

SAFE PROGRAMMING IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

**A GUIDE TO
MANAGING RISK**



OXFAM

SAFE PROGRAMMING:

All humanitarian responses must include proactive measures to ensure we do not inadvertently cause harm to people, nor undermine the values, standards and norms that underpin our work. This includes being conflict sensitive, preventing or reducing the risks of gender-based violence, and upholding humanitarian principles.

INTRODUCTION

All Oxfam humanitarian responses must include proactive measures to ensure we do not inadvertently cause harm to people, nor undermine the values, standards and norms that underpin our work.

Humanitarian work takes place in high-risk environments. Actively managing actual and potential risks enables us to do this work more effectively and safely. Managing risks systematically helps us monitor trends, avoid ‘knee-jerk’ reactions, and helps us plan for likely scenarios. Demonstrating that we understand and are actively managing risk builds confidence with the communities with whom we work, as well as our colleagues, partners and donors. Most of all, it means we can do more to help people in crisis situations without inadvertently causing harm.

Managing risk is an ongoing process. Tools such as the quick and simple risk matrix (see page 8) help guide and record the process. Such written risk matrices allow analyses to be reviewed and updated over the course of a response, can be used for briefing incoming staff, and allow staff to document and learn from experience. However, managing risk involves much more than filling in forms—the core of effective risk management is the actions taken.



Children play in a river near an abandoned farm building, Iraq. Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL RISKS

Good risk analyses draw on the perspectives of a diverse group of people—including national staff, partner organizations and community representatives. In a rapid scale-up, we might have to start by consulting our staff and gradually make the analysis more inclusive. The process should not be arduous; ideally it should be incorporated into regular work by asking a range of people what risks they are most worried about and how they think they might be mitigated.



This should be supplemented with analysis drawn from assessments; community or listening groups; feedback and complaints mechanisms; and observations from colleagues and staff from other agencies. Involving people who wouldn't normally participate in meetings can bring useful perspectives and understanding. There is no finite list of the types of risks to consider—they vary by context and over time. However, it is important not to make a long list of every possible risk; instead prioritize those that are most harmful and most likely.

WE CANNOT ANTICIPATE EVERY RISK, BUT SOME WE SHOULD CONSIDER:

- Sexual exploitation and abuse (this should always be included)
- Data management issues
- Exacerbating tensions between groups, or within households/families
- Aid recipients being targeted for robbery or theft
- Triggering violence, including violence against women in the home, sexual harassment, assault or sexual violence
- Diversion of aid to political or armed actors, or proscribed groups
- Creating expectations that cannot be met
- Undermining effective local structures and leaders
- Empowering abusive or discriminatory local structures and leaders
- Undermining humanitarian principles or normative standards, such as refugees' right to non-refoulement or safe, dignified and voluntary return for internally displaced people
- Health and safety issues, e.g. uncovered latrine pits

Examples of potential risks:

- | | |
|--|---|
|  Women and girls facing sexual harassment and assault when using poor-quality latrines in camps |  Authorities forcibly returning refugees demand access to our beneficiary databases |
|  Humanitarians are asked to deal with 'collateral damage' during a military operation |  Beneficiaries at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarians and contractors |

RESPONSE-LEVEL RISK ASSESSMENT

Response-level risks are ‘macro’ or strategic risks in the environment. Preventing or mitigating them will affect the overall nature of a response, determining not just what is done, but how it is done, the kinds of partnerships it requires, and how humanitarian principles and other standards will be upheld.

We need to be conscious of the ever-present risk that others will try to instrumentalize humanitarian activities for political or other non-humanitarian goals, for example by only allowing humanitarians to respond to needs in areas that support the ruling party, requiring that aid be handed over to military actors to distribute, or by linking aid funding to counter-terrorism goals. Humanitarians themselves may risk undermining the standards that protect certain groups, for example, if they are asked to provide assistance during the involuntary return of refugees to their country of origin.

These types of risks require us to make extremely difficult decisions about what to consider ‘non-negotiables’ in where and how we work. Analysing actual and potential risks can help with decisions, and means we are better prepared to respond to sudden situational changes. In many cases, Oxfam will not only be developing its internal position regarding, for example, how to interact with a non-state armed actor, but simultaneously be



Kids play football at an IDP camp in north-eastern Nigeria. Sam Tarling/Oxfam

working with other humanitarian actors under UN leadership to agree a common approach, advocacy or a negotiating position. Oxfam is subject to specific legal requirements, and has internal policies that must be followed, so response-level risks often require working with the Executing Affiliate’s legal service and other specialists to develop ‘Engagement Guidelines’ that outline how existing policies, principles and standards will be practically implemented or upheld in the response.



