


## Guidance Note 7

# Humanitarian Assistance


## 1. The protection value of humanitarian assistance

Generally, humanitarian assistance consists of providing relief services or commodities either directly or indirectly via the supply of advice or resources through a local authority or partner organization.<sup>1</sup>

Humanitarian assistance has a wide **protection capacity** as its aim is to address the urgent needs of the target populations, thereby improving their human rights situation. Yet, if the planning and delivery of humanitarian assistance are not guided by protection objectives and basic principles, the safety and dignity of civilian populations can be put at serious risk and the humanitarian character of assistance can be undermined. **Conscientiously planning and delivering humanitarian assistance through a *protection lens***<sup>2</sup> can greatly expand its protection capacity.


Humanitarian assistance can also be a determining factor in the **search for durable solutions**. For example, adequate and timely humanitarian assistance during displacement can help displaced persons regain the ability to develop sustainable livelihoods and thereby prepare them for reaching earlier solutions. A well-balanced assistance programme can also avoid dangerous secondary displacements to unsafe locations and contribute to the development of conditions for return or relocation (see *Part VI on Durable Solutions*). 

**National governments are responsible** for the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons. Humanitarian actors should therefore try to avoid acting as substitutes for national authorities. While life-sustaining essentials should always be provided if the State is not doing so, humanitarian agencies must orient longer-term interventions towards reinforcing the capacity and the responsibility of national authorities to assist the population on their territory. This includes advocating that national policies, public services and targeted assistance programmes adequately respond to protection needs.

Humanitarian actors should also ensure that assistance ultimately strengthens the ability of internally displaced and other affected communities to realize their rights and of civil society groups to support them to that end (see *Parts IV.4 and IV.10*). 

## 2. Key protection considerations on humanitarian assistance

### 2.1 Core Humanitarian Principles<sup>4</sup>: *Humanity, Impartiality, Independence*

Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence<sup>5</sup> (see *Part I.1*).  In simple terms, this means that:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *A Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*, Slim, H., and Bonwick, A., August 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See section II of this Chapter.

<sup>3</sup> References to humanitarian assistance in this Guidance Note include those life-sustaining essentials that States and humanitarian actors provide to displaced populations, such as clothes, bedding materials, cooking items, etc. The overall protection considerations on humanitarian assistance contained in this Chapter, however, also apply to the provision of shelter, water and sanitation as well as food distribution, all of which are also dealt with in more detail in other chapters of the Handbook.

<sup>4</sup> See Guiding Principle 24.1. The Guiding Principles are reproduced in Annex 1 at the end of this Handbook.

<sup>5</sup> GA Resolution 46/182, 19 December 1991, Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations.

<sup>6</sup> See also *ICRC neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian assistance*, Denise Plattner, International Review of the Red Cross.

- Humanitarian assistance must be provided to prevent and alleviate human suffering, to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being.
- The criteria for distribution of humanitarian assistance must not be based on nationality, race, religion, or political point of view. It must be based on need alone.
- Humanitarian agencies must formulate and implement their own policies independently of government policies or actions.

Even if these principles are sometimes difficult to apply, especially in rapidly changing situations, they are unambiguous. Their application ensures the integrity of relief operations and it contributes to safeguard the safety of the assisted populations and of humanitarian staff.

These principles should guide a continued assessment of the potential consequences of humanitarian action which, at times, may lead to the conclusion that assistance should NOT be provided. This may be the case in situations in which humanitarian access might be denied in one location while strategically permitted in another, leading to a worsening of inter-communal tension or discrimination; reductions in food rations to an IDP settlement used to force relocation or premature return; pressure to establish assistance points in certain strategic locations to reclaim control over a territory use IDPs as human shields, or to control population movements for other political or military purposes in violation of the rights of IDPs.

The application of the principles of humanity and impartiality will also make it necessary for humanitarian actors to carefully consider if and when an assistance project initially planned for internally displaced persons needs to be substantially expanded to other groups or to the civilian population as a whole.

## 2.2 Balanced Interventions


Protection and assistance activities by the different humanitarian partners should all be part of one coordinated strategy. All humanitarian partners must have a common commitment so that both humanitarian assistance and generic protection interventions, (such as monitoring and reporting or following up on human rights violations), can take place at the same time without undermining each other.

