

Draft Operational Guidance: Participation of Affected Populations in UNHCR Evaluations (March 2026)

Purpose and use of this guidance

This guidance supports UNHCR staff and evaluation teams in operationalizing commitments on participation in the context of evaluations. It does not introduce new policy requirements or establish minimum standards or expected levels of participation. It does not replace or reinterpret UNHCR's Accountability to Affected People (AAP), Community-Based Protection (CBP), or Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) guidance. Rather, it translates these established commitments into a non-exhaustive list of possible, evaluation-specific actions, complementing existing guidance on participation in other phases of the programme cycle.

UNHCR's AAP and CBP guidance provide limited direction on how these principles apply to evaluations, particularly beyond data collection. Evaluations raise distinct considerations related to independence, ethics, and evaluative judgment. This guidance addresses that gap by indicating where and how the perspectives and experiences of forcibly displaced and stateless people may inform evaluation design, analysis, learning, and accountability, while remaining consistent with UNHCR's protection mandate, AAP commitments, and evaluation standards. Where appropriate, participation can strengthen the credibility and contextual validity of evaluation evidence by incorporating perspectives from those directly affected by UNHCR's work.

The guidance is structured around six phases of an evaluation: planning, inception, data collection, data analysis, reporting, and dissemination. For each phase, it illustrates possible participation actions anchored in existing policy principles. Participation approaches¹ referenced in this guidance (inform, consult, contribute, collaborate, co-produce) represent different modalities through which affected populations² may engage in an evaluation. These approaches are not prescriptive, sequential, or hierarchical, and should not be used to assess the quality of an evaluation. The appropriate modality should be determined case by case, based on the purpose and scope of the evaluation, as well as feasibility, protection and ethical considerations, access and security constraints, and available time and resources. This may include cases where direct engagement with affected populations is not necessary (e.g. evaluations of internal systems or administrative processes). Not all evaluations will include direct participation of affected populations.

In some contexts, particularly global evaluations, direct engagement with affected populations during early phases such as planning may not be feasible. In such cases, alternative modalities may be used, including engagement through representative networks and other platforms involving affected populations at regional or global levels. Engagement with affected populations or representative bodies should be informed by a context-sensitive assessment of legitimacy, inclusion, and protection risks. In some contexts, representatives may not reflect the diversity of affected populations, and reliance on them alone may exclude certain groups or perspectives. Evaluation Managers and teams may consult country operations to identify appropriate, inclusive, and safe channels of communication and community engagement, including how findings may be communicated and discussed after the evaluation.

Participation in evaluation may build on existing feedback, response, and assessment processes, which can reduce the need for additional consultation. It aims to inform evaluative judgment, organizational learning, and accountability by bringing perspectives from affected populations into the evaluation process. Responsibility for evaluative conclusions and recommendations remains with the independent evaluation team, in line with UNHCR's Evaluation Policy and UNEG norms and standards. This guidance therefore functions as a technical application of UNHCR's AAP and CBP guidance to the evaluation phase of the programme cycle and is relevant to both centralized and decentralized evaluations.

Normative Basis for Participation in Evaluation

Participation in evaluation reflects established human rights principles and UNHCR's commitments to accountability to affected populations, as articulated in UNHCR's Evaluation Policy. The following principles provide the normative basis for participation in evaluation processes.

1. **Participation is a recognized human rights principle.** Affected populations have the right to be informed and to express views on matters that affect them.
2. **Access to information is a prerequisite for participation.** Meaningful engagement requires timely, understandable, and relevant information about evaluations. Information provision alone, however, does not constitute participation.

3. **Participation should be meaningful.** Perspectives from affected populations should be considered in evaluation processes and may inform framing, interpretation, or learning.
4. **Participation supports accountability to affected populations.** It strengthens transparency, feedback, and organizational learning, and contributes to UNHCR's accountability commitments.

The participation approaches presented below illustrate different ways in which affected populations may engage in evaluations. The examples provided are illustrative and non-exhaustive; they are not intended as a checklist, sequence, or set of required steps, and should not be used to assess the quality of an evaluation.

