

RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES: Risk factors and mitigating strategies

In the face of large-scale, rapid-onset crises, humanitarian assistance is designed to quickly provide lifesaving goods and services. The focus on speed, combined with the scaling up operations, does however often come together with risk factors that can compromise the quality of a response.

The purpose of this resource is to build on learning from past emergencies by highlighting five key risk factors and their respective mitigating strategies based on the [Core Humanitarian Standard \(CHS\)](#). For each CHS Commitment, practical tools and other resources are suggested, which will help avoid or at least minimise potential risks.

Risk Area 1: Organisations and/or staff with limited experience in humanitarian assistance

Potential consequences

- High-profile crises tend to create an inflow of small agencies with little aid experience. This increases the likelihood of **programmes lacking relevance to local needs and context**.
- High demand for staff leads to hiring people with limited experience in humanitarian assistance and leaves little time to check references and screen inappropriate candidates. This can result in an **increased risk of fraud, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and other corruption** – especially when the response is perceived as making inappropriate use of resources.

Mitigating strategies

CHS Commitment 8: Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably

- Strengthen recruitment and onboarding processes to ensure staff are made aware of their responsibilities with regards to the code of conduct, which they should also sign. The code of conduct should include the obligation of staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people, as well as references to Accountability to Affected Populations more generally and respecting the local culture.
- Ensure your organisation's commitments on quality and accountability are communicated appropriately and regularly to your own staff and external stakeholders.
- Ensure reference checks are conducted, in particular with regards to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), fraud and other corruption.
- Job descriptions, work objectives and feedback processes are in place so that staff have a clear understanding of what is required of them.
- Ensure basic training of staff on quality and accountability is taking place.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 8 can be found on page 45 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

Risk Area 2: Organisations, staff and/or consultants with limited knowledge of the context and/or the organisation they are working for

Potential consequences

- High-profile crises tend to create an inflow of mid-size to large humanitarian organisations with limited context knowledge. This increases the likelihood of **programmes lacking relevance to local needs and context**, and the use of **‘pre-packaged’ solutions**.
- High demand for staff leads to hiring people with limited context knowledge. This can result in an **increased risk of corruption** because the context in which assistance is given is not understood and important local social, political and economic (power) relations are not recognised.
- Specialists coming from abroad and contracted for only a short term can lack essential context knowledge and be not aware of their **organisation’s commitments on quality and accountability**, and end up designing **solutions which are not sustainable in the long term**.

Mitigating strategies

CHS Commitment 1: Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant

- Conduct a systematic, objective and ongoing analysis of the context and stakeholders.
- Design and implement appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs and risks, and an understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups.
- Ensure rapid assessments are followed up with more detailed assessments to ensure contexts and needs are appropriately understood.
- Privilege interagency assessments when appropriate.
- Adapt programmes to changing needs, capacities and context.
- Consider cash transfer programmes when they can support local markets.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 1 can be found on page 8 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 4: Humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback

- Ensure senior management of your organisation (and at interagency level, if possible) commits to keeping the people affected by crisis at the centre of the response, with context-specific commitments and objectives which are communicated publicly.
- Systematically contextualise programmes and projects to ensure they are relevant to local needs and respect local culture, language, etc. by working closely with the affected population and its representatives, including national and local authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs).
- Provide information to communities and people affected by crisis about the organisation, the principles it adheres to, how it expects its staff to behave, the programmes it is implementing and what they intend to deliver.

- Communicate in languages, formats and media that are easily understood, respectful and culturally appropriate for different members of the community, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- Feed back to the affected people the decisions your organisation has taken, even if the decisions are negative.
- Ensure representation is inclusive, involving the participation and engagement of communities and people affected by crisis at all stages of the work.
- Encourage and facilitate communities and people affected by crisis to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of the assistance received, paying particular attention to the gender, age and diversity of those giving feedback.
- Senior management at country office and headquarters should take the views of field staff into account when making decisions.
- Consider that in an urban environment, we are not working with distinctive communities but overlapping ones, constituted around neighbourhoods, economic and associative activities, informal networks, etc.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 4 can be found on pages 24-25 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 8: Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably

- Strengthen recruitment and on-boarding processes to ensure staff are made aware of their responsibilities with regards to the code of conduct, which they should also sign. The code of conduct should include the obligation of staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people, as well as references to Accountability to Affected Populations more generally and respecting the local culture.
- Ensure your organisation's commitments on quality and accountability are communicated appropriately and regularly to your own staff and external stakeholders.
- Job descriptions, work objectives and feedback processes are in place so that staff have a clear understanding of what is required of them.
- Ensure basic training of staff on quality and accountability is taking place.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 8 can be found on page 45 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

Risk Area 3: High staff turnover

Potential consequences

- Rapid response tends to imply high staff turnover, especially in mid-level and senior management positions, creating issues with **continuity of project implementation, accountability for decisions taken, and institutional memory**. Moreover, in situations with high staff turnover it is more difficult to **uphold good relations with partners and other key stakeholders** and there is little time to train new staff on key issues such as their **organisation's commitments on quality and accountability, code of conduct, potential corruption risks**, etc.
- High staff turnover leads to pressures to recruit new staff quickly. If, in a rushed recruitment process, people with limited humanitarian work experience or context knowledge are hired and references are not checked properly, there is an **increased risk of fraud, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and other corruption**.