A child at a tap stand in Hassansham camp around 50km east of Mosul, Iraq. Tegid Cartwright/Oxfam

TWO EXAMPLES OF RESPONSE-LEVEL RISKS

BOX 2

- 1** Oxfam is responding to a mass influx of refugees into camps close to extremely poor villages that lack even basic facilities. The host community has so far welcomed the refugees. However, firewood and water resources are limited and the two communities have different cultural and religious beliefs.
- 2** Oxfam has been asked to provide water and sanitation in a closed centre where internally displaced people are being screened in a search for insurgents. Oxfam staff would not be allowed direct contact with people in the centre, which is run by military actors who require aid to be handed over to them to distribute. Human rights reports indicate that young men ‘disappear’ and females are subjected to sexual assault in such centres.

In both cases, there are strategic and response-level risks that need to be taken into account through ongoing risk management.

QUICK AND SIMPLE RISK MATRIX

Date _____ Version _____

Proposed activity	Anticipated benefits to community (optional: to partners/Oxfam)	Potential or actual risks to community, partners and/or Oxfam	How might these risks be prevented, mitigated or managed?	Actions/adaptations agreed by management (optional: by whom and by when)

The matrix should be updated on a regular basis to monitor risk, and will require the involvement of managers who can make informed judgements about the activities to be carried out.

PROGRAMME-LEVEL RISK ASSESSMENT

Although, ideally, integrated programming would lead to risk assessments undertaken on a geographical basis (by sub-location) only, they can also be done by technical sector—such as emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods protection (EFSVL) or water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH)—or for specific actions, such as a cash distribution.

All responses are set up differently, so managers should decide what is practical for the specific structure and capacity of their work.



Herding cattle, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.
Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

Producing a risk assessment requires bringing together a diverse group of people who, based on their experience and knowledge of the context, can identify actual and potential risks related to programmes. This could be in a face-to-face meeting—perhaps as

part of a planning session or regular team meeting—or as a process led by a few individuals who talk to and involve a wider group through regular meetings and interviews. As with response-level risks, it is important to prioritize the most harmful and likely risks, so that the process does not become unwieldy.

Each identified risk should have a corresponding prevention or mitigation action. Once the assessment is completed, programme/team managers need to consider whether these actions are adequate, and ensure they are incorporated into workplans. In some cases, actions and adaptations may have financial or resource implications, and/or require some renegotiation with donors. Written risk matrices can help communicate the case for such actions or adaptations. Managers can delegate the task of carrying out a risk assessment to their teams, but they cannot delegate their responsibility to make sure it is enacted.

BOX 3

COMMUNITY INPUT TO RISK MANAGEMENT

Managing risk should involve the people that organizations are trying to assist. For example, asking single women what problems they face as recipients of ATM cards for a cash programme might reveal that they cannot leave their immediate neighbourhood without a male chaperone. In many cases, they have a better idea than we do about the risks they face and can suggest ways to overcome them, or acceptable compromises.

BOX 4

DATA RISKS

Oxfam will manage a large-scale multi-purpose cash programme. One of the risks identified is that personal data may be compromised or requested by authorities to identify the locations of members of a persecuted minority group that they accuse of taking part in anti-government protests. Such individuals are often held in arbitrary detention or ‘disappear’. The manager reviews the risk matrix and approves the programme with specific adaptations to effectively manage the risk, including:

- mentoring from an internal data specialist;
- carrying out a Privacy Impact Assessment;
- training for the team;
- extra safeguards and protocols (e.g. data minimalization, methods for receiving informed consent and password protection); and
- creating contingency plans so that the whole team knows what to do in the event of a data breach.

The manager liaises with their counterparts in other agencies carrying out similar programming, and they agree to alert each other if the authorities request data, and produce a joint statement, reviewed by their legal teams, to use in such an event.

