

Participatory Assessment in Operations

I. Introduction

Refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees must be at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the protection problems they face, it is essential to consult them directly and to listen to them. Their right to participate in decisions on matters that affect their lives is enshrined in human rights instruments and UNHCR policy and guidelines, in particular the Agenda for Protection.¹ The participation from the outset of refugee women and men, young and old and from diverse backgrounds, in the definition of problems and the design of programmes for their benefit is crucial to serving, assisting, and protecting them and ensuring an effective operation.

What is participatory assessment?

Participatory assessment² is a process of building partnerships with refugee women and men of all ages and backgrounds by promoting meaningful participation through structured dialogue. Participatory assessment includes holding separate discussions with women, girls, boys, and men, including adolescents, in order to gather accurate information on the

specific protection risks they face and the underlying causes, to understand their capacities, and to hear their proposed solutions.

Participatory assessment involves discussing with women, girls, boys, and men of concern and analysing jointly with them the protection risks that they face. It helps mobilize communities to take collective action to enhance their own protection and forms the basis for the implementation of a rights and community-based approach³ (see Guiding Principles). Participatory assessment is one phase of a comprehensive situation analysis.

What is situation analysis?

Situation analysis in UNHCR comprises three closely interlinked phases:

- **Phase 1: Analysis of existing information**

All the available information on a particular situation concerning refugees, internally displaced persons, and/or returnees is gathered from a wide range of internal and external sources, including Country Reports, Annual Protection Reports, the proGres database (Project Profile), and Standards and Indicators Reports, as well as from political and legal documents and reports produced by other organizations/partners. The information collected should be reviewed from an age, gender, and diversity perspective to identify protection gaps in information, in services, in assistance or in advocacy.

- **Phase 2: Participatory assessment**

Structured discussions are organized with refugee women, girls, boys, and men of all ages and backgrounds, providing them with an opportunity to explain the protection risks

they face and to participate as partners in the design of programmatic responses to issues affecting their lives.

▪ **Phase 3: Participatory planning**

A planning meeting takes place to prepare the annual Country Operations Plan (COP) for submission to UNHCR headquarters. Participants include donors, host government authorities, implementing and operational partners, and refugees.⁴ Together, they review and analyse the information available and develop the operational objectives at the country level.⁵



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Situation analysis

Phase 1

Analysis of existing information

- Socio-economic, political and legal context;
- Population profile—demographics and diversity;
- Standards and Indicators Reports;
- Country Reports;
- Annual Protection Reports;
- Other agency partner reports.

Phase 2

Participatory assessment

Structured dialogue with refugee/internally displaced/returnee women and men, girls and boys of different backgrounds to:

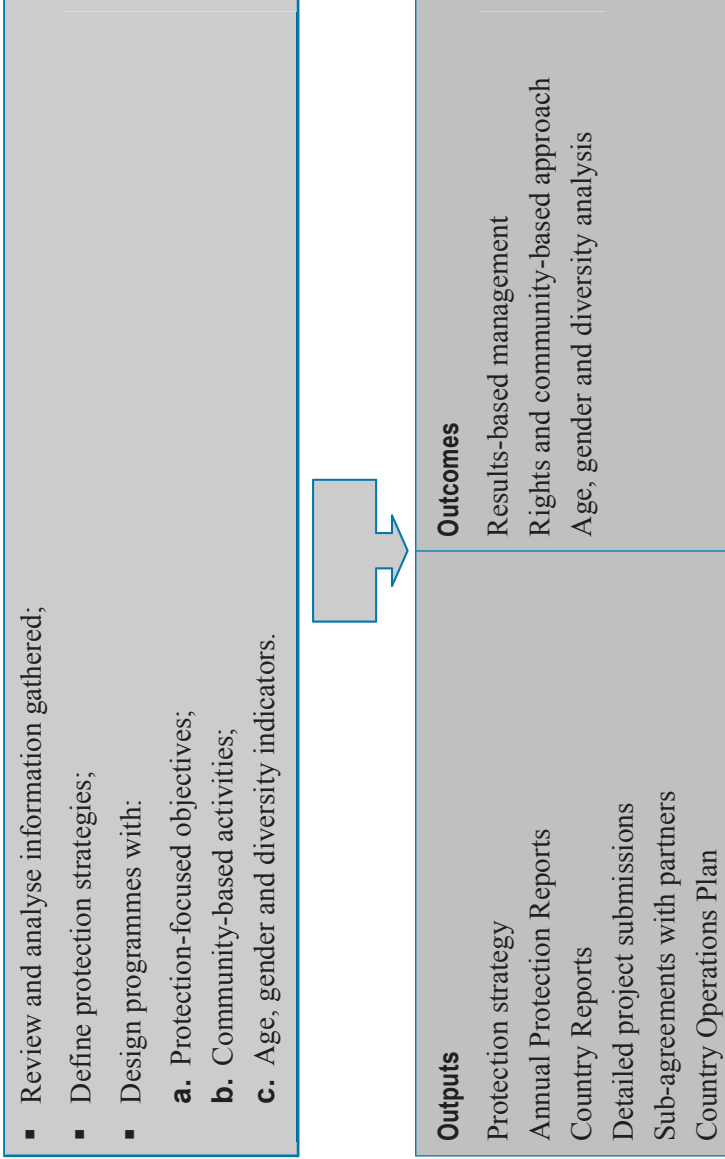
- Identify protection risks and assistance needs;
- Identify root causes of protection risks;
- Identify community capacities and resources;
- Discuss solutions and priorities.