Participation Approaches — Operational Definitions and Use Cases

Participation approach	Core dynamic	How it works in evaluation	Typical use cases
Inform	Information sharing	Information about the evaluation is shared with affected populations. Communication is one-way and does not involve soliciting views or feedback.	• Announcing that an evaluation will take place • Sharing the purpose, scope, or timeline of an evaluation • Publishing a finalized CN, TOR, or report for transparency
Consult	Feedback gathering	Information is shared and views from affected populations are sought. Their perspectives are documented as part of the evaluation process.	• FGDs or interviews used for data collection • Surveys or participatory assessments analyzed by the evaluation team • Use of existing feedback and assessment data, which may replace direct consultation
Contribute	Input shaping the evaluation	Affected populations provide input that may shape aspects of the evaluation, such as the framing of questions, interpretation of findings, or learning priorities.	• Revising evaluation questions based on input • Adjusting interpretation of emerging findings based on feedback • Reflecting divergent perspectives in conclusions
Collaborate	Joint interpretation	Affected populations participate in discussing and interpreting evaluation evidence and its implications. Analysis and sense-making are shared, while the evaluation team retains responsibility for evaluative conclusions.	• Joint validation or sense-making workshops • Structured discussion of emerging findings and implications • Collective reflection on recommendations
Co-produce	Localized leadership	The evaluation is conducted by local actors, including community-based organizations, local evaluation firms, or partnerships between international and local evaluators. Local researchers may also serve as members of the evaluation team.	• Community-based organization–led evaluation³ • Local evaluation firm–led evaluation • International evaluation firm partnered with a local evaluation firm • Community-based researchers embedded in the evaluation team

Phase 1 – Planning

Lead: Evaluation Manager (EM)

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
• EM informs affected populations or representative bodies that an evaluation is being planned through existing communication or outreach channels (e.g. Help Sites, contact centers, community meetings), where feasible. • Information may include purpose, scope, or indicative timing. • No views are solicited and no feedback mechanism is provided.	• EM draws on existing sources capturing perspectives of affected populations (e.g. participatory assessments, prior evaluations, complaints or feedback data). • These perspectives are considered as the EM develops the Concept Note (CN) and Terms of Reference (TOR) without altering the purpose, scope, or key evaluation questions.	• EM solicits input from affected populations or representative bodies, where feasible, on the draft CN. • This input informs adjustments to the purpose, scope, or key evaluation questions before the CN and TOR are finalized. • At global level, this may include engagement with networks of forcibly displaced and stateless persons (e.g. Advisory Board to the UNHCR Task Team).	• EM and affected populations or representative bodies jointly discuss the draft purpose, scope, or key evaluation questions in the draft CN. • Deliberation explores whether these questions reflect issues that matter for affected populations. • Feedback from this joint reflection informs revisions to the CN and subsequently the TOR, while final drafting decisions remain with the EM.	• EM designs the evaluation to enable localized leadership, including roles for community-based organizations, local evaluation firms, or community-based researchers. • This approach is reflected in the CN and embedded in the TOR so that the evaluation team is led by or includes local actors.
• Participation approaches and their resource implications are reflected in the TOR and budget at the time of procurement.				

Phase 2 – Inception

Lead: Evaluation Team (with EM oversight) supported by Country Operations and local evaluators

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
• Evaluation team, local evaluators, or Country Operations inform affected populations in case-study locations that evaluation activities will take place, using existing communication channels where feasible. • Information may include the purpose of the evaluation, planned methods (e.g. focus group discussions), timelines, and how participation will be organized to reflect AGD considerations.	• Evaluation team develops a stakeholder analysis and engagement strategy. • Early consultations with affected populations help refine stakeholder mapping, access considerations, and appropriate engagement channels. • Perspectives gathered inform contextual understanding, while interpretation and design decisions remain with the evaluation team.	• Evaluation team solicits input from affected populations during early consultations, including in case-study locations. • This input informs adjustments to the inception report, including refinement of evaluation questions, consultation approaches, or group discussion guides. • Early consultations may be used to test and adapt engagement approaches before full data collection begins.	• Evaluation team and affected populations jointly discuss the draft inception design, including how key issues will be explored. • Discussion explores alternative approaches to engaging affected populations or organizing consultations. • The inception report is revised following this joint reflection, while final decisions remain with the evaluation team.	• Local evaluators participate as members of the evaluation team and co-develop the inception report. • Decisions on evaluation questions, engagement approaches, and consultation tools take place within an evaluation team comprising or led by local actors. • Local evaluators lead participatory engagement with affected populations and contribute to ERG discussions on the inception design.

