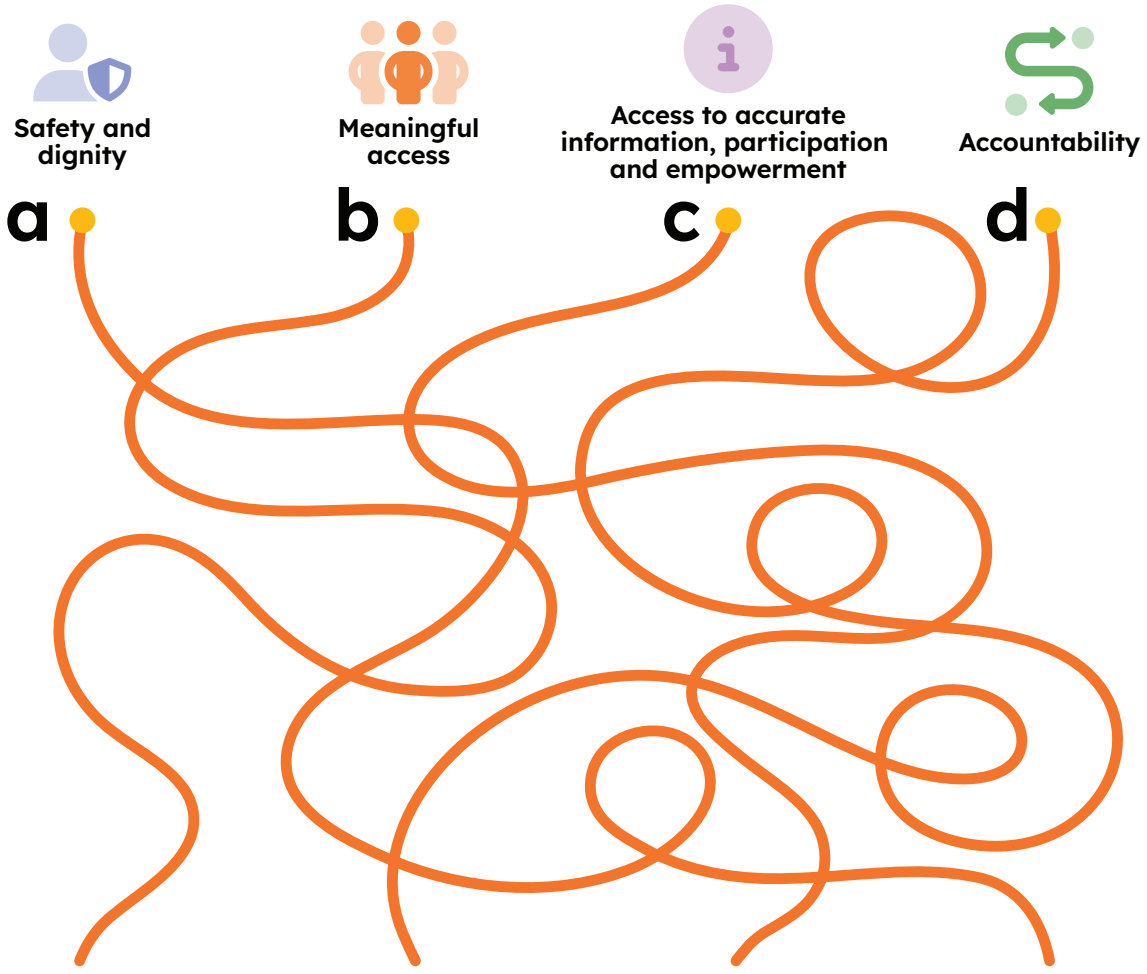
Module 2

How to contribute to safer information ecosystems by adapting ways of working



Internews

Guidelines map: How do I use the *Information and risks: a protection approach to information ecosystems modules and annexes?*

Question:

I run the online page of a local newspaper and I have heard some rumors that violence broke out after an article we wrote prompted very angry comments.

Answer:

To guide work aimed at mitigation and preventing this from happening again, see Modules 2 and 4. To listen to communities and understand more about the issues this article triggered in the community, see Module 3 and associated tools.

Question:

I am a protection actor preparing to undertake analysis to monitor protection trends and inform programming.

Answer:

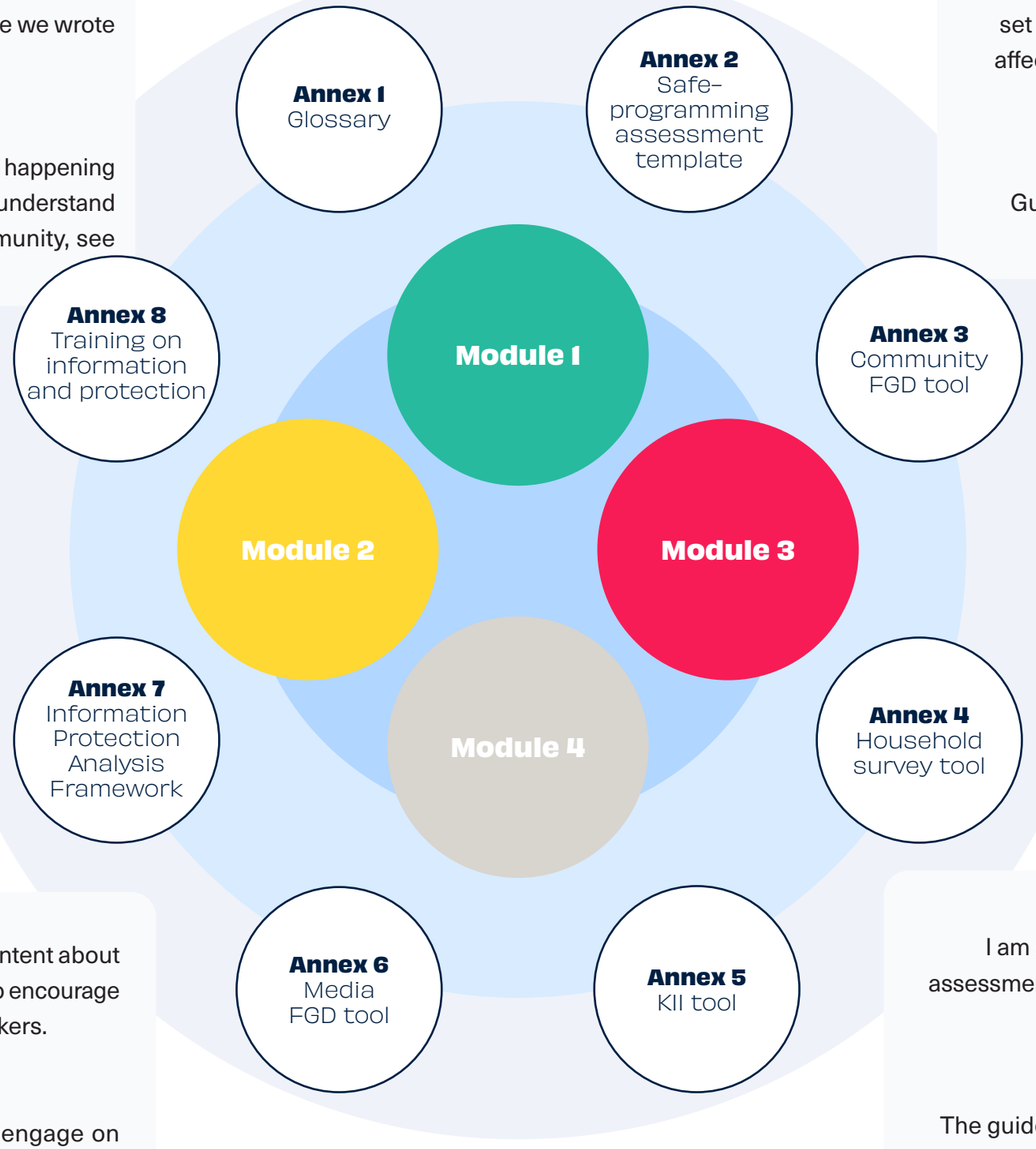
Module 3 and associated Annexes provides an analytical framework to help you design your tools and collect data, as well as guidance to produce analysis on information-related protection risks.

