee camp.
OCHA/Vincent Tremeau

AAP in the community
UNHCR's outreach volunteer programme helps determine how best to reach local communities and how to adapt humanitarian activities accordingly. In the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh, including women as Community Outreach Members proved fundamental to an effective humanitarian response. The Community Outreach Members play a key role in providing information about humanitarian assistance, raising awareness of priority issues and communicating communities' perceptions to humanitarian organizations. In the words of one front-line UNHCR aid worker: "The Community Outreach Members bring us closer to the refugee community and vice versa. They're the source of information, they live in the community, they understand very well the community's priorities and know the gaps in services and infrastructure."

Having communities at the centre of humanitarian action is critical for appropriate and timely aid and protection to reach the people in need. AAP is the commitment of humanitarians to use their power responsibly.

This means regularly providing information to affected communities, ensuring decisions are informed by the views of communities, and enabling communities to assess and comment on the performance of humanitarians. It also means raising awareness and ensuring that well-established community-based complaint mechanisms are in place to prevent and respond to cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. Systematic accountability is viewed as essential to meeting commitments outlined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Grand Bargain and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

At the global level, IASC partners are working to achieve more coherent and systematic approaches to AAP. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement promoted stronger collective action, and adopted the Movement-wide Minimum Commitments and Actions on Community Engagement and Accountability in 2019. UNICEF is revising its Core Commitments for Children to reinforce obligations to quality and accountability, and IOM is promoting AAP principles across the organization.

In many countries, there has been a significant shift towards common approaches to community engagement on a whole-of-response level. This includes the meaningful participation of affected communities and diverse groups of people in all stages of the HPC, including in coordination, planning and monitoring. The aim of such approaches is to measure affected peoples' satisfaction, and adjust the overall response based on their views. In 2019, response-wide projects highlighting community perceptions of humanitarian response to inform programmatic change were implemented in Bangladesh, CAR, Chad, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Uganda and Yemen.

In 2019, overall response planning and implementation was further enriched by the collaboration between community engagement and accountability initiatives and the technical work delivered through various protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) networks. Effective community outreach and sensitization on PSEA in response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique has been attributed to early interventions at the coordination level and highlighted as an important measure in supporting capacities across the response. As a priority for the IASC through its Results Group on Accountability and Inclusion, efforts are under way to harmonize and leverage the complementarities of these critical areas of accountability in Indonesia, Myanmar, South Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen.

Zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse

More people in humanitarian situations reported sexual misconduct in the past year. While it is not clear whether this reflects an actual increase in cases, or only an increase in the number of people speaking up, the humanitarian community is determined to fight this scourge.

The 2018 IASC-endorsed Strategy on Protection from and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment commits to creating a humanitarian environment free from sexual wrongdoing, where the people caught up in crises as well as humanitarian workers feel safe and respected. In September 2019, the IASC announced three overarching priorities for the coming year: to bolster prevention, expand safe spaces so all survivors can speak out, and to promote the respectful use of authority.

In 2019, IASC members scaled up their investments to deliver results in priority areas for communities affected by crises. UNICEF committed $21 million to support 32 priority countries facing humanitarian emergencies to accelerate work on PSEA. Following commitments by IOM, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, more than half the 34 countries with ongoing humanitarian operations had PSEA Coordinators by September 2019. Under the leadership of Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordinators (RCs/HCs), PSEA Coordinators are responsible for leading inter-agency networks, ensuring safe and accessible reporting systems are in place, and establishing linkages with GBV and child protection referral services. The IASC also supports country-level efforts for the coordinated implementation of the 2018 UN Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving implementing partners.

The IASC promotes adherence to the Inter-Agency Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, which facilitates the systematic sharing of information on non-criminal sexual misconduct between humanitarian and development agencies. In 2019, 1,580 candidates have been screened and at least 10 people prevented from seeking employment in the aid sector because of misconduct. The scheme is expected to significantly expand in 2020.

In addition, the UN Secretariat entities and more than 25 UN agencies, funds and programmes use the Clear Check database to share information on former staff and affiliated personnel who were either dismissed for substantiated sexual exploitation and abuse allegations or who resigned while under investigation.

In the field, inter-agency efforts have been strengthened to facilitate access to information on protection and service delivery. In Colombia, for example, a Regional Safe Spaces Network was set up to improve coordination in case management involving SGBV and child protection, and to ensure access to quality services, in collaboration with more than 30 government and NGO partners. In Jordan, more than 30 humanitarian organizations continue to strengthen implementation of the Inter-agency Sexual Exploitations and Abuse Community-based Complaints and Referral Mechanism that was formally established in 2016.

Progress was also made in supporting enhanced accountability, including investigations. OCHA has created a $1 million fund to provide investigation capacity to IASC partners to strengthen accountability in response to allegations of misconduct.

Mozambique: A priority from the start
In the immediate response to tropical Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, the IASC activated a humanitarian system-wide scale-up and 10 humanitarian clusters. Within weeks, the HCT established PSEA networks nationally and in Beira, the worst-affected area. UNICEF and COSACA (CARE International, Oxfam, and Save the Children) co-chaired the network in both locations. The HC circulated the PSEA Network Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures for inter-agency complaint handling to all members of the HCT at the outset of the response, sending a clear message that PSEA was a priority.

A PSEA Action Plan was quickly rolled out, with clear indicators for tracking progress. Communication materials on how to report sexual exploitation and abuse were posted at accommodation centres and resettlement sites. Direct communication with the Prosecutor's Office was set up to discuss alleged cases related to the Government.

Sudan: A Joint Framework for Action
In Sudan, the PSEA network, under the leadership of the RC/HC, and the Government of Sudan agreed on a Joint Framework for Action which addresses priority actions to strengthen collective and individual efforts by all development and humanitarian organizations. The framework outlines the priority results that the Network members will work towards for 2019–2020, in six core areas: PSEA policy operationalization, coordination and cooperation, prevention and internal mainstreaming, advocacy, complaints and investigations, and survivor support. It also includes a budget funded by partners.