

Accountability to Affected Populations in Syria

FAO's commitments

FAO's goal to improve policy and practice in AAP is underpinned by seven¹ core commitments that provide the framework for focused improvement activities. These commitments are:

1. Strengthening **leadership and governance** to embed good practice within the organisation's management structures and to ensure that FAO's staff deliver on its commitments;
2. Greater and more routine **transparency**, two-way **communication**, and **information** provision for affected communities;
3. Offer means for communities to provide **feedback** on programmes and to submit **complaints**, and to ensure that they receive a timely **response**;
4. Enable fair and representative **participation** of all sections of affected populations, including the most vulnerable and marginalised;
5. Mainstream AAP into **design, monitoring and evaluation** activities, ensuring an appropriate focus on AAP and participation;
6. Prevent and respond to **sexual exploitation and abuse** (SEA) by FAO personnel and implementing partners;
7. Collaborate with **peers** and **partners** to deliver on AAP commitments in a coordinated and coherent way.

The bottom line in practice

Through its membership of the IASC, FAO has agreed to operationalise these commitments through, at a minimum:

- Incorporating them in staff inductions and clearly within agreements made with operational partners.
- Systematically include participation of affected population in all needs assessment as well as monitoring, review and evaluation processes.
- Include affected populations in programme/operations planning and review.
- Facilitate the provision of feedback from affected people on the services and protection offered by their agencies, including a complaints mechanism.
- Provide information to affected people about services and support available in local languages and ensure that in any new disaster, information on the emergency situation, availability and nature of humanitarian responses is systematically communicated to affected populations using relevant communication mechanisms.
- Implement its work plan on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA).

Some context specific considerations

From the discussions following the needs assessment, a number of critical factors were identified that would influence the way in which FAO might choose to incorporate AAP into the next steps of intervention design and planning. Three issues in particular are noted below:

¹ Commitments 1 - 5 are in line with the 5 commitments on accountability to affected populations (CAAP) endorsed by the IASC Principals in December 2011, commitment 6 is in line with ST/SGB/2003/13

1. FAO has not traditionally had extensive operations in Syria, and is therefore not well embedded across the agricultural sector, aside from at a more governmental and diplomatic level. Consequently, there is not the same level of intimate knowledge and expertise as to the complex and interacting factors that will influence outcomes, and not the in depth understanding of the local cultural and social context, beyond the facts outlined in the needs assessment and a limited number of in-house Syria experts.
 - As evidenced in the needs assessment and highlighted again during the initial multidisciplinary planning meeting, lack of existing expertise on Syria places an even greater emphasis on the importance of affected populations being involved at every stage including planning , design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, as their expertise in their own lives and local context is essential to guide effective programme design and implementation.
 - Analysis of other FAO field operations has found that even when there is a long term and local knowledge of the people and conditions, project design based predominantly on the technical knowledge of FAO experts leads to many and varied problems with the implementation of projects that could have been avoided through consultation and participation. The situation in Syria can only lend itself to a greater degree of error and miscalculation without systematic input.
 - Feedback from FAO's project participants was most strong and most negative on the issue of consultation and participation, indicating a strong desire to be involved, and a high level of dissatisfaction with current tendencies to not consult.
2. Due to the volatility of the situation, access to populations may be extremely variable, impacting not only on consultation and feedback but also distribution of relief inputs and the safety and security of any staff.
 - Access may be limited by conflict and safety concerns, the fact that FAO's main partner, the government, is a party to the conflict, and by the fact that FAO has only a handful of staff in the country.
 - Models from other conflict situations where access is an ongoing issue may be borrowed from to find solutions to establishing accountability in situations of non-access. Much work has been done in Somalia and Afghanistan, for example, on 2 way communication, feedback and complaints using mobile phones (calling and sms), partner and national NGO staff, informant networks, etc.
3. The current political situation and FAO's relationship with the government of Syria may provide some additional considerations with regard to how freely and neutrally FAO may communicate with affected populations.
 - Building regular communication and information provision into the intervention is critical in order to meet FAO's commitment to this, however restrictions and or sensitivities with respect to the evolving political situation do need to be taken into account, and no one should be placed at risk through our communications. A reliable analysis of the risk for affected communities should be undertaken.

