



Community-based child protection mechanisms

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that parents, as well as families and communities “have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child” and “States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.” (Article 18). However, in times of humanitarian crisis and displacement, the capacity of communities and parents is often undermined as children face new and exacerbated protection risks such as family separation, abuse and exploitation and recruitment into armed forces and groups. In order to mitigate those risks, it is important that humanitarian actors support and strengthen the protective capacity of families and communities, who are the first point of call and primary duty-bearers when it comes to the protection of vulnerable children. The active involvement of communities in the protection of children is a key principle of action for UNHCR and is reiterated in the Framework for the Protection of Children.



Grounded in the actual and potential capacity of all communities, community-based protection assists refugees and internally displaced persons to protect their security, secure their rights, and take or recover control over their lives.”

Understanding Community-Based Protection, UNHCR 2013

Key messages

- ➔ Families and communities have the **primary responsibility for the protection of children** of concern.
- ➔ The **involvement of the community** in the identification of child protection issues and design and implementation of activities will ultimately lead to **better acceptance and greater impact of child protection** interventions.
- ➔ Involving the **community will enable interventions to reach more children** because resources are used more effectively.
- ➔ The **active participation** of the community in the protection of children will **guarantee sustainability** of the actions undertaken.
- ➔ Strengthening the engagement of communities in the protection and care of their children will **support refugees to realize greater self-reliance and dignity.**



This briefing note has been produced by the Child Protection Unit, Division of International Protection, in order to guide field operations on key thematic child protection issues.

Key Concepts

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH: “A community-based approach is a way of working in partnership with persons of concern during all stages of UNHCR’s programme cycle. It recognizes the resilience, capacities, skills and resources of persons of concern, builds on these to deliver protection and solutions, and supports the community’s own goals” (UNHCR 2008).

COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISM: A community-based child protection mechanism (CBCPM) is a network or group of individuals at community level who work in a coordinated way toward child protection goals. These mechanisms can take the form of a focal point or a group or network of community members with a role in child protection (social workers, teachers, health staff, parents, elders, and other volunteers).

CHILDREN’S AND YOUTH GROUPS: Children’s and adolescent groups are part of community-based child protection mechanisms and enable children themselves to play an integral role in their own protection.

WHAT DO COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION GROUPS LOOK LIKE?

Community-based mechanisms include a mixture of “exogenous” or outside actors and influences and “endogenous” or internal or traditional actors and influences. Increasingly, the importance of working through local community structures and traditional or informal processes is recognized.

These mechanisms can be set up in different ways, depending on the analysis of the context:

- 1 Direct implementation by agency (Externally driven and managed by aid agencies)
- 2 Community involvement in agency initiative (initiative is driven by agency)
- 3 Community-owned and managed activities mobilized by external agency (higher level of community ownership with external agency support)
- 4 Community-owned and managed activities initiated from within the community. (See Benham 2008 typology).

WHAT DO COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISMS DO?

Community-based child protection groups typically play different roles depending on the context and existing community capacities. Some child protection committees focus on child protection or child welfare issues more broadly whereas others have a more narrow focus, such as supporting and monitoring unaccompanied children or working to combat child trafficking.

Community-based child protection groups may be involved in:

- Identification of protection concerns and vulnerable children
- Awareness raising on child rights and child protection
- Referral and accompaniment of children and their families to appropriate services
- Provision of psychosocial, emotional and spiritual support to vulnerable children
- Promoting birth registration
- Identification of children at “heightened” risk
- Informal tracing
- Alternative care or foster parent groups
- Dispute resolution and mediation (such as family or custody issues)
- Informing communities of services
- Life skills and good-parenting skills programmes