Question:

I work at a local radio station and want to develop content about the rise of gender-based violence (GBV) in the area, to encourage action amongst regional and national decision makers.

Answer:

The guidelines will provide direction on how to safely engage on sensitive information (Modules 2 and 4) and how to analyze the role of information in reducing or exacerbating GBV in the community (Module 3).



Question:

I work for an non-government organization and I want to set up a Facebook page to share information with the affected community. How can I make sure it is safe for community members to use?

Answer:

Guidance on setting up safe, meaningful and accessible information channels can be found in Module 2.

Question:

I work for a humanitarian organization and want to review (or if needed, develop) a feedback and complaint mechanism.

Answer:

Module 2 will provide information on safe and meaningfully accessible feedback and complaint mechanisms.

Question:

I am a humanitarian coordinator leading a multi-sectoral assessment in a country that was hit by a humanitarian crisis. How do we engage safely with communities?

Answer:

The guidelines provides guidance on how to safely engage with communities and coordinate with key stakeholders in Module 2. Module 3 provides guidance on how to include information elements in an assessment.

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Internews guidelines development and writing team: Stijn Aelbers, Emily Cowlrick, Floriane Echegut, Lea Krivchenia, Haley McCoin, Irene Scott.

Project Advisory Group and peer reviewers: Nadia Akmoun (IOM), Raphael Bacot (REACH), Adrienne Brooks (Mercy Corps), Stuart Campo (OCHA), Victoria Dangond Peralta (Internews), Marina Di Lauro (Oxfam), Katie Drew (GPC), Marie Dozin (GPC), Tiffany Easthom (Nonviolent Peaceforce), Giovanna Federici (NRC), Andre Heller (IRC), Séverine Lacroix (IOM), Anahi Lacucci (UNHCR), Francesco Michele (GPC), Briana Orr (IRC), Nathaniel Raymond (Yale University), Joelle Rizk (ICRC), Fausto Spiga (REACH), Mark Silverman (ICRC), Kathrine Starup (DRC), Craig Twitt (Internews), John Warnes (UNHCR).

Design and illustrations: Corneliu Comendant, Emily Cowlrick, Floriane Echegut, Julia Huang, Ganaëlle Tilly

These resources have been created as part of the Community Voices for Better Protection (CVBP) project. This project aims to understand the risks associated with information in humanitarian contexts from the perspective of humanitarian field workers, specialist protection agencies and media and other information providers. Using field work conducted in 2022-23 in three locations – Iraq, Mali and Philippines – these resources work to address a gap in the understanding of, and response to risk and information.

For feedback or suggestions for the improvement of these guidelines, please contact the Internews Humanitarian Team through info@internews.org

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Introduction

What are our responsibilities in contributing to safer information ecosystems?

These responsibilities apply to all activities that relate to information, communication, community engagement and outreach, and can be divided in four components[1]:

- **Safety and dignity:** Ensure our work does not create new protection risks for the affected communities we interact with and that we provide information and engage in a way that respects the dignity of those people
  - **Good practices:**
    - Undertake a protection analysis of the information ecosystem to identify the risks the affected community may face due to the context (presence of disinformation, or denial of access to information, other protection risks)
    - Conduct a safe-programming assessment and train staff on safe-programming to avoid unintended negative effects of work with communities (fundamentally understanding: how do we deliver or obtain information, is it safe?).
- **Meaningful access:** Ensure the information and the services we provide and the engagement we conduct are accessible to all population groups and adapted to their individual and community needs.
  - **Good practices:**
    - Assess the diverse needs and preferences of the affected community when it comes to information (what language they prefer, who they trust to get information, how they prefer to receive information).
    - Understand if there are differences related to gender, age, ability or experience.
- **Access to accurate information, participation and empowerment:** Support the development of self-capacities including an individual's or a community's inherent abilities, skills, and resources that enable them to manage and address their own needs and challenges independently, including claiming their rights.
  - **Good practice:** Based on the needs and preferences of the community, develop activities that strengthen capacities to safely and meaningfully access accurate information (information literacy, digital literacy, strengthening local media capacity).

[1] These components are formed from the four protection mainstreaming principles; for more resources see the Global Protection Cluster's resource page

- **Accountability:** Ensure the affected communities we work with can hold us accountable for our actions. This includes two-way communication platforms and feedback and complaint mechanisms that are community-based.
    - **Good practices:**
        - Building community-based feedback and complaint mechanisms that take into account safety and dignity, meaningful access, and participation and empowerment
        - Ensure information flow and communication methods go both ways (humanitarian/media actors to the community, and community to humanitarian/media actors).