WORKING WITH OUTSIDE CONTRACTORS

BOX 5

Oxfam has a contractor building emergency latrines—known to be a gender-based violence risk for women and girls—using local day labourers who will have to stay overnight near a refugee camp. Oxfam recognizes that humanitarians and contractors can themselves pose a risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). After carrying out a risk assessment, the manager requests the deployment of Safeguarding humanitarian support personnel (HSP) to carry out a detailed Safeguarding risk assessment and support the programme for three months. The risk assessment outlines a range of other mitigation measures, including:

- ensuring the contractor signs Oxfam’s Code of Conduct;
- banning labourers from the camp outside of work hours;
- maintaining an Oxfam staff presence in the camp;
- providing obligatory safeguarding training for all Oxfam and contractor employees;
- establishing complaints mechanisms; and
- working with existing community groups to raise awareness of SEA risks.

All Oxfam staff, managers for the contractor and the community groups are trained and supported to safely and confidentially deal with disclosures from survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in line with best practice and a survivor-centred approach.

Once the initial risk analysis is complete, it is important to review it regularly. Making it part of a monthly team meeting or regular programme review, for example, makes it a less onerous task.

ONGOING RISK ANALYSIS AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Situations constantly shift and new risks emerge, while our knowledge and understanding of the environment is also always changing.



At the first stage of a response, risk analyses may not have been able to be inclusive; over time, more people from different parts of a response can be brought in, especially representatives from the communities being supported. Listening groups and complaints

and feedback mechanisms are a very important source of information, as are structures like Wash committees. Protection committees tend to have a very specific role in identifying and understanding the safety of the civilian population, and can play an active role in managing risks.

Identifying risks does not prevent or mitigate them. Managers at all levels play a critical role in ensuring that actions are taken. Adaptive management is a paradigm in which managers have the confidence, support and flexibility to change activities. Support for this along the management line is a key enabler of risk management. Effective risk management can only reduce risk, not eliminate it. Management cultures that openly acknowledge

risks and support honest discussions about the difficult decisions that have to be made, often under pressure, enable effective risks management. Humanitarians will not always make the right decisions, and in many cases, will be trying to choose the ‘least bad’ options. As organizations, we need to manage learning effectively from situations in which things have gone according to plan, and those in which it hasn’t.

REDUCING THE RISK OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

BOX 6

Oxfam is responding to a cyclone in an area notorious for human trafficking. There are many separated and unaccompanied children in informal settlements, and there have already been abductions.

Oxfam identifies this as a risk in the environment and takes it into account when designing the response. They make sure parents do not have to leave children alone to collect aid by having more local distributions and taking items directly to single-headed households. Instead of targeting female-headed households for solar-powered lights as was originally planned, it switched to blanket distribution, so those households would not be so identifiable at night. Oxfam provided funding for a local child protection organization whose volunteers helped people take simple measures to reduce risk, and worked with local police to more effectively patrol the spontaneous camps.

All these measures had financial and resource considerations: while donors accepted the costs of additional solar lights and funding for the child protection agency, they would not cover the costs of extra volunteers for more localized distribution based on the risk assessment. Oxfam agreed to cover these latter costs itself.

PROTECTING REFUGEES’ IDENTITIES

BOX 7

In order to raise awareness of a ‘forgotten’ crisis, Oxfam’s media teams carried out interviews with refugees who had fled violence and were living in camps in a neighbouring country. The risk assessment highlighted a potential risk that individuals who were identified could face problems if they returned home. In collecting the material, the media teams explained they would use pseudonyms and took a range of photographs, some of which were non-identifiable and asked the participants which one they could use. Shortly after the trip, a political leader declared all refugees to be traitors, and Oxfam started to receive reports that militant groups loyal to the leader were crossing the border at night and using news and aid agency photographs to find and attack individual refugees in the camps. Recognizing the risk, Oxfam decided not to use any content that might identify locations and switched to using the photos that did not identify individuals.

RISK ANALYSIS SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN OXFAM

Managers have a specific responsibility for Safe Programming and are under more pressure than ever to manage risks effectively. However, experience shows that they are the least likely to participate in training or other capacity-building exercises. Country and global protection staff have historically supported Safe Programming capacity building and will continue to do so. In the period 2019–21, Oxfam will be ensuring that a wider

group of humanitarian staff—including all Global Humanitarian Team staff—are able to support Safe Programming.

There are different formats for recording risks and actions—the quick and simple risk matrix is a default option that can be customized to your specific needs. It is better to keep the format simple, as the content—especially in conflict and other high-risk responses—can be complicated.

For further information email:
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