

This document forms part of the 4th edition of the UNHCR Emergency Handbook and was generated from the digital Emergency Handbook system.

Older persons

Key points

- Do not assume older persons are visible; actively identify them.
- Consult older persons to identify their needs and capacities and identify shortcomings in protection and assistance programmes.
- Consult older persons to determine the content of food and non-food assistance packages and make sure that distribution mechanisms are accessible.

1. Overview

An older person is defined by the United Nations as a person who is over 60 years of age. However, families and communities often use other socio-cultural referents to define age, including family status (grandparents), physical appearance, or age-related health conditions. The psychological and psychosocial toll of traumatic experiences, combined with poor nutrition and exposure to disease, can cause refugees and IDPs to 'age' faster than settled populations. As a consequence, many challenges associated with old age will be apparent in refugees and IDPs who are in their 40s and 50s.

The needs and capacities of older persons are often overlooked in an emergency response because humanitarian actors do not register their presence or because of their weak socio-economic position. An emergency response that fully includes older persons must respond to their specific needs, dedicate resources, and plan and implement targeted protection initiatives in close consultation with the persons concerned, their communities, and service providers.

2. Protection objectives

- To identify older persons and assess their needs and capacities from the start of an emergency and throughout.
- To ensure that protection and assistance programmes are accessible to older persons on an equal footing.

- To ensure that older persons do not suffer discrimination and fully participate, as much as possible, in decisions that affect them.
- To ensure that all responses are inclusive and accessible to older persons, and consider their specific needs, by applying an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) lens.
- To ensure that appropriate systems are in place to prevent and respond to exploitation, abuse and violence against older persons during an emergency.
- To recognize and built on the capacities, skills and resources of older persons.

3. Underlying principles and standards

- UNHCR, Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, 2011.

Explains the objective, rationale, and core commitments of an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach; defines diversity and the main elements for mainstreaming AGD.

- UNHCR, Policy on Older Refugees, 2000.

Older women and men have the same basic needs as others, but become increasingly vulnerable as a result of ageing. Older persons face particular challenges during the phases of displacement, but should not be seen as passive, dependent recipients of assistance. They are often community leaders and transmit knowledge, culture, skills and crafts. UNHCR and partners must ensure their rights are met without discrimination.

- UNHCR, Need to Know Guidance: Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement.

Provides practical guidance on how to protect the rights of older persons of concern, and prevent discrimination.

4. Protection Risks

- Older persons are often less mobile; their sight and hearing may fail; their mental capacities and muscle strength may diminish; they may have chronic health problems and specific nutritional needs.
- Forcibly displaced older persons are at heightened risk of violence, including: sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members; discrimination; and exclusion from access to humanitarian assistance, education, livelihoods, health care, a nationality, and other services. These risks are compounded for women, persons with disabilities, and older LGBTI persons.
- Unaccompanied older persons face particular challenges in emergency situations: to find adequate accommodation, protect their belongings, and obtain water, rations and fuel.
- In emergency refugee situations, family members may be separated or die, leaving older persons without traditional forms of family support. Older persons may also become the main caregivers for their grandchildren.

- The above risks may be heightened in non-camp settings and new displacement contexts, where the community is dispersed and community protection mechanisms may no longer function.

5. Other risks

- The reputation of UNHCR and its partners will be put at risk if they do not fulfil their responsibility to protect all persons of concern, including older persons.
- Any failure to protect the security of persons of concern will create heightened risks for older persons.

6. Key decision points

- At the beginning of an emergency, consider the needs of older persons when you design shelter and settlement options, select sites and plan and design infrastructure. Ensure minimum standards of access, and ensure that emergency distributions take steps to deal with difficulties that older persons might face.
- Respond at once and adequately to the specific needs of older persons and make sure that they have access to day-to-day care.
- Ensure that older persons are identified and registered.
- Ensure that services and infrastructure are physically accessible to older persons whose mobility is limited.
- Establish referral systems to ensure that older persons can access relevant service providers.
- Put in place appropriate systems to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse.
- Make sure that programmes include older persons, and that older persons are adequately informed about programmes they are entitled to access.
- Make sure that staff, partners and local and national authorities recognize the specific needs of older persons and know how to respond to them.
- In particular in non-camp settings, it is very important to establish an outreach programme, through selected partners, to identify older persons and keep them informed of matters that concern them.

7. Key steps

Support services and care arrangements

- In camps, and at local and national level, identify service providers and potential partners who have specific expertise (medical, psychological, social support) and capacity to respond immediately.
- In consultation with older persons, and service providers and partners, agree coordination mechanisms and set up clear arrangements for referring older persons to support services.

- Prioritize older persons in reunification efforts. Do not separate them from family members or support persons, or their assistive devices, adaptive aids or medication (notably during relocation or transport).
- Consult the refugee community to identify what support arrangements exist for older persons who are alone (who have no other family members), or who care for children, other older persons or persons with disabilities.
- Identify volunteers in the refugee or local community (community workers) who can be trained to assist older persons and their families.
- Conduct training and capacity building activities for partners and local service providers.