Why are these responsibilities important?

Consistently adapting internal processes and ways of working with these responsibilities in mind will contribute to a safe and healthy information ecosystem. Equally important is the opportunity for collaboration with other stakeholders within a specific context, to make a difference at scale, and with all relevant groups within the interconnected information landscape. Effective coordination between media, humanitarian actors, government, and civil society is key to tackling contextual issues related to protection risks, which allows us to better support meaningful access to, creation of and sharing of information.

This module outlines the essential factors for incorporating the above four components into humanitarian / information work effectively. It emphasizes the importance of simple actions and policies that equip a wide range of stakeholders including community service organizations, media outlets and humanitarian organizations with the skills and tools needed to safeguard individual and community well-being when engaging and sharing information with a crisis affected community. By effectively integrating a protection mainstreaming approach into activities, we can reduce risks associated with information access, creation, and dissemination. In addition, this Module provides guidance on the roles of different information actors in a crisis and highlights how coordinated efforts can contribute to creating a safer information ecosystem.

What tools are available to support these efforts?

Training content on information, protection, and safe-programming is provided in Annex 8 of this guidance. This introductory training is designed for local information actors, including humanitarian agencies, local media, civil society and other actors who work to meet the information needs of communities impacted by crisis.

Contextualizing approaches through analysis

Safe and meaningful access to accurate information will vary depending on each context. The below table lists elements to consider to understand your information and protection context.

Safe, dignified, and meaningful access to accurate information: what should we consider?	
Safe access:	■ Capacities to safely create, share, seek and obtain information **on any needed topic**, including sensitive information. ■ **Safe access to diverse sources** of information, including safe spaces to discuss and debate available information ■ **Safe access to diverse channels** of information, including sufficient media and information literacy skills to assess the differences between various channels. ■ Sufficient **digital literacy** to safely access online information including via social media platforms, including knowledge of how to securely access those channels. ■ Sufficient **information literacy** and **understanding of information-related protection risks** to make an informed decision about whether a risk is worth taking, by weighing the needs for information against the risks
Meaningful access:	■ Capacities to create, share, seek, and obtain information that **meets the information needs** of the affected population without barriers (including consideration for linguistic needs and preferences). ■ **Access to preferred sources** of information, noting that those sources should have information that meets the information needs of the affected population. ■ **Access to preferred channels** of information, including the existence of functioning communication infrastructures (phone and internet coverage), the financial capacity to use these channels, sufficient level of literacy or digital literacy to access these channels, access to individual, communal or shared channels, and consideration for the impact of cultures and norms that may be an obstacle to accessing those channels (age, gender, diversity). ■ Sufficient **digital literacy to use connected devices** (phones, tablets, laptop, etc.) in a way that fits with daily life , to create, share, seek and obtain information online. ■ **Feedback and complaint mechanisms** available to the affected community are safe, adapted to local contexts and accessible to all
Access to accurate information:	■ Access to **reliable and trusted sources** of information, including the capacity to verify information through multiple sources. This access also depends on the media's capacity to create reliable content. ■ Sufficient **information literacy to obtain accurate information**, including identifying information needs, finding that information, verifying information, and analyzing that information prior sharing or using the information to make an informed decision. ■ Sufficient **digital literacy to distinguish accurate from false information** on websites and on social media platforms ■ Impact of the context: circulation of **disinformation** (false information spread deliberately to cause harm), **misinformation** (false information that is spread unknowingly), and **rumors** (information that might be right or false but is not verified) ■ Access to **two-way communication** methods to ensure people can ask questions and request the specific information they need from humanitarian and other information actors.

Section I: How to contribute to safe, dignified, and meaningful access to accurate information by adapting ways of working

Safety and dignity

Safety and dignity means having access to information, channels and platforms to ask questions without fear of harm, and in a manner that does not undermine people's dignity. In most contexts, greater access to information is in itself a source from which people can derive dignity and feel they are treated with respect. However, considerations need to be taken to ensure the risks do not outweigh the benefits, and that affected people are able to make their own decisions with as much information about risks and benefits as possible.

This section considers both safety and dignity and is organized around guiding questions to better understand context, as well as some general recommendations that need to be tailored to your specific contexts to be implemented effectively. The protection analysis of the information ecosystem described in Module 3 and the tools in Annexes 3-6 will provide you with data to inform programming and interventions. Secondary sources with supporting data and analysis should also be cited. The data will enable you to assess and analyze the implications of your information work on the *safety and dignity* of the specific people / audiences you are working with, and the community in general.

Safety considerations

Checking our assumptions about safety....

> *Are there places that are not safe for women to travel, or for men of fighting age to be seen?*
>
> *What are understandings of consent amongst the people you are working with. Do individuals from different communities have a different understanding of what this means?*
>
> *Can people safely speak publicly? Maybe there is a history of stigma towards a particular ethnic group that risks being exacerbated if they do.*

These nuances need to be understood in each community as information and community engagement interventions are being designed and implemented. Any assumptions need to be checked and updated continuously.

Physical safety considerations:

Are our information and communication activities increasing people's physical security risks?
Where are we holding meetings?
Where are physical feedback mechanisms (formal or informal) located?
How can individuals travel to access activities and services and are there any risks in doing so?
If activities are in public places, are they places that everyone is safe to access?

Examples:

- A feedback box that is located next to the camp management office, putting people at risk if they make a complaint about camp management staff.
- Community meetings are held in a central part of town, but when new checkpoints are placed on the road, some people can no longer access the location safely.

Confidentiality:

There are a range of big and small things we can do to ensure confidentiality, from safeguarding people's personally identifiable data to simply not asking questions we do not need an answer to.

Community engagement requires conversations and discussions with community members, and it is important to note where and how we ask people to share information to ensure it is not in a location or a manner that puts a person's confidentiality at risk.

Operating in a digital / online space creates an additional set of challenges for confidentiality (more on that in *Digital safety, security and risk* below).

Examples:

- Asking a question about the nearest health facility near a border crossing gives malicious actors a good sense of a particular group's location, endangering their safety.
- Linking personally identifiable data to data on needs or protection issues runs the risk of displaying identifiable data in the course of ongoing analysis.
- A radio call-in show provides answers to callers questions, but in the process people inadvertently share personally identifiable information live on air.