Phase 3

Participatory planning

Government counterparts, implementing and operational partners and refugee/internally displaced/ returnee representatives to:

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Completing the three phases of a situation analysis leads to a more accurate determination of protection strategies and programming for UNHCR's operations in a specific country. The information collected and analysed through this comprehensive process will inform the content of key programme documents such as the Country Operations Plan (COP), Country Reports, Annual Protection Reports, detailed project submissions, and budgets.

What is this Tool?

This Tool outlines a series of steps to follow for conducting a participatory assessment with refugees or other persons of concern. If applied systematically, it will ensure that women and men of all ages and backgrounds are given the opportunity to identify and voice their own protection risks, priorities, and solutions, and thus participate meaningfully in the development of the annual COP. While some offices already hold regular consultations with different groups of refugees, this Tool provides additional guidance with the aim of promoting a more systematic approach to participatory assessment and of assisting in systematizing the findings for more effective incorporation into planning processes.

The overall goal of this Tool is to assist offices in strengthening partnerships with persons of concern, in gathering baseline data for age, gender, and diversity analysis and in developing the most appropriate protection strategies through:

- Analysing protection risks and incidents together with persons of concern;

- Involving refugees in the design, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of services throughout the programme cycle;
- Being accountable to the populations that UNHCR serves.

Who is this Tool for?

While there are many different types of participatory assessments available, UNHCR has developed this Tool to adapt the methodology to support its operations. Thus, this Tool aims to support UNHCR Branch and Field Offices in conducting participatory assessments together with partners. It is vital that all functions and sectors contribute to participatory assessment with refugees, as protection risks should be discussed and considered holistically. Reviewing and analysing protection risks, priorities and solutions through participatory assessment requires an interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, UNHCR promotes the establishment of multifunctional teams to lead the Office through the process and to support age, gender, and diversity mainstreaming.

A multifunctional team is, at a minimum, composed of protection, programme, and community service staff. Ideally, it should include female and male staff, both national and international and of different levels. A successful multifunctional team approach requires the strong leadership and commitment of management, especially Heads of Office, and the active engagement of all members of the team. Offices should ensure that multifunctional teams include the wider circle of actors on the ground, such as partners, governmental counterparts, NGOs, other United Nations agencies, and donors, as appropriate.

When can this Tool be used in the programming cycle?

As stated in chapter 4 of the *UNHCR Manual*, a participatory assessment exercise undertaken with refugees is part of the annual programming cycle.⁶ Ideally, an exercise should take place before the detailed project submissions are prepared for the coming year (i.e. September to November). Information gathered from different groups of refugees during the participatory assessment will also form the basis of the Annual Protection Report, the Country Report and the COP, hence informing the participatory planning workshop, the design of programmes and the planning process, as required by the results-based management (RBM) approach. RBM calls for planning according to results rather than resources. Its four components are: participatory assessment/analysis among key actors; core problem analysis; objective setting; and performance monitoring.

The *Tool for Participatory Assessment* should be used throughout the programming cycle to structure dialogue with refugees on the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of services and protection assistance.⁷ While the focus of the Tool is to link participatory assessment to the programming cycle, as in chapter 4 of the *UNHCR Manual*, it can and should be used to plan all aspects of repatriation, reintegration, and local settlement operations (see below).

Participatory assessment in different contexts

When conducting a participatory assessment in a non-camp setting involving urban refugees, internally displaced persons,

or returnees, the main challenges are identifying ways of establishing regular contact with people of concern, gathering reliable data, and building a complete picture of the protection risks. In such cases, just as in camps, the key to applying participatory assessment successfully is to identify the best methods of reaching members of the community, communicate information to them on meeting times and places, and plan with them. Methods may include working through existing community structures, such as religious groups, youth groups, health facilities, community-based organizations, and local NGOs. Through these groups access to the wider urban community can gradually be established.

In urban settings, people of concern are often scattered over a wide area, making it harder to reach and mobilize them. Multifunctional teams, possibly national staff members and local partners, begin by making contact with urban refugee women and men already known to them and find out more about informal meeting places and networks through which a wider participatory assessment can then be conducted.

Participatory assessment can be used for inter-agency cluster assessments in situations of displacement⁸ as there are many similarities in internally displaced persons and refugee movements. Internally displaced persons move into camp-like settings, merge into urban areas or stay with host families. In certain contexts, where people of concern have opted to “merge” in with the local population because of security considerations, careful dialogue with leaders will be required to establish effective communication channels and to ensure an inclusive approach. The host community should also be brought into the process as their views and perspectives will impact on the situation, particularly in internally displaced and returnee settings.

Participatory assessment can equally be applied in situations of repatriation, reintegration, local integration, and local

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settlement.⁹ It begins in the country of asylum before refugees return home. At this point, it is essential to discuss with them issues of protection, rights, and duties, including access to land, infrastructure, and services available upon return, and to organize “go and see” visits for women, men, and young people. Teams in the country of origin can obtain advance information on the returnee population from the *proGres* database (such as on unaccompanied and separated children or grandmother-headed households) and meet groups with specific needs to discuss their concerns and priorities before their return. Conducting participatory assessment with the returning population is a crucial component of returnee monitoring and paves the way for a community-based approach to reintegration. Early participatory assessment will also support women’s role in decision-making in peace negotiations and reconstruction efforts and provide ways for adolescent girls and boys to participate in building their future.