Mitigating strategies

CHS Commitment 8: Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably

- Ensure your organisation's commitments on quality and accountability are communicated appropriately and regularly to your own staff and external stakeholders.
- Ensure reference checks are conducted, in particular with regards to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), fraud and other corruption.
- Strengthen recruitment and on-boarding processes to ensure staff are made aware of their responsibilities with regards to the code of conduct, which they should also sign. The code of conduct should include the obligation of staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people, as well as references to Accountability to Affected Populations more generally and respecting the local culture.
- Job descriptions, work objectives and feedback processes are in place so that staff have a clear understanding of what is required of them.
- Ensure people hired for a short term only are also well briefed on your organisation's commitment to Accountability to Affected Populations.
- Ensure basic training of newly recruited staff on quality and accountability is taking place systematically.
- Aim to hire longer-term staff quickly where possible, and especially look out for longer-term national staff instead of employing international staff.
- Ensure appropriate debriefings and handovers.
- Ensure staff policies and procedures are fair, transparent, non-discriminatory and compliant with local employment law.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 8 can be found on page 45 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

Risk area 4: Speed vs. quality

Potential consequences

- Pressure resulting from the emergency situation itself, but also from the media and donors, pushes humanitarian organisations to write and deliver projects quickly, with **limited opportunities to involve local stakeholders in the assessment and design phases and meaningfully contextualise projects**. However, a lack of participation by the affected people, national and local authorities and CSOs makes it difficult to build on existing local knowledge and capacities, prioritise and address the right issues, and target the most vulnerable people.
- High-profile crises tend to attract large amounts of money that are expected to be spent quickly and visibly. In such a context, humanitarian organisations tend to design programmes and projects which overlook **local livelihoods, undermine the local economy, and/or focus on high-profile areas** to the detriment of less accessible and/or visible areas.
- When organisations focus on delivering aid quickly, and at the same time there are limited resources available, this can lead to a lack of information sharing with local populations about what assistance is available, where and how it can be accessed, and the selection criteria that are being used. This creates **frustration and a feeling of uncertainty within affected communities**. Also, without essential information available, **fraud, abuse and other corruption risks** are significantly higher.
- The pressure within the humanitarian sector to minimise overheads can, among other things, lead to **decreased funding for essential quality assurance processes**.

Mitigating strategies

CHS Commitment 1: Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant

- Conduct a systematic, objective and ongoing analysis of the context and stakeholders.
- Design and implement appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs and risks, and an understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups.
- Ensure rapid assessments are followed up with more detailed assessments to ensure contexts and needs are appropriately understood.
- Privilege interagency assessments when appropriate.
- Adapt programmes to changing needs, capacities and context.
- Consider cash transfer programmes when they can support local markets.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 1 can be found on page 8 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 2: Humanitarian response is effective and timely

- Advocate early on with donors for keeping a degree of flexibility in how funding is provided so programmes and projects can be adapted to the context by involving local stakeholders – in particular the affected people and national and local authorities and CSOs – especially as a clearer picture of mid- to long-term needs emerges.
- Advocate early on with donors for earlier and easier access to long-term funding in order to start planning the transition from relief to development as early as possible.
- Advocate early on with donors for funding quality assurance as an integral part of the response.
- Advocate early on for Accountability to Affected Populations to be included as a key issue at Humanitarian Country Team and cluster level.

- Use relevant technical standards and good practice employed across the humanitarian sector to plan and assess programmes.
- Monitor the activities, outputs and outcomes of the humanitarian assistance given in order to adapt programmes and address poor performance.
- Ensure programme commitments are in line with your organisation's capacities.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 2 can be found on page 13 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 3: Humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects

- Ensure coordination systems are open to representatives of national and local authorities and CSOs.
- Ensure early involvement of national and local authorities, CSOs and other specialists in the planning of the response and link with development actors for the planning of the recovery phase.
- Use the results of any existing community hazard and risk assessments and preparedness plans to guide activities.
- Design and implement programmes that promote early disaster recovery and benefit the local economy.
- Identify and act upon potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely and systematic manner, including in the areas of: people's safety, security, dignity and rights; sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by staff; culture, gender, and social and political relationships; livelihoods; the local economy; and the environment.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 3 can be found on page 19 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 4: Humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback

- Ensure senior management of your organisation (and at interagency level, if possible) commits to keeping the people affected by crisis at the centre of the response, with context-specific commitments and objectives which are communicated publicly.
- Systematically contextualise programmes and projects to ensure they are relevant to local needs and respect local culture, language, etc. by working closely with the affected population and its representatives, including national and local authorities and CSOs.
- Provide information to communities and people affected by crisis about the organisation, the principles it adheres to, how it expects its staff to behave, the programmes it is implementing and what they intend to deliver.
- Communicate in languages, formats and media that are easily understood, respectful and culturally appropriate for different members of the community, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- Feed back to the affected people the decisions your organisation has taken, even if the decisions are negative.
- Ensure representation is inclusive, involving the participation and engagement of communities and people affected by crisis at all stages of the work.
- Encourage and facilitate communities and people affected by crisis to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of the assistance received, paying particular attention to the gender, age and diversity of those giving feedback.
- Senior management at country office and headquarters should take the views of field staff into account when making decisions.

- Consider that in an urban environment, we are not working with distinctive communities but overlapping ones, constituted around neighbourhoods, economic and associative activities, informal networks, etc.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 4 can be found on pages 24-25 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 5: Complaints are welcomed and addressed

- Consult with communities and people affected by crisis on the design, implementation and monitoring of complaints-handling processes.
- Welcome and accept complaints, and communicate how the mechanism can be accessed and the scope of issues it can address.
- Manage complaints in a timely, fair and appropriate manner that prioritises the safety of the complainant and those affected at all stages.
- If possible, set up complaints-handling processes at interagency level.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 5 can be found on pages 30-31 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 7: Humanitarian actors continuously learn and approve

- Draw on lessons learnt and prior positive and negative experience when designing programmes.
- Learn, innovate and implement changes on the basis of monitoring and evaluation, feedback, and complaints.
- Systematically collect feedback from the affected population to improve programmes and project continuously.
- Support or establish local interagency quality and accountability working groups where lessons learned on approaches to replicate and mistakes to avoid can be shared.
- Perform rapid self-assessments with regard to quality and accountability at organisational level to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 7 can be found on pages 39-40 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 9: Resources are managed and used responsibly for their intended purpose

- Design programmes and implement processes to ensure the efficient use of resources, balancing quality, cost and timeliness at each phase of the response.
- Manage and use resources to achieve their intended purpose, minimising waste.
- When using local and natural resources, consider their impact on the environment.
- Manage the risk of corruption and take appropriate action if it is identified.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 9 can be found on page 50 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

Risk Area 5: Lack of coordination and recognition of local capacities

Potential consequences

- The first to respond are the local population and local organisations. This is often overlooked by international actors and results in a lack of **recognition of valuable local knowledge and experience in the design of the response** and, consequently, in a **lack of local ownership** of projects.
- Weakened local government capacity, and at the same time an inflow of new actors with limited context knowledge, increases chances that **local authorities are overlooked**, aid is **insufficiently coordinated with national and local key stakeholders**, and that **existing systems and capacities are not used to their full potential**.

Mitigating strategies

CHS Commitment 3: Humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects

- Ensure programmes build on local capacities and work towards improving the resilience of communities and people affected by crisis.
- Ensure coordination systems are open to representatives of national and local authorities and CSOs.
- Ensure early involvement of national and local authorities, CSOs and other specialists in the planning of the response and link with development actors for the planning of the recovery phase.
- Enable the development of local leadership and organisations in their capacity as first responders in the event of future crises, taking steps to ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged groups are appropriately represented.
- Use the results of any existing community hazard and risk assessments and preparedness plans to guide activities.
- Design and implement programmes that promote early disaster recovery and benefit the local economy.
- Identify and act upon potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely and systematic manner, including in the areas of: people's safety, security, dignity and rights; sexual exploitation and abuse by staff; culture, gender, and social and political relationships; livelihoods; the local economy; and the environment.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 3 can be found on page 19 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).

CHS Commitment 6: Humanitarian response is coordinated and complementary

- Identify the roles, responsibilities, capacities and interests of different stakeholders.
- Ensure humanitarian response complements that of national and local authorities and other humanitarian organisations.
- Participate in relevant coordination bodies and collaborate with others in order to minimise demands on communities and maximise coverage and service provision of the wider humanitarian effort.
- Share necessary information with partners, coordination groups and other relevant actors through appropriate communication channels.

Practical tools and other resources on Commitment 6 can be found on page 35 of the [draft CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators](#).