Stigmatization and Discrimination:

Consider that it is not the same for everyone to speak up or stand out. Members of marginalized groups may be vulnerable to abuse or harassment, simply through the act of asking for support or information.

It is crucial to understand the specific community dynamics that influence potential stigmatization or discrimination that might come as a result of particular people participating in information interventions. We need to think through the ways people – and especially vulnerable people - may be impacted by different ways of sharing information. You may need to offer different channels for feedback, or use alternative platforms for different people, in order to prevent stigma or discrimination.

Examples:

- Migrants are being blamed for the spread of disease in a particular country. As a result, those migrants feel they cannot openly seek information about prevention or treatment without revealing their status and facing further discrimination.

Digital safety, security and risk:

The rapid growth of digital information has enabled mass communication and provided information providers in humanitarian settings new opportunities to communicate directly with, and facilitate communication between, affected populations.

Many of the same risks and safety considerations above apply to communication and information transmitted digitally. However, new technologies also come with new and distinct risks that need to be understood by information providers and by communities themselves.

People might not always be aware of the privacy settings on their phone, or understand the conditions of being part of a private group online. Information about individuals in crisis can attract the attention of scammers, human traffickers, and other malicious entities who may seek to exploit their vulnerability for financial gain or other unethical purposes.

Examples:

- People answer survey questions online about their needs, and unknowingly share personal and sensitive information to the platform hosting the survey.
- A person joins a private group that provides information on local services. Initially, the group consists of 60-80 local people exchanging information and is administered by a local teacher. The group continues to grow into close to a thousand members (including people not directly in the community) and eventually the group admin changes hands, and the group monitoring becomes very limited. At this point, the group is functioning as a de facto open platform, with little oversight on who's joining and what their intentions are.

Further resources on digital safety, security and risk:
- "Connecting with confidence – Managing digital risks to refugee connectivity" by UNHCR
- "Using social media in community-based protection – A guide" by UNHCR
- "Symposium Report on "Digital Risks in Situations of Armed Conflict" by ICRC

Data security and privacy:

Data security and privacy are a crucial part of any intervention that collects personally identifiable information (PII) about people, especially vulnerable people. It is essential to consider:
- what information you are collecting and why
- how you will safeguard the data once collected

There are a number of detailed guidelines that support efforts to collect, store and access data and PII in a crisis responsibly. Ultimately, the organization or entity you work for should have established policies and procedures for data security and responsibility. This guidance can support you to ensure those policies and procedures ensure the safety of the people you are engaging with and supporting in your work, in relation to their data you collect and keep.

- The Protection Information Management (PIM) Initiative aims to "develop, consolidate, and disseminate a conceptual framework for protection information management" and includes resources on principles for protection information management as well as tools and guidance for how to implement them in crisis settings.
- The Professional Standards for Protection Work has a detailed chapter on "managing data and information for protection outcomes".

Dignity considerations

Maintaining and supporting the dignity of people in crisis is a central tenant of humanitarian assistance, and one that all information actors should consider. Research on dignity in displacement done by the Humanitarian Policy Group found that people tend to conceptualize dignity as being related to "*how* aid was given, rather than *what* was given." Two recommendations developed from this research relate to information and communication:

- Invest time and resources in listening to the affected population from the start of the response and use this information to inform project design and implementation.
- Use more face-to-face communication, especially in the assessment phase of the humanitarian response, and pay attention to what means of communication are appropriate at each stage.

These nuances need to be understood in each community as information and community engagement interventions are being designed and implemented. Any assumptions need to be checked and updated continuously.

People-centered:

Before engaging with people, ask questions and encourage people to share their perspectives. Be clear on what you are trying to achieve, what type of information you need and crucially what data you do *not* need to collect (check what already exists through secondary data!). Activities, and therefore the data that informs them, must be guided by the interests, well-being, and rights of the affected population.

Tips:

When doing an assessment in a humanitarian response, agencies should (and usually do) coordinate to ensure they are not asking the same questions of the same people, particularly if those questions are invasive or deal with sensitive issues. Agencies will also often do joint-needs assessments, so make sure you are linked with those and aware of what data is already being collected.

In some cases, agencies ask questions in their needs assessments about needs that people have, even if the agency knows they will not be able to meet that need. Explaining limitations upfront is more respectful of people's time and more likely to manage their expectations.

Privacy:

Humanitarian agencies and journalists both know the human-interest angle is very powerful to create empathy with people in crisis, particularly by using people's stories and photos. But depicting people in ways that makes them look helpless and without agency perpetuates stereotypes and the impression that they do not have the capacity to deal with the crisis. Asking for consent is crucial, but even when asked for, consent can be given without a full understanding of the possible impact, and it can still result in people experiencing consequences. See *Module 4 - Reducing harm: a guide for media and journalists in emergencies*, for a deeper exploration into the steps media workers can take to respect privacy and uphold dignity in their work.

Examples:

- In a story aired on TV, names of affected people are changed and their faces are blurred out, but enough details were included about their general appearance, location and professions that mean they could still be identified.

- Until recently, an affected community did not have much access or experience with the internet – particularly for women and older people. As part of a response to an emergency, increased internet access was set up and agencies used that access to engage with the community and share information. It became clear that many people automatically agreed to online informed consent processes (that is, clicking 'I agree' to Terms and Conditions), but many lacked knowledge and understanding about what that meant and how their data was shared and stored. As a result, their privacy was compromised.

Trauma and psychosocial implications:

Considerations need to be given to the psychological impacts of information interventions.

Are you asking people to share and re-share traumatic incidents or events?

Are you respectful of the way that people do want to talk about and engage in difficult things in their lives?

Are you taking into account the potential effect of vicarious trauma (people being affected by information that contains traumatic information)?

Widespread use of social media has brought new dynamics to these considerations, with graphic images and descriptions often circulating widely, being shared by people affected by crises themselves. Content can be shared with good intentions, for advocacy efforts, justice and accountability. But there can be harmful effects on those who see them frequently, or for those who may be triggered from past traumas. Consider the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of sharing such information, and work with the affected population to understand potential risks and benefits from their perspective.

Tips:

Sharing traumatic stories is a choice that people affected by trauma make, but it can also be re-traumatizing or otherwise damaging. Any engagement that might elicit such information should be done carefully, ideally by those with expertise in the area, and with the availability of specialized psychosocial services.