This can be particularly necessary, for instance, in situations where public denunciation or advocacy reports, become necessary at one point to raise awareness about grave and systematic human rights violations against a particular group or the population as a whole. In such cases, it is essential that ALL humanitarian partners, UN and NGOs, agree on a common advocacy approach and operational strategy. The fact that open denunciation may put at risk humanitarian assistance or access altogether requires a solid unanimous approach from the country team, otherwise threatening the safety of staff and the integrity of humanitarian interventions (*see also Part IV.2 on humanitarian access and presence*). 📖

A balanced approach also requires all humanitarian actors to orient their programmes towards the achievement of durable solutions. From the beginning of an emergency and through the implementation of their programmes, they should work in coordination and partnership with development and early recovery partners.

## 2.3 Security

Humanitarian interventions could inadvertently aggravate or create risks for the target population and/or surrounding communities. The presence of humanitarian actors, the location of warehouses with food and non-food items as well as the chosen assistance modalities can increase the risk to affected communities, for example by drawing unwanted attention to assisted communities from armed groups or agents of persecution.

Armed actors may systematically infiltrate and use civilian IDP settings as a convenient base to supplement their rations, putting civilians at great risk. Constant monitoring activities in this regard are therefore indispensable (see Part II.3). 

## 2.4 Integrity and accountability

Humanitarian assistance programmes need to be accompanied by scrupulous monitoring systems to identify and prevent corruption in aid-distribution systems and avoid a spiral of extortion rendering IDPs defenceless. All efforts should be made to prevent the diversion of assistance to combatants during conflict. Humanitarian personnel taking part in assistance activities must be well aware of the practical implications of the core humanitarian principles as well as of their respective codes of conduct and the consequences of breaching them.

## 3. Ensuring a protective approach to planning and delivering humanitarian assistance

To maximize the potential protection value and benefits of humanitarian assistance, it is vital to ensure that **protection concerns are mainstreamed** into the planning and programming cycle of any humanitarian assistance programme. The following matrix suggests ways in which we can accomplish that:

### 3.1. Assessing needs for assistance with a protection perspective (see Part III.1)


- Ensure that non-protection staff taking part in assessments is adequately trained on the protection implications, the risks as well as the protection potential of humanitarian assistance.
- Try to reach, a shared perspective of key protection gaps and objectives with all protection and non-protection partners. To this end, *joint* situational assessments are useful to identify the full spectrum of protection concerns affecting persons of concern.
- At the peak of emergencies, ensure that rapid assessments are systematically undertaken from a gender, age and diversity perspective and that they include some degree of participatory inquiry, even if limited. This will help set up an adequate procurement and delivery process during the initial planning stages of assistance programmes, to respond to the needs of women, men, girls and boys of different ages, sex and circumstances.
- Do not make assumptions about family size or structure. In emergencies, families are not always made up of two parents with several children. Often, households are headed by one parent or a grandparent with children and cousins. Ensure that members of the new family unit are not put at additional risk by not receiving adequate assistance.
- Through participatory assessment during the post-emergency phase try to understand community dynamics and other relevant factors, such as gender roles, traditional practices, discriminatory laws or customs, and common patterns of abuse that may affect the delivery of assistance to some individuals or groups. This will ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those in the community who are not as visible to the humanitarian agencies.
- Establish any assistance needs that are specific to the cultural and daily practices in affected communities, such as cooking practices and fuel sources before the displacement; type of clothes that women and men used to wear, including any specific clothing items essential for their daily needs; hygiene products used or needed; and how were single-headed households surviving or accessing non-food items before.
- Establish whether there are smaller groups or families remaining **outside camps or settlements**, or those who are not able to flee as far as camps, such as older persons. Ensure that they also receive humanitarian assistance on a continued basis.