Good Practices

- Promote **community ownership** and do not impose external models or views (unless community’s views are contrary to international human rights standards).
- Ensure members of community-based mechanisms understand and apply the principle of **best interests of the child** in all initiatives they undertake.
- Be aware of and sensitive to **power and social dynamics** within communities of concern and how they impact functioning of community-based groups.
- Do not offer payment so as to avoid undermining **genuine volunteerism**.
- Try to **optimize resources** and support communities to also use their own resources.
- Support groups with **equipment and tools** for their work such as ID cards, t-shirts, rubber boots, torches, letter of introduction.
- **Recognize** work of the group through provision of certificates, annual celebrations, or volunteer of the year awards.
- Ensure CBCPMs have a **clear mandate** with a **realistic set of functions**.
- Ensure groups **understand their own limits** by training them well on which types of complex cases need to be referred and how to uphold confidentiality and data sharing protocols.
- Ensure that group members are **perceived as a support mechanism** for the community and not as having a “policing” function.

Key actions: What UNHCR and partners can do

Legal & Policy Framework

- ➔ Ensure CBCP groups are appropriately trained and aware of the **child protection legal framework** in the country of operation.
- ➔ Establish and develop **Standards Operating Procedures (SOPs)** that include a description of the role of CBCPMs in all activities undertaken by UNHCR and partners.

Knowledge & Data

- ➔ **Map** already existing community structures and mechanisms that contribute to protecting children of concern.
- ➔ Involve community mechanisms to set up their own **indicators and benchmarks** related to the protection of children of concern.
- ➔ Carry out **baseline survey** and assess the functioning of community groups (scope of work, children reached, quality of outreach, etc.).

Currently, the child protection sector is researching ways to build a **stronger evidence-based approach** to show the impact of community groups on the protection of children. At times, mechanisms are set up unilaterally by agencies or other external actors, whereas other mechanisms are initiated and led by the community. Emerging lessons show that community-based approaches need to be adapted specifically to the context and should ideally be the result of a community-driven process.

Coordination

- ➔ Link and create coordination and **referral mechanisms** with other service providers, ensuring mechanisms are connected with other sectors such as health, education, justice and law enforcement entities to ensure a holistic response.
- ➔ Promote linkages between the informal CBCPMs and the formal national child protection system, including at district levels.
- ➔ Explore linkages and potential areas of cooperation between schools, teachers and CBCPMs.

Human & Financial Capacity

- ➔ Support the **selection of volunteers** through a transparent recruitment process, taking into account the community's own criteria of selection of child protection volunteers and the views of children.
- ➔ Assess gaps in competency and develop and implement a **training plan**, that includes do no harm and child safeguarding.
- ➔ Explore how **children and youth groups** can safely engage and link with CBCPMs
- ➔ Agencies supporting CBCPM need to have **sufficient capacity to monitor and coach** groups.

Prevention & Response

- ➔ Engage both refugee and host **community** in discussions regarding child protection violations and seek their perspectives on solutions.
- ➔ **Consult with children and adolescents** about planning and implementation of CBCP group activities.
- ➔ **Guide the groups** to develop **Terms of Reference** (endorsed by communities and key officials if possible) and an **action plan**.
- ➔ **Accountability:** Establish a **feedback mechanism** so that children and the community can report on the functioning of the CP group.
- ➔ **Sustainability:** Develop an **exit strategy** to ensure a smooth transition towards community ownership of the initiative.

Advocacy & Awareness

- ➔ Support groups in developing results-oriented **awareness strategies** that will aim to change **social norms** and practices that are harmful for children.
- ➔ Support CBCPMs to **identify allies** and key figures within the community who they can rely on to make a change in their area of work (e.g. key role models, parents, young people, elders and leaders etc.).
- ➔ Collaborate and coordinate with other community groups that work on **related areas** (e.g. supporting persons with disabilities or SGBV prevention and response including children).

HOW DO COMMUNITY MECHANISMS FIT WITHIN NATIONAL SYSTEMS?