Respect for custom and culture:

Ensure your information creation and sharing methods are conducted in a way that is respectful of cultural, religious, ethnic and customary norms. This will require investing in understanding the broad range of perspectives present in your context, including incorporating the contextual experience of a range of locally hired staff and conducting wide-reaching community engagement.

Tips:

- In some contexts, women are less likely to speak freely while men are present in a public meeting. Or young people may not speak until their elders have had space to speak. If we do not understand these nuances, there is a risk that only some perspectives are captured.

Informed consent:

It is widely understood that informed consent is a necessary process to ensure that members of the affected community who participate in our work understand the implications of that participation. This is also true for community engagement activities.

However, informed consent should be considered holistically and go beyond – for example - reading out a statement at the start of a survey that might not actually be well understood by the participant.

Dense language, legal and formal terminology also make it more likely that consent checks will not be understood. Various information and literacy barriers may mean that people may not understand the full implications of their consent, or understand that they have the power to withdraw consent at any time. If consent is something accepted digitally, such language makes it very likely people will click on it without reading, or simply ignore if it is hidden somewhere on a webpage (see the example under Privacy above).

Tips:

While individual consent must be given for individual interactions, there is merit in organizing more community wide conversations about the purpose of the participation and community engagement activities and their value for the community.

This will allow for a broader understanding of what consent means and how the community understands it.

For an example in humanitarian settings, see this in depth discussion of informed consent in Cox's Bazaar.

There are many resources available online to increase the capacity of information providers working in challenging contexts to protect themselves and the people they interact with when creating media content:

- "Journalist Security Guide – Covering the news in a dangerous and changing world" by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- "SpeakSafe – Media workers' toolkit for safer online and mobile practices" by Internews
- "Safetag – A security auditing framework and evaluation template for advocacy groups" by Internews
- Safe Sisters is a resource pack developed for women civil society leaders and human rights defenders to better protect themselves online, by Internews, Defend Defenders and Digital Society

Safe-programming Assessment

Given all these considerations for ensuring safety and dignity of affected people, what tools are available to support assessment and understanding of these?

The safe-programming assessment (template in Annex 2) guides the process for information actors to decide on whether a project or action is safe to implement in a community[2]. This exercise can be conducted by the team implementing a project or developing content (for example, reporting on a story). If the context allows, the safe-programming assessment process should always include community input.

5-step safe-programming assessment process:

1. *Clearly lay out the project:* including the locations and the different stakeholders involved. Think about the primary stakeholders you will directly interact with and the secondary stakeholders who may also be impacted by this activity. For example, you may be aiming to provide information to parents, therefore 'parents' would be a primary stakeholder, and a secondary stakeholder may be the children in the household.
2. *Identify the benefits of the project:* this will help in weighing the benefits against the risks to decide whether the project outcomes justify taking certain risks / levels of risk. Think about the benefits to individuals and the community as well as the benefits to your organization or media outlet.
3. *Identify the risks that any activity could create:* this should include risks for the different stakeholders identified in the first step, including affected communities, the employees involved in the activity, and the information actors' reputation and organizational capacity to work.
4. *Identify mitigation strategies to each risk:* Think about practical and concrete solutions that can be implemented to allow the project to take place while minimizing the identified risks, including who in the organization is responsible for acting each solution.
5. *Decide whether to implement the project:* assess the benefits against the remaining risks (after considering the feasibility of the proposed mitigation strategy), does the project outcome outweigh the remaining risks? Or identify aspects of the project that can be changed to mitigate risks while maintaining some or all the identified benefits.

[2] For more guidance on safe-programming, see Oxfam "Safe programming in humanitarian responses – A guide to managing risk" (ghtsafeprogramming@oxfam.org)

Example of safe-programming assessments (for the template, see Annex 2):

Project:		
A local radio show covering the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM): "Since FGM is part of a cultural tradition, can it be condemned?" is open to live questions from the audience and hosts medical and legal experts, traditional and religious leaders, and government representatives.		
Benefits	**Risks for all stakeholders**	**Mitigation strategies**
- *Contributing to the elimination of FGM by providing a space to debate the cultural, religious and legal elements framing the practice* - *Raising awareness about FGM health consequences for girls and women and disseminating information about health centers that can provide specialized medical care and mental health/psychosocial support* - *Providing an opportunity for the audience to share its experience and ask questions about FGM*	- *Audience: participants might disclose personally identifiable information (PII) while calling into the show and be targeted as a result (including stigmatization, violence)* - *Guests and journalists: might be targeted as a result of sharing a controversial opinion in opposition to traditional beliefs* - *Local radio: the office might be targeted by people from a community that practices FGM and is offended by the broadcast*	- *Ahead of participation, inform all participants about the risks of sharing information that would help in identifying who and where they are, and encourage anonymity. Offer the option to record questions or testimony ahead of the live show to allow edits to protect their identity.* - *Ensure all guests and journalists are aware and comfortable with the risks of participating in a debate on this topic* - *Coordinate with key stakeholders, including the head of the identified community that practices FGM, to increase buy-in, and invite a diverse set of guests to represent the whole community*
Decision:		
Mitigation strategies are sufficient, to protect individual callers, staff and the organization so the show can go ahead.		

Project:		
A local organization is creating a public social media account to share information about their achievements delivering humanitarian assistance, including pictures of affected community members.		
Benefits	**Risks for all stakeholders**	**Mitigation strategies**
- *Increasing transparency around the fair use of humanitarian funding* - *Increasing the organization's visibility among community members and local authorities to strengthen buy-in, improve safety of staff and support effective programming* - *Raise the profile of the crisis internationally and support the advocacy and fundraising aims of the organization*	- *Audience: the affected community members could use the platform to request support or share sensitive information, disclosing PII that could put them at risk, raising expectations for services that are not available through this organization and / or do not have established referral mechanisms* - *Audience: individuals in hiding may be recognized in a picture and their location be inadvertently disclosed* - *Audience: a user could be targeted for speaking up about a sensitive topic (noting that some population groups are more vulnerable to threats based on gender norms, belonging to marginalized group)* - *Organization: automatic translation of social media post might lead to misunderstandings for the audience* - *Organization: lack of capacity to respond to questions and requests of the audience might open the space to frustration, misinformation and rumors, creating tension with and mistrust in the organization*	- *Include visible guidelines on the social media page to raise awareness on the risks of disclosing PII and sharing sensitive information online* - *Choose pictures that do not identify members of the affected community, and ensure that all staff are trained and respect informed consent (including explaining the reach of social media to population groups with low digital literacy)* - *Develop internal guidelines for the moderation of social media messages on the account and choose to turn off commenting on sensitive posts* - *Recruit staff who can produce posts in multiple languages to avoid automatic translation* - *Recruit and train enough staff to moderate the group (respond to comments and private messages), or disable those two-way communication options if they cannot be reasonably monitored*
Decision:		
Review the project to include a two-way communication component, including ensuring sufficient capacity for staff to monitor the social media account, and ensure training on monitoring and protection. The social media page should not be launched until all mitigation strategies are in place.		

