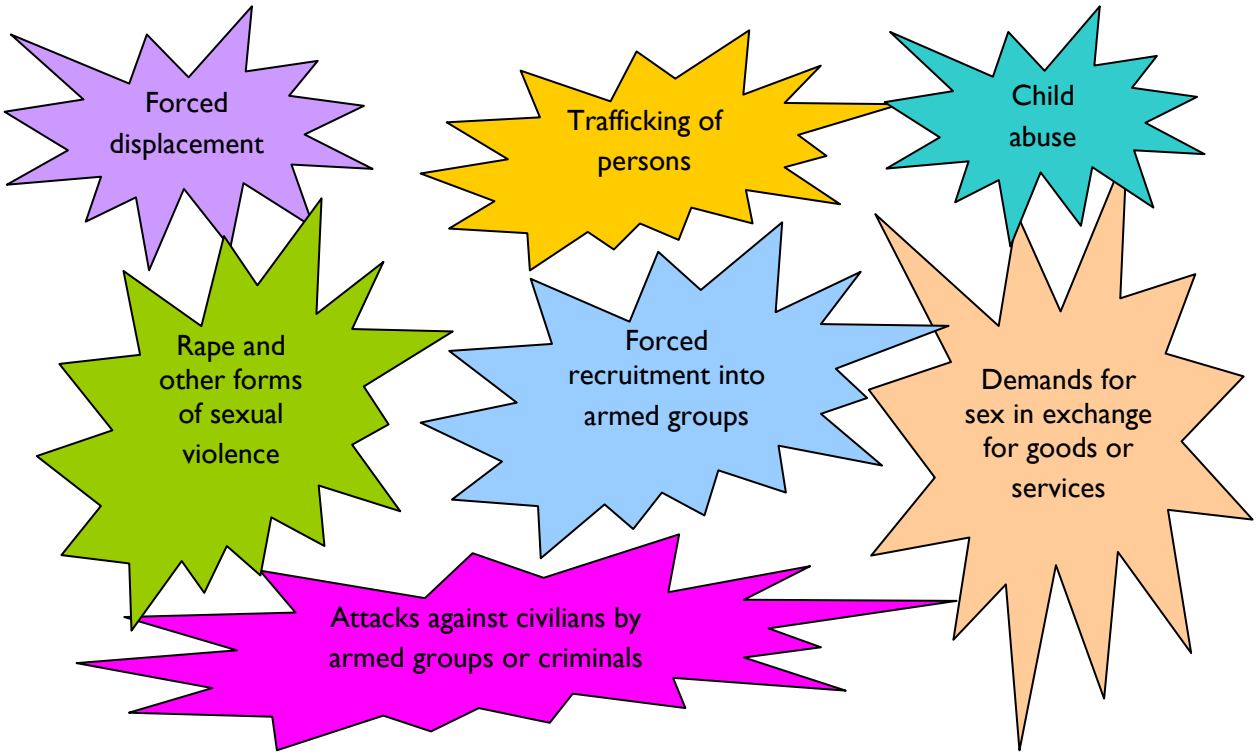
BUREAU FOR DEMOCRACY, CONFLICT, AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE (DCHA)
OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (OFDA)

PROTECTION OF DISASTER-AFFECTED POPULATIONS THROUGH HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

HARM, EXPLOITATION, AND ABUSE IN DISASTER SITUATIONS

Following a disaster, affected populations often require a variety of humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, blankets, clean water, latrines, health care, and other materials and services to meet basic survival needs. In addition, populations affected by conflict and natural disasters may face threats of exploitation, abuse, and harm.



VULNERABILITY TO HARM, EXPLOITATION, AND ABUSE

Understanding the factors that make disaster-affected people vulnerable to harm, exploitation, and abuse allows the humanitarian community to mitigate potential threats. The table below outlines factors that may increase an individual's vulnerability in disaster situations.

Displacement	A natural disaster or conflict may cause affected populations to flee from areas of origin, disrupting livelihoods and social networks. Displaced populations may lose identification documents and other legal documents that could affect their ability to access services, such as health care.
Gender	Women and men often face different types of threats. In conflict, armed groups may forcibly recruit or kill men, while women might be sexually assaulted. Men might be vulnerable to violence when collecting money or materials, and women may face threats while accessing water points, collecting firewood, or working in fields .