### 3.2. Planning and delivering assistance with a protection perspective (see Part III.2)

- **Integrate lessons learned:** before deciding on specific assistance modalities, seek lessons-learned about humanitarian assistance programmes in other operations with comparable protection risks and patterns of displacement.
- **Promote dignified settlement opportunities:** assistance delivery programmes should avoid creating a pull factor towards encampment if other viable alternatives exist, such as staying with host families.
- **Carefully consider the root causes of conflict:** ensure that the analysis of the root causes of conflict is integrated in the definition of assistance priorities and modalities, to prevent unnecessary tension and to foster coexistence through the delivery of assistance. (For instance, if unequal access to water for cultivation was among the root causes of conflict, humanitarian actors should prioritize access to water in communities receiving displaced populations).
- **Strengthen national responsibility:** make every effort to develop assistance programmes that strengthen existing local and national services or policies, particularly with a view to durable solutions. For instance:
  - Design nutritional centres, schools and sanitation services that can be integrated in the national system, as soon as the State is ready to assume its responsibility.
  - If the issuance of personal documentation is required to facilitate distribution and prevent abuse, avoid developing a parallel documentation system to that of the State. Rather, support, directly or through partnerships with specialized agencies, the ability of the State to provide affected populations with identity documents. Apart from facilitating the relevant distributions, this may also facilitate accessing other rights (see Part V.2). 
- **Avoid dependency on assistance:** plans for assistance delivery should promote a balance between assistance and livelihoods through coordination between protection and early-recovery agencies. Such cooperation should also serve to improve the conditions in areas of return or settlement. For instance, procurement and delivery of assistance can be oriented towards promoting local products and supporting local employment. Vocational training on traditional and new crafts using local materials, will allow for the sustainable manufacture of goods and to get access to local markets.
- **Build on the community's self-protection strategies:** older persons are often crucial interlocutors to understand these strategies, due to their understanding of the existing threats and their knowledge of the community. Such situations could be:
  - In some cases, being identified as IDPs or being spotted receiving humanitarian assistance can put displaced persons in life-threatening situations. This can be the case of displaced individuals or groups in areas where they constitute an ethnic minority and where there is a lack of governance or effective security apparatus (such as areas in Somalia or in Iraq). Special distribution systems of basic subsistence items must be developed on the basis of thorough consultation and joint planning with the community. Such systems usually involve complex and lengthy distribution procedures, yet they can save lives.
  - Some displaced communities may need to limit their movements to avoid security risks and assistance should be planned to help them avoiding such risks. For example, if members of a displaced community risk being attacked by collecting firewood in remote areas, humanitarian assistance programmes should prioritize the provision of energy-saving cooking stoves or alternative fuels to reduce the need for such movements.
  - In some cases, provision of cash grants could trigger attacks against particular segments of the population which may be perceived as vulnerable or defenceless, such as older persons, widows, etc.
  - Conversely, a project for clothes distribution that prioritizes families with special needs can improve the situation of separated children in foster care, as it may broaden opportunities for monitoring the situation of children, identify further needs, and establish referral mechanisms for identified children with additional needs.



- **Take into consideration culture and climate:** ensure that assistance distributed (clothes, bedding materials, cooking items) is appropriate to cultural practices and climatic conditions. Ensure that it is sufficient in quantity and that it enables safe practices. To the extent possible ensure that existing local practices are taken into account.
- **Be identifiable and accessible:** humanitarian partners should be easily identifiable through visibility signs and regular presence during distribution exercises. Their offices should be accessible to local authorities, IDP leaders and individuals wishing to discuss assistance-related matters.
- **Ensure that assistance does not divide the community:** objective criteria for assistance based on specific needs should be set together with representatives of the community and broadly disseminated. Discuss with those parts of the community, including the other affected communities, who may feel negatively affected and explain the principles of humanity and impartiality of humanitarian assistance in clear and unambiguous terms. It is vital to promote cohesion within the community so that it retains its ability to develop common protection strategies.
- **Build on the key role of women in their families:** work with other partners and the community to ensure that they acknowledge the key role of women in the health and well-being of their families. Ensure that all support that role by ensuring women's equitable access to assistance. Such access will be ensured by women receiving the commodities directly or together with their partners or other relatives.
- **Take into account specific needs:** ensure that assistance programmes organized around distribution points or areas, also foresee alternative arrangements to reach persons who may not be able to attend, such as:
  - Older persons and persons with disabilities, who may not be mobile at all.
  - Women taking care of many dependants on their own who may have restricted mobility and little time for participation in community affairs, including general distributions.
  - Women and adolescents who may fear attending meetings or distributions on their own for security reasons, including gender-based violence from members of their own or surrounding communities, or from armed elements.
- **Avoid exposing the community to attacks:** the type and amount of assistance provided on each occasion may attract attacks by armed actors. Infrequent distributions of large quantities of assistance are more likely to draw attacks than providing smaller quantities at more frequent intervals. Leaving vehicles and other equipment at settlements or sites over night or during longer periods can also expose the community to insecurity.
- **Ensure that all members of the community are well informed:** make sure that both women and men know well in advance the quantity / variety of items they should receive, as well as the how the distribution method is supposed to work. Ensure that they are continuously informed on any changes in the system or the quantities of assistance. Use public information and notice information boards clearly indicating entitlements to non-food items and distribution sites, day and time. Take into account different levels of literacy in selecting methods for information dissemination (see Part IV.6). 
- **Plan for orderly and safe distributions:** in cases of large-scale distribution, work with the community to designate crowd controllers who can monitor queues, and provide a separate queue for persons and groups with specific needs (such as those not able to stand in line for various reasons, e.g. older persons, pregnant women or persons with disabilities). Clearly designate the person at each site who will be responsible for security decisions, for ordering evacuation and/or abandonment of supplies. That person should be known to all staff and be visible.
- **Deal quickly and fairly with cases of cheating and disorder:** tackling corruption can put staff and the relevant organization at risk. Ensure that staff responsible for control and management is experienced and qualified. Ensure transparency and accountability in contracting and recruitment of staff for distribution of assistance.