Ensuring meaningful access

When providing information to a crisis affected community or designing community engagement activities, we need to adapt ways of working to ensure all population groups have access to information in proportion to their needs and without barriers. This means special attention should be given to individuals and groups who may be particularly vulnerable or have difficulty accessing information. *Module 3 - Reducing information-related protection risks: an analytical framework* guides in contextual analysis and helps to identify measures that will contribute to meaningful access.

Module 3 will provide information on how to manage the following key points relevant to ensuring meaningful access, taking into account the needs of different population groups with different sets of vulnerabilities and capacities (remember to refer to *Annex 1: Glossary* if any of the terms used below need clarification).

- *Information needs:* understanding topics that highly important but difficult and/or dangerous to access or address (when creating, sharing, seeking, and obtaining information).
- *Sources:* understanding the preferred and most trusted sources of information.
- *Channels and platforms:* understanding preferred, safest, and most accessible channels and platforms to access information.
- *Vulnerability and capacity factors:* understanding the characteristics that can contribute to certain population groups facing more risks or barriers when trying to access information. This includes but is not limited to language, gender, disability, legal status, literacy, digital literacy, information literacy.
- *Heavily relying on inaccessible channels and platforms:* Not everyone affected by a humanitarian crisis may have access to digital platforms or technology. Focusing solely on online communication and information-sharing can exclude vulnerable populations, further marginalizing them. Conversely, some very marginalized groups may feel safer communicating in digital platforms, rather than in person.

Supporting local media by collaborating on the development of content tailored to the needs of affected communities, and increasing media outlets access to those communities, can remove many barriers to meaningful access to information. This includes: humanitarian actors sharing findings of their assessments in a timely manner to allow up-to-date information; coordinating with local media on communicating about humanitarian assistance and other key information; for example, by including local media in relevant cluster working groups, such as Communicating with Communities (CWC) and Accountability to Affected Peoples (AAP); when needed, providing capacity-building and/or funding assistance to local media.

Project example:

Signpost is designed to ensure people can reach out and interact with a team specifically equipped to provide locally relevant and reliable information. During a July 2018 assessment in Athens, Greece during the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis, survey data found that users not only engaged with information on Signpost, but also shared information. The assessment indicated that 78% of survey respondents shared the information they found on Refugee. Info with their family members. The study also found that 62% of the respondents shared information with someone not on Facebook, which highlights the extent of Signpost's reach beyond social media. can provide alternative forms of trusted information on a specific topic.

Accountability

Safe, meaningful and respectful information provision and engagement with affected communities also means providing accessible channels for the community to share their thoughts, complain if we make mistakes and hold us accountable. A lot of our work – by either humanitarian actors, media, community organizations or other information providers – aim to increase community engagement and participatory decision making and hold power to account. These aims align with efforts to *mainstream protection* – otherwise known making programming safer and more accountable.

However, while pursuing these aims, it is important to be aware that the *way* accountability measures are introduced can increase or decrease risk and harm to individuals and communities. For example, increased participation in decision making through community members speaking up, sharing concerns, or attending meetings can come with risks that need to be considered and mitigated. Community-driven accountability initiatives may also come with risks, and we have a role in helping communities identify and mitigate those risks to support the community to design and access these initiatives safely.

What does this mean for key information actors?

Local information actors need to provide appropriate mechanisms through which the affected population can provide feedback, as well as input on how to address their potential concerns and complaints. These accountability mechanisms should be set up in line with the three other components of safe programming:

- they should be safe and respect the dignity of the affected community,
- they should be meaningfully accessible by different population groups of the affected community,
- they should be designed through community-based consultations and known by all members of the community.

For **local media**, this means giving the opportunity to the audience to provide feedback on media content and production. This includes a space where audiences can safely and anonymously share feedback and suggestions on what information they need, how they would like to receive that information, and at what points they want opportunity for input and community-based perspectives. Accountability also means being open to hearing complaints and suggestions for improvement from audiences.

For **humanitarian actors**, it means understanding the existing reporting mechanisms within the affected community in order to build on or strengthen them to provide safe and accessible feedback and complaint mechanisms. *Module 3 - Reducing information-related protection*

risks: an analytical framework guides identification of sources and channels trusted and safely accessible to different population groups, and the vulnerabilities and capacities that could impact access to those sources and channels (refer to "Ensuring meaningful access" component earlier in this Module). In order to set up a feedback and complaint mechanism that is meaningfully accessible, it is essential to understand the potential barriers the affected community face to create and share information.

Given the complexity of power dynamics in contexts where the affected community depends on humanitarian assistance to live, the mechanisms should allow anonymity as well as direct and indirect reporting. Direct reporting means an individual reports through a specific organization's mechanism and indirect reporting goes through a focal point trusted by the community, who will report on behalf of other community members.

Guidelines to safely integrate protection from sexual exploitation and abuse within accountability mechanisms can be found on the Inter-Agency Standing Committee website, including best practices, case studies, and a helpdesk that can provide guidance to suit specific needs.

Case study

In Country D, almost all NGOs set up complaint and feedback boxes in their centers for refugees and other residents to use. They do not offer feedback pathways online or over the phone, so people can only provide feedback in-person. Some NGOs also gather feedback through focus group discussions (FGDs) where they ask questions on a range of topics including safety and security and mental health. When possible, they divide groups by gender and split refugees and host residents. But resources are limited so sometimes they host everyone in a single FGD.

A recent survey found that most refugees in country D do not know how to report feedback or complaints to NGOs. Additionally, NGOs were reported as some of the least trusted information sources in country D. People with disabilities (PWD) were commonly unsure about how to be referred for tailored services, and women were particularly hesitant to provide feedback for fear of appearing ungrateful. Many were worried that submitting a complaint could impact their ability to receive services from NGOs in the future.