Identification and assessment procedures

- Assign community workers, UNHCR protection staff or community-based protection staff to (pre-) registration points or arrival areas to identify and register older persons with specific needs (long-term physical, mental or sensory impairments; injuries; chronic illnesses, etc.).
- Appoint community workers or request partners to screen camps and settlements for older persons with specific needs who may not have been present at (pre-)registration (often due to their condition). Older persons who have registered may be useful sources of information.
- Include specific questions about older persons in rapid and participatory assessments, to identify their needs and difficulties they may face in meeting them. Ask older persons which forms of assistance and which referral mechanisms they find most appropriate and accessible.
- Train registration staff, and provide guidance, on how to identify and record (ad-hoc) older persons with specific needs (who have not yet registered in ProGres).
- Enter the specific needs of older persons into ProGres.

Access to services

- Identify families that include older persons and, in consultation with them, locate them close to facilities and services when assigning plots and shelters.
- In consultation with older persons, design or adapt medical centres, distribution sites, water sources, latrines, shelters and other infrastructures so that they are safe, accessible and appropriate for older persons. (They should not have barriers or tripping hazards, and should have ramp access, large doorways, hand rails on stairs, non-slippery floors, etc.).
- Ensure that older persons can obtain food or non-food item distributions. Monitor to this end and consider creating separate queues, providing transport, issuing smaller parcels, or 'home delivery'.
- Consult older persons when deciding what items should be included in distributions (for example, small Jerry cans) and when designing new infrastructure. (Consultation can avoid expensive alterations later on.)

Prevention of abuse and exploitation

- Include older persons in all prevention and response mechanisms that address protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

- Through community workers and other partners, monitor and follow up older persons who are at higher risk of abuse or exploitation. The system should include referral mechanisms.
- Inform and train older persons, their families, their caregivers, and community workers, on how to recognize, avoid, and report, instances of violence, exploitation and abuse.

Inclusion and information sharing

- Key messages to refugee populations (on timing of food distributions, health outreach, etc.) should take into account the needs of older people. Disseminate messages in formats that older persons are likely to access: radio, information booklets, signs (text and symbols/images), word of mouth.
- Consult and involve older persons and their care givers in decision-making and programming; include them in the design, assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of activities.
- Include older persons in livelihood activities; identify opportunities and training for them, in accordance with their experience and abilities.

Awareness-raising and advocacy

- Inform staff and partners of the rights of older persons. Emphasize that responses need to be designed in consultation with older persons so that they are inclusive and accessible.
- Train UNHCR and partner personnel on how to integrate the specific needs of older persons in programmes and activities.
- Advocate for the inclusion of older persons in national policies and programmes.

8. Key management considerations

- Sufficient staffing and resources must be available to meet the specific needs of older persons.
- Assess programmes regularly to ensure that age, gender and diversity policies (AGD) are implemented.
- Establish a monitoring mechanism for all key steps.
- Establish national partnerships to ensure that governmental services and other national partners remain fully and continuously engagement, and programmes and support for older persons can be sustained.

9. Resources and partnerships

Staff

- Protection, community-based protection, mental health and psychosocial support.

Financial resources

- Sufficient to plan and implement necessary services, programmes, and interventions.

Partnerships

- UN Agencies, INGOs and national NGOs, including organizations of older persons, and government institutions, including relevant ministries. Partners will also often be able to provide mental health and psychosocial support, as required.

10. Links

UNHCR's online community-based protection practitioners community
HelpAge International and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Guidance on including older people in emergency shelter programmes, 2011

HelpAge International, Older People in Disasters and Humanitarian Crises: Guidelines for Best Practice, 2000

IASC, Humanitarian Action and Older Persons, An essential brief for humanitarian actors, 2008

Humanitarian Practice Network, Protecting and Assisting Older People in Emergencies, Network Paper No. 53, 2005

WHO, Elder Abuse, Fact Sheet N°357

11. Media

UNHCR's online community-based protection practitioners community
Introduction to Community-Based Protection

UNHCR video about a 100 year old Syrian refugee

Video of Help Age about a project to include older persons in disaster reduction and emergency preparedness "White Brigades" in Bolivia

Need help?

CONTACT As first port of call, the UNHCR Dep. Representative (Protection), UNHCR Asst. Rep. (Protection), and/or Snr Protection Officer in the country; or The UNHCR Regional Asst./Dep Rep (Protection) and/or Snr. Regional Protection Officer at the regional office (if applicable); or The Snr. Regional Legal Advisor in the respective UNHCR regional bureau, covering the respective country region, who in turn will liaise as required with the parent unit at UNHCR DIP.

Annexes

- UNHCR, Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, 2011
- UNHCR, Policy on Older Refugees, 2000
- Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement 2013

- Protection in Emergencies Toolbox. Protection Checklists

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