Applying AAP in an achievable way in the Syria context

The needs assessment outlines an excellent model and has clearly met FAO's commitment to include affected populations:

"The mission held consultations in Damascus, and visited (several) governorates. The mission met with officials from the Directorate of Agriculture in different governorates, representatives from Peasants' Union, representatives from Al Badia Commission, small farming households, small herders, Bedouins, returnee families from crisis-affected areas, medium-sized farmers and herders, and poultry entrepreneurs. The mission also held focus group discussions and interviews with some of the most vulnerable small farmers, herders, widows and female-headed households... Telephone conferences were held with the Directorates in Homs and Hama for the situational update and secondary data collection..."

Suggestions for further AAP strategies (focussing specifically on the first 6 months):

1. Build AAP into funding proposals. Including quality and accountability activities in the early planning stages and allocating budget-lines will ensure sufficient resources are available to carry out activities linked to strengthening accountability and quality management and guide field staff on implementing FAO's commitment to improving accountability as part of the emergency response. Budget lines may include, for example, and depending upon the plan:
 - Transport, consultation and meeting costs, conducting participatory activities (venue, refreshments, reimbursement for time?), training of beneficiary representatives
 - Costs associated with translation of materials, training community committees, holding community meetings, running radio advertisements, hiring theatre groups, producing notice boards, leaflets / posters, photographs etc
 - Setting up complaints number, training complaints committees, develop complaints filing and tracking system
 - Development and production of induction materials for responding staff
 - Regular review meetings to document lessons learnt, real time evaluations
 - A degree of budget flexibility to respond to learning and feedback.
2. Ensure staff responding are briefed and inducted with respect to AAP and FAO's commitments
3. Build in ongoing feedback and consultation mechanisms that respond to the particular context. This could include, for example:
 - Finding out if it is possible to remake contact with the informants on the needs assessment to look at establishing some key informant committees
 - Ensuring that input is not only received from community leaders and systems of representation that have not been tested for their actual representativeness
 - Collect telephone numbers from key informants and build in a budget for staff to consult with people by phone and collect feedback and complaints

- Brief local authorities/partner staff / other civil society actors who may be in a position to make contact with communities where FAO isn't, on consultation and feedback needs, and guide them in conducting regular feedback focus groups (of course political considerations are key here)
 - Recruit community members as monitors and receive regular monitoring reports via telephone or other appropriate means
 - These kinds of systems should also be associated with cash grants initiatives, to ensure that complaints and corruption or other potential concerns can be addressed
 - Ensuring that there is a means to complain through, for example, the establishment of a hotline needs to also be associated with a knowledge of access in communities to mobile telephones, to ensure that women in particular, and vulnerable or marginalized / poorer groups also have access. If they don't, budget could be included for the distribution of cheap handsets and credit.
4. Ensure means to provide information and conduct two way communication
 - Consult with communities as to what kinds of information they require and how they could receive it. This could include information sheets being provided in inputs being distributed, radio broadcasts, joining forces with any other agencies responding, newsletter drops, etc
 - Information should, at a minimum, include information about FAO, about the standards of behaviour they can expect from FAO and partner staff, how to get in contact if they need to, and how their feedback has influenced the intervention
 5. Ensure any distributions (as recommended in the needs assessment) take into account AAP , highlighting the concept of "Do No Harm". For example:
 - How far will people have to come, and what kinds of transport do they have access to?
 - If the distribution is in the morning, what time will this require people travelling on foot to leave from the furthest locations, and is this a reasonable time? Would people coming on foot require water?
 - Will people need to hire vehicles, and if so, will this present too much of a burden (particularly if the most poor have been targeted)
 - How will women manage the sacks?
 - How is jealousy in the communities being addressed, if not everyone is targeted?
 6. Beneficiary targeting and selection should take the potential for community conflict and discord into account and ensure consultation and participation.
 7. Seek an understanding of the impact of the ongoing conflict on Syrian social dynamics, particularly with respect to gender and any changes in the position of women.