Language also plays a role in deterring people from providing feedback. While most refugees speak the majority language in Country D, they prefer to communicate, read, and write in a different language that is not as commonly used by NGOs or local media.

Local media outlets typically avoid covering topics related to the humanitarian response in country D because most of their audience are members of the host community and do not find such information relevant. This approach limits prospects for local media coverage to serve as a channel for feedback about aid operations. While local media

outlets do allow people to share their thoughts through their website and social media pages, they do not offer an option for providing feedback in-person, so people who do not have internet access cannot provide feedback.

Recommendations:

- *For humanitarians:* Diversify methods for receiving feedback, adding online methods and options like a hotline that might be more accessible to people who cannot travel to local centers, or who may not read or write. Ensure there are clear options to escalate feedback or complaints if refugees do not feel their needs have been met. Where possible, avoid mixing FGDs so that people can feel fully comfortable providing feedback, and can use the preferred language of the person providing feedback.
- *For media:* Explore options for receiving feedback from the audience through a hotline or in person through community events or surveys. Ensure there are clear options for people to escalate feedback or complaints if they do not feel their needs have been met.

Access to accurate information, participation and empowerment

Placing the affected communities at the center of any initiative to increase safe and meaningful access to information will contribute to building the self-capacities of those communities to analyze information and protect themselves from information-related protection risks. This can be done by ensuring that a diverse representation of the community is consulted and takes part in the development of media content destined to that community, as well as with the involvement of the community in assessment and recommendations to design humanitarian projects.

A range of guidance materials and tools exist on how to meaningfully engage affected communities in their access to information:

- Internews guide on rumor tracking as a way to address misinformation during humanitarian crisis
- "Information ecosystem assessment" by Internews is a manual that support the mapping of the information ecosystem through a community-based approach.
- "Listening groups" by Internews provides guidance and tools for media and other information providers to have two-ways conversations with communities, promoting accountability within the humanitarian sector, and continually adapting and improving programs.
- ICRC research paper: Dignity and displacement – from rhetoric to reality. To better understand community and humanitarian perceptions of dignity.
- IFRC Guide on Community Engagement and Accountability

Safe and meaningful access to accurate information: the essential role of language and translation

In any healthy information ecosystem, and even more in a crisis context, language needs to be adapted to the affected communities' preferences. Whether you are collecting data, gathering stories, or producing messages, language will always impact the quality of information. Involving community members and professional translators will contribute to address some of the risks related to language and translation.

- Safe and dignified access to information
  - Humanitarian and journalist terminology may not translate in all languages, or can run the risk of being perceived as unempathetic. With this in mind, avoid technical terms, work with professional translators and/or community members who will support translation to identify appropriate and adequate wording.
  - Community members might find themselves working as interpreters without interpretation expertise, and interpreters might work in a context crisis without humanitarian expertise. Always set aside time and resources to train interpreters and be mindful of the mental health impact of interpreting sensitive and sometimes traumatic information in high-stress level environments[3].
- Meaningful access to information
  - Gender, age, disability and multiple other factors may affect how certain groups communicate about sensitive topics. Allocate time (and funding) to understand the language dynamics and develop data collection tools or messaging adapted to your target group/audience.
  - Be mindful of minority group's languages and of the answer to "what language do you speak". Engaging with the community in the language they are the most comfortable with requires understanding of what languages people speak, but more precisely what languages they *prefer*, or what languages they speak at home.
- Access to accurate information
  - The information you receive from the community might need to be clarified and interpreted to take into account sensitivities and self-censure around certain topics (whether the words needed are not acceptable in a public space, or the person tone down the language due to fear of speaking our). Allocate time for one-on-one discussions with community members in safe spaces and debrief with the interpreters on key terminology that might be misleading.
  - Information you create in local languages might be misleading, harmful and/or reenforce cultural or traditional inequalities or stigma. Always verify that the content of the information you want to convey is perceived accordingly with different groups of the targeted community.

[3] For more guidance on interpretation, see Translator Without Borders and Oxfam tip sheet "Interpretation and sensitive topics", as well as Translator Without Borders "Field guide to humanitarian interpretating & cultural mediation".

Section 2: Working together to contribute to better access to information.

A healthy information ecosystem comprises a diverse range of information actors that mostly share the same objective: providing safe, dignified, and meaningful ways for people to seek, access, create and share information, including in communities affected by humanitarian crises. Information actors have different strengths and require different support depending on their role, capacity and resources. Coordination between the media, civil society, the government, and the humanitarian community that resources and links efforts will strengthen both the humanitarian response and the information ecosystem.

It should however be noted that in practice, most information ecosystems comprise a blend of information actors: some who are driven by a commitment to safety and dignity, and others who may contribute to division and harm, with some falling in between. Given this complexity, it becomes crucial that during a crisis, information actors genuinely dedicated to meeting the community's information needs in a risk-informed manner collaborate to establish more effective and coordinated information responses.

Coordinating with and resourcing civil society

Using these guidelines (see *Module 3 - Reducing information-related protection risks: an analytical framework*) to analyze the information ecosystem with a protection lens will identify key civil society organizations that contribute to access to information and play a role in holding the government accountable. This includes advocacy networks, community groups, and organizations that provide support to minorities and marginalized groups. It is important to remember that civil society organizations will likely be impacted by the humanitarian crisis and require assistance to restart or strengthen operations. With resourcing at critical times, civil society organizations can act as information providers and as advocates for the needs and rights of affected communities. These organizations are likely to have networks and systems in place to organize community-based actions and as such also encourage two-way communication. They are therefore potentially a trusted source and are well positioned to focus on the protection of minorities or marginalized groups and efforts to hold decision makers accountable.

Coordinating with and resourcing local media

In a humanitarian crisis, working with existing, locally trusted information providers is critical to ensure timely and verified information reaches the people who need it most.

As with civil society, local media may be based directly in affected communities. Therefore,

the impact of a crisis on the general community is likely to also impact local media, who may lose their capacity to operate if, for example, their technical systems are damaged, or they have staff directly impacted by the crisis who are unable to continue work. It is essential that humanitarian actors collaborate with local media, recognizing and supporting their capacity and role in providing locally relevant information to the affected population. Working with pre-existing information mechanisms in affected areas will allow a timelier response to information needs and risks. It will also avoid set up of parallel information systems not in line with the community preferences, and systems that are unsustainable beyond humanitarian funding cycles.