Phase 3 – Data Collection

Lead: Evaluation Team (including local evaluators) supported by Country Operations

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
- Affected populations are informed that data collection is taking place. - Information may include purpose of data collection, methods, timing, and safeguards. - Communication is one-way; this notification does not solicit views.	- FGDs, interviews, surveys, or observations are conducted to collect views, experiences, or perceptions. - Data are gathered without shared interpretation at this stage.	- Data collection methods explore how affected populations make sense of the issues being examined, not only their reported experiences. - Inputs may lead evaluators to probe additional themes or adjust discussion guides during data collection.	- Data collection activities include structured reflection on emerging patterns or tensions. - Participants are invited to discuss preliminary interpretations during data collection (e.g. iterative focus group discussions). - Sense-making between evaluators and participants is shared. - Representatives of affected populations may participate in end-of-mission debriefings to reflect on emerging findings.	- Local evaluators or community-based researchers are actively involved in shaping data collection processes. - This may include co-facilitating FGDs or interviews, refining tools, or guiding lines of inquiry based on local knowledge. - Evidence generation reflects local perspectives and priorities.

Phase 4 – Data Analysis

Lead: Evaluation Team (including local evaluators)

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
- Analysis is underway and preliminary findings may be shared for transparency. - No feedback is solicited. - Interpretation remains internal to the evaluation team.	- Preliminary findings are shared with affected populations. - Reactions or clarifications are invited to verify accuracy or contextual understanding. - Interpretation and analytical judgment remain with the evaluation team.	- Feedback on preliminary findings is actively sought and documented. - Input is used to refine interpretation, clarify conclusions, or adjust emphasis. - Final evaluative responsibility remains with the evaluation team.	- Evaluation team and affected populations engage in structured dialogue on emerging findings. - Sense-making and interpretation are discussed jointly. - Analysis is adjusted based on this shared interpretation.	- Analysis is conducted by an evaluation team comprising or led by local evaluators. - Interpretation of evidence and framing of findings are developed within that team. - Analytical judgments are reached collectively within the evaluation team.

Phase 5 – Reporting

Lead: Evaluation Team (drafting), with oversight and quality assurance by the Evaluation Office

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
• Final evaluation report is shared with affected populations for information only. • Findings, conclusions, and recommendations are presented without solicitation of feedback.	• Draft sections are shared to verify factual accuracy or clarity. • Feedback may correct errors or omissions. • Final interpretation and conclusions remain with the evaluation team.	• Draft findings, conclusions, or recommendations are shared for comment. • Feedback is used to refine interpretation, emphasis, or recommendations before finalization.	• Evaluation team discusses draft findings and implications with affected populations or representative bodies. • Dialogue focuses on the meaning, significance, or implications of results. • Final report reflects issues raised through this dialogue.	• Reporting is produced by an evaluation team comprising or led by local evaluators. • Findings, conclusions, and recommendations are drafted within that team. • The final report reflects analytical judgments reached collectively by the evaluation team.

Phase 6 – Dissemination

Lead: Commissioning entity with support from the Evaluation Team

Inform	Consult	Contribute	Collaborate	Co-produce
• Relevant evaluation findings are shared with affected populations in accessible formats. • Products are translated or adapted as needed (e.g. language, literacy level, format). • Existing community networks may be used to support dissemination. • Communication remains one-way; no feedback is solicited.	• Refugee-facing products are shared with an invitation to provide reactions or feedback. • Input may focus on clarity, relevance, or resonance. • Feedback is documented; final dissemination decisions remain with the EM.	• Feedback informs how findings and recommendations that concern affected populations are communicated. • Language, emphasis, sequencing, or formats may be adjusted prior to final dissemination.	• Evaluation team and affected populations discuss which findings and recommendations concern affected populations and how they should be communicated. • Dissemination products are adjusted following this exchange.	• Dissemination products for affected populations are developed jointly with local actors. • Decisions on messages, formats, and communication channels are taken together with these actors. • Local actors lead dissemination activities among affected populations.

Sources

- UNHCR (2018). [*Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity*](#).
- UNHCR (2024). [*Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report 2024*](#).
- UNHCR (2008). [*UNHCR Manual on a Community-Based Protection Approach in UNHCR Operations*](#).
- UNHCR (2016). [*Community-Based Outreach Outside of Camps: UNHCR Community-Based Protection in Action*](#).
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- UNHCR (2023). [*Longitudinal Evaluation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy: Final Report*](#).
- Consortium (2023). [*Guidelines for Co-Produced Research with Refugees and Other People with Lived Experience of Displacement*](#).

¹ Adapted from Arnstein S. R. (1969). *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*.

² In this guidance, *affected populations* refers to forcibly displaced and stateless persons and the communities that host them. Depending on context, this may include refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, returnees, and members of host communities.

³ Community-based organizations (CBOs) refers to organizations and collective structures rooted in affected communities. This includes organizations led by or representing forcibly displaced and stateless persons, host community organizations, refugee-led initiatives, and other community groups or networks that represent the perspectives of people with and for whom UNHCR works.