Age	Children are vulnerable due to their dependency on adults. Elderly populations may face challenges in accessing assistance or escaping from dangerous situations due to a lack of mobility. Households with elderly populations caring for children—whose parents may be absent or deceased—are particularly vulnerable.
Family Separation	Families provide safety for most people, especially children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Individuals become more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation when they are separated from families. One of the first responses in emergencies is family tracing and reunification for children separated from parents or guardians.
Disability	Disasters often disrupt normal care and assistance arrangements for persons with physical or mental disabilities. Disabled people living apart from their families may be unable to understand or escape from threats. Families caring for a disabled person may require additional assistance.
Ethnicity or Religion	Disaster-affected populations are almost never homogenous. It is important to understand the ethnic and religious composition of an affected population, and ensure that all affected persons are able to access assistance and participate in community decision-making. Ethnic and religious differences are particularly important when one group is displaced into another group's territory, potentially increasing tensions between displaced populations and host communities.
Socio-economic Status	Disasters disproportionately affect lower socio-economic groups. Poorer households have fewer coping mechanisms for dealing with disasters and threats to their safety. Higher-income individuals may be able to migrate or move into a rental property following a disaster, while poorer households may not have sufficient resources to flee their homes.

PROTECTION: PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING HARM, EXPLOITATION, AND ABUSE

In response to threats facing disaster-affected populations, humanitarian assistance providers implement protection activities designed to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities associated with harm, exploitation, and abuse. Protection activities also support people who have already been harmed, exploited, or abused: for example, providing special services to survivors of sexual violence.

According to international law, national governments are responsible for protecting their populations from harm, exploitation, and abuse. However, during disasters, national authorities may be unable or unwilling to provide protection. In these cases, humanitarian assistance providers take steps to protect disaster-affected populations. Humanitarian assistance providers can protect populations in two ways:

1) Protection Mainstreaming: Humanitarian agencies design and implement activities that meet the population's basic needs in ways that reduce risks and take into account the vulnerabilities of the disaster-affected population. Protection mainstreaming does not change the objective of the assistance (for example, to improve health or provide food) but does change how the assistance is implemented. For examples, see the following section.
2) Protection Programs: Humanitarian agencies implement activities that are designed to minimize risks, reduce vulnerabilities, or provide services to people who have been harmed, abused, or exploited. Examples include family tracing and reunification, legal assistance for replacing identity and property documents, or psychosocial support for survivors of sexual

violence. The USAID/OFDA Guidelines for Unsolicited Proposals[1] contain guidance on protection programs.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR IMPLEMENTING PROTECTION

Humanitarian assistance providers need to understand the threats to and vulnerabilities of a disaster-affected population in order to take practical steps to protect the population. The following guidance offers some key points and approaches for protection but is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all possible protection activities and approaches.

- Consultation and participation of the affected population: To the extent possible, disaster-affected populations should be consulted and participate in decision-making about humanitarian assistance activities. It is important that all affected persons are represented in decision-making. Humanitarian assistance providers should develop an awareness of all segments of the population and receive input from each one (see table of vulnerabilities above). For example, before placing latrines in a camp for displaced person, a relief agency should consult with men, women, and children living in the camp to determine the best placement and labeling of latrines. Such actions prevent assaults in these areas.
- Equitable access to goods and services: Humanitarian assistance providers should not assume that everyone will be able to travel easily to distribution sites or access services such as health clinics. Providers should be aware of people who may not be able to access relief supplies and make special arrangements for their inclusion. For example, elderly populations or persons with physical disabilities may not be able to travel to a food distribution point, or cultural practices may prevent women from leaving their houses to visit a health clinic without being accompanied by a male relative. In addition to physical access, tensions between ethnic groups may prevent one group from accessing services if the service providers belong to another ethnic group.
- Safe access to goods and services: In an environment without adequate security and rule of law—often the case in disasters—humanitarian assistance providers should take measures to ensure that the targeted population does not face physical threats when accessing goods and services. For example, a humanitarian assistance provider should consider the location and timing of hygiene kit distributions to minimize the risks of attacks on or robberies of beneficiaries traveling to and from the distribution site. In addition, humanitarian agencies may mobilize community watch committees in camps to prevent sexual violence. Although humanitarian assistance providers cannot provide security themselves, they may advocate for national authorities or U.N. peacekeepers to provide a police presence for high-risk areas or activities.

[1] http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/resources/pdf/updated_guidelines_unsolicited_proposals_reporting.pdf

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON PROTECTION

For additional ideas and guidance on the protection of disaster-affected populations, a number of resources are available.

1. USAID/OFDA Guidelines for Unsolicited Proposals and Reporting
   http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/resources/pdf/updated_guidelines_unsolicited_proposals_reporting.pdf

2. Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement
   http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/gp_page.aspx

3. IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters
   http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/idp/docs/OperationalGuidelines.pdf

4. Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons (Global Protection Cluster Working Group)
   http://www.humanitarianreform.org/Default.aspx?tabid=294

5. Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence (ICRC, 2009)
   http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/p0999

6. Making Protection a Priority: Integrating Protection and Humanitarian Assistance (InterAction)
   http://www.interaction.org/document/making-protection-priority

7. Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies (IASC)
   http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/clusters%20pages/Gender/tfgender_GBVGuidelines2005.pdf