While local media are likely to be contextual experts with strong community ties, they sometimes find it challenging to build relationships with humanitarian agencies. There can be a distrust between humanitarian agencies and local media, with both feeling that their values, processes and aims are not aligned. However, successful collaborations between media and humanitarian agencies have shown there are many similarities that provide opportunities for dialogue, coordination and collaboration.

Shared principles and values between humanitarian and media

- Both actors have an interest in ensuring the community has access to life saving information, aiming to ensure the community is informed about what has happened and to provide information to help people plan their next steps.
- Both actors aim to make sure people are aware of their rights and responsibilities and strive for people to have the practical information they need to access humanitarian services.
- Local media (and other community-based organizations) contribute to conflict prevention and the protection of civilians by bringing attention to the realities of the conflict and exposing violations of human rights and international law, which are fundamental within humanitarian principles and values. Local media also have a wealth of contextual knowledge and can serve as a platform for civilians to voice their concerns and share their experiences.
- Both humanitarian and media principles often prioritize a human-centric approach. Humanitarian principles, such as humanity and impartiality, emphasize the importance of prioritizing the well-being and dignity of individuals affected by crises. Similarly, responsible journalism aims to serve the public interest, inform the public, and protect individual rights and dignity.
- Humanitarian principles, including impartiality, stress the importance of providing assistance based on need rather than favoring one group over another. Similarly, media

ethics often call for objectivity and impartial reporting, which involves presenting information without bias or favoritism.

- Both humanitarian and media organizations recognize the significance of accountability and transparency in their work. Humanitarian actors are expected to be accountable for their actions and transparent in their operations. Similarly, responsible journalism values accuracy, fact-checking, and transparency in sourcing and reporting, and a core part of journalist's role is to use their skills and platform to hold power to account on behalf of everyday people.
- Both humanitarian organizations and media outlets must navigate complex ethical considerations. They often deal with sensitive issues, including privacy, consent, and the potential impact of their actions or reporting on individuals and communities. For instance, "Do No Harm" is a core humanitarian concepts, and the same principle is also part of many professional journalistic Codes of Conduct.

Shared values and principles are clear, however difference in prioritization of these principles can create tension in the relationship. For instance humanitarians may prefer not to share information on a topic or respond to interview requests because of the risks it could pose to the community. This can make them seem like a closed system that does not like to explain itself, communicate uncertainties, and avoid raising expectations they might not be able to meet. This information vacuum can leave space for misinformation to circulate, based on assumptions, fears, and suspicions. And paradoxically this attitude can cause harm.

Media houses are often competing for market share to either justify their government funding or attract more advertising. This can result in focusing on sensationalized content and formats that put pressure on the ethical principles they aim to follow. This is actually not so different from the fundraising techniques that some humanitarian agencies use, where stories about affected people's needs and suffering are used to elicit donations.

Coordinating with the humanitarian community

In a humanitarian crisis, local, national, and international humanitarian actors provide a wide range of services to the affected community and coordinate their actions and communication through dedicated structures: thematic clusters that gather all actors working on a specific service (food security, health, protection, etcetera.), and dedicated working groups on information (Communicating with Communities, Accountability to Affected People, Risk Communications and Community Engagement, etcetera). Many of those actors within the latter groups will conduct assessments – at the onset of a crisis and in an ongoing manner – to understand information needs and existing community-based mechanisms to provide tailored information and engagement with the affected community. Given the proximity and role of civil society

and local media, they are often the first responders (and are often themselves affected by the crisis). They often hold essential knowledge on the context, and have established networks within multiple communities.

Understanding the different priorities and establishing common interests of humanitarians and media can help to harmonize the conditions in which both can play their role, without putting people at risk. Collaboration between humanitarian agencies, civil society and local media can happen in a number of practical ways that can improve the safety, meaningful access and accuracy within information ecosystems. These factors contribute to a humanitarian response where affected communities have safer and more meaningful access to information on humanitarian services, therefore resulting in a better quality response overall.

For humanitarian and civil society actors:

- ☐ Be available to answer questions and provide updates using the languages preferred by affected communities. This ensures accurate, high-quality, relevant information in answer communities' questions.
- ☐ Engage with media to explain humanitarian processes, responsibilities and limitations so that they can accurately translate this information for audiences and set expectations.
- ☐ Encourage and support local media to play an accountability role in monitoring the response, highlighting gaps, signaling mistakes and providing independent verification of information to strengthen humanitarian commitments.
- ☐ Offer to provide training to local media on protection, safe-programming, security, and digital and information literacy and safety.
- ☐ Invite local media to participate in coordination mechanisms, such as Accountability to Affected People (AAP) or Communicating with Communities (CWC) working groups / sub-working groups
- ☐ Provide personal protective equipment to ensure safety of local journalists who cover events in conflict zones or during health emergencies.
- ☐ Advocate at local, national and global levels for freedom of expression and press, and the protection of journalists in locations where those rights are not upheld by the government.

Coordinating with government

In a humanitarian crisis, humanitarian agencies operate in support of the host government. However, while the Government may support activities designed to protect their communities, existing policies, rules and regulations can have unintended consequences for people in crisis. To name a few examples...

> *After a disaster,* people could be displaced from their homes and suddenly without their belongings (including legal documents and identification). This can hamper access to information, for instance when trying to access the internet or register for a new sim-card. Rules around broadcasting licenses might make it hard to set up an emergency radio station when all other infrastructure is destroyed.
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> *In instances of sudden and forced displacement,* policies designed for foreigners under the assumption that they enter the country as a migrant or tourist, may not be fit for purpose when people enter as refugees. In some instances, policies are politicized and prioritize host populations, intentionally limiting refugees' access to information, and discouraging long-term stays. Amongst policies built for host populations, governments may not always consider how they could affect the immediate safety of individuals.
>
> *In humanitarian responses,* organizations may aim to hire inclusively in order to reach vulnerable people or minority groups, for example, employing women or people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, or hiring people whose right-to-work registration is still in process. Government rules and regulations around employment or rights of certain groups can hinder this, making it hard to reach parts of the population with relevant and trusted information, thus putting these people more at risk.

Making a clear link between policies and government actions, and how they can impact the lives of people in crisis can help identify the ways to mitigate and avoid causing harm. Identifying risks can initiate a dialogue and serve as a foundation for advocating risk reduction within the local information ecosystem.

End of Module 2