UNHCR
L'Agence des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

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5 STEPS TO FOLLOW BEFORE SETTING UP A HOTLINE

Here are some tips for humanitarian organisations considering integrating a hotline into their community engagement strategy. This fact sheet is based on the experience of UNHCR's Innovation Service in Uganda and shares five key steps to find out if a hotline is the best solution to your community communication problems.

1. IDENTIFY THE COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

This translates directly into the availability of channels through which refugees can contact humanitarian actors. If it is a densely populated camp, a connected community tech center may be a more appropriate solution than a call centre.

Access to a hotline requires mobile devices, connectivity, electricity and phone credit:

- Is there cellular coverage in your target area (or can it be restored soon)?
- Do people have access to a power source (solar or generator) to charge their devices?
- Can they afford to use mobile phones (e.g. cost of calls/data)?
- Do people have access to mobile phones or other communication equipment?

In some cases, data or studies are already available, in others, it may be appropriate to undertake data collection:

- Un bon point de départ consiste également à effectuer une évaluation des besoins en matière d'information et de communication. Un modèle prêt à l'emploi qui peut être adapté pour une évaluation locale est disponible ici.
- The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the United Nations specialised agency responsible for information and communication technology (ICT) issues. It publishes statistics on fixed and mobile telephone subscriptions and the percentage of households with Internet access by country.
- GSMA is an industry organisation that represents the interests of the world's network operators. GSMA often publishes studies on connectivity and mobile access for refugees, internally displaced persons and other affected communities (The Digital Lives of Refugees).
- A good starting point is also to conduct an information and communication needs assessment. A ready-made template that can be adapted for local assessment is available here.

2. IDENTIFY FAVOURITE CHANNELS

The information and communication needs assessment is also useful for understanding the existing channels refugees use to communicate with your organisation and what their preferred means of communication are.

There may not be just one optimal channel, but several depending on the needs of different communities. Call centres are just one of the options that an organisation might consider in a multi-channel accountability to affected people (AAP) strategy.

Also consider alternative channels that could be used alongside or instead of call centres:

- Print media: posters, leaflets, billboards, magazines...
- Broadcasting: loudspeakers, radio, television, videos...
- Social networks: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram...
- In person: community meetings, discussion groups...
- Community systems: community groups, religious leaders...
- Internet: email, websites...
- Messaging applications: WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, Messenger...
- Telephone: SMS, call centres...

3. IDENTIFY YOUR CHALLENGE

- There are a number of reasons why a call centre may be set up: to provide valuable information to communities, to offer assistance, to provide remote counselling, to respond to complaints and comments....
- It is the mandate of UNHCR, as a protection agency, to understand individuals across the range of their capacities, problems and concerns and