- **Support durable solutions:** where the general conditions of return are given and displaced persons have started to return or expressed their willingness to do so, assistance delivery points should be close to areas of origin to facilitate voluntary return and reintegration of the displaced communities. The same should apply to relocations.

### 3.3. Evaluating and monitoring the protection impact (see Part III.3)

- Work with all partners for the adoption of concrete measures to avoid abusive distribution systems, such as warehouse monitoring and post-distribution household surveys.
- Ensure that monitoring of assistance distribution is done both by agency staff and representatives of the affected communities.
- Enable beneficiaries to transmit their concerns and suggestions regarding the quality of assistance or its modalities. Hold regular discussions with community members on the distribution mechanisms and make modifications wherever feasible. Irregularities in the distribution cycle undermine the confidence of the affected community and increase the need to circumvent the system.
- Work together with humanitarian actors in the different sectors to ensure that their programme evaluation and monitoring activities measure not only performance levels, that is, the quantities of material distributed, but also their protection impact, such as:
  - The ability of such programmes to promote dignity and self-reliance of persons of concern and the community or whether they are reinforcing dependency and risk prolonging displacement.
  - The different impact of assistance on persons of different ages, sex and backgrounds, particularly those who are less visible or unrepresented, including in terms of equality, non-discrimination, appropriateness to cover their specific needs and any changes required.
  - Whether targeted assistance related to sensitive issues inadvertently identifies and places individuals at risk of stigmatization or physical harm, such as targeted assistance to HIV-AIDS patients or GBV survivors.<sup>7</sup>
  - Any other undesired effect, either on those receiving assistance, their relatives, surrounding populations or the relationship between different communities.
- Set up suggestion and complaint-boxes along the areas of displacement. Conduct regular random visits to households and displacement sites to get first-hand information about the impact of assistance should be conducted regularly.
- Ensure that ongoing evaluations of humanitarian assistance programmes develop and use 'protection impact' indicators linked to the objectives set by the Protection Cluster/Sector.



## Resources

- *Beyond Firewood: Fuel Alternatives and Protection Strategies for Displaced Women and Girls*, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, March 2006.
- *Making Protection a Priority: Integrating Protection and Humanitarian Assistance*, paper from Inter Action's Protection Working Group, April 2004.
- *Commodity Distribution*, UNHCR Division of Operational Support, June 1997.
- *Different Needs – Equal Opportunities, Gender and Non-Food Items in Emergencies*, IASC Gender Handbook.
- *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, Chapter 4, Minimum Standards in Shelter, Settlement and Non-Food Items, by Sphere Project, 2004.
- *Camp Management Toolkit*, Norwegian Refugee Council Camp Management Project, Oslo, 2004.
- *Growing the Sheltering Tree: Protecting Rights Through Humanitarian Action*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Geneva, 2002.
- *Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*, Slim, H., and Bonwick, A., Overseas Development Institute, London, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> "Gender-based Violence in Colombia: WFP Field Study" (23 April-6 May 2006), WFP draft report, p. 16.