A distinction is often made between the **formal** elements of the system, such as **government-led** police family units, local courts, children's offices and social workers (which are not always accessible to refugee, displaced and stateless children) and the less formal or **informal mechanisms** that still have a role to play in child protection such as CBOs, mothers' groups, kinship networks, religious structures and other traditional mechanisms for protecting children. However, current evaluations and research show that there is too often a disconnect between the informal and formal elements of national child protection systems. It is essential that the two levels collaborate and that the central government body dedicated to child welfare is equipped and resourced to also address issues and violations against children in situations of displacement. CBCPM are an essential component of the overall child protection system; UNHCR works to strengthen community-based mechanisms as well as the wider national system.

UNHCR in Action: Examples from the Field

Rwanda

In Rwanda, child protection committees (CPCs) have been established in refugee camps. These CPCs mirror an already existing nation-wide model of community-based child protection networks in Rwanda. Members of the CPC are individuals from the refugee community who have agreed to commit to work towards the safety and well-being of children in the camp on a volunteer basis. The volunteers of the Ishuri Inshuti Z'Abana ("Friendly school for children") section of the CPC are all adult women who provide children between 3 to 4 years old with early childhood development. The members of the Abarengerabana ("protectors of children") section play an important role in the sensitization and reporting in their assigned area of intervention. They are also responsible for advocating for the protection of children in the camp. The members of the Nkundabana ("I love children") section are selected to become mentors for children, in particular for children at risk (UASC). They monitor children at risk and report back. There is a fourth group, Ijwi ry'Abana ("Voice of Children") composed of children who advocate on child rights – to ensure that children's ideas are integrated into camp activities.

Cairo, Egypt

In urban Cairo, Egypt, UNHCR's partner runs a youth group for young people from many different refugee and asylum seeking communities (as well as some members of the host community) living in the area. Members of the youth group identified education as an issue of concern to them. As a result 45 young people decided to conduct their own research on the challenges faced by refugee and asylum seeking young people in education in different areas of Cairo. The group became young researchers, carrying out qualitative interviews with fellow students, teachers, community leaders and other significant adults. They attended training workshops on data analysis, pulling the information together and then completed a report on the process. They also produced a short documentary film to highlight the process and the issues. This report, "Future researchers: Children's Dreams for a Better Education" was then used as one of the resources to inform UNHCR's child protection and education strategies. Members of the youth group also regularly attend and contribute to the Inter-agency Education Working Group.



Girls and boys are protected from abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect through community-based mechanisms and processes."

Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Standard 16: Community-based mechanisms

For More Information:

- Community Child Protection Exchange Forum: www.childprotectionforum.org
- Benham, 2008. *Agencies, communities and children, A Report of the Interagency Learning Initiative: Engaging Communities for Children's Well-Being*. Available at: <http://goo.gl/5Jjils>
- UNHCR 2001. *ExCom Conclusion 15 February 2001: Reinforcing a Community Development Approach*, available at: <http://goo.gl/IY4H2X>
- UNHCR 2008. *A Community-based Approach in UNHCR operations*, available at <http://goo.gl/d7Qwk7>
- UNHCR 2010. *UNHCR and Community Development: a weak link in the chain of refugee protection?* Available at: <http://goo.gl/Q1pYsD>
- UNHCR 2013. *Understanding Community-based Protection*, available at: <http://goo.gl/EOxNko>
- CPWG, 2012. *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*, available at: <http://goo.gl/6A1OOj>
- ARC training pack on community mobilization, available at: <http://goo.gl/san8yE>
- Save the Children, 2010. *Strengthening National Child Protection Systems in Emergencies through Community-Based Mechanisms: A Discussion Paper*, available at: <http://goo.gl/fB6uJD>
- Wessels, Mike, 2009. *What are we learning about protecting children in the community?* Available at: <http://goo.gl/fm476d>
- Save the Children, 2007. *Children at the centre, a guide to supporting community groups caring for vulnerable children*. Available at <http://goo.gl/0ok0uN>
- Save the Children Alliance, 2008. *A common responsibility: The role of community-based child protection groups in protection children from sexual abuse and exploitation*, available at: <http://goo.gl/Mb6OvN>
- Inter-agency learning initiative, 2012. *Lessons Learned: Conducting Research on Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms*, available at <http://goo.gl/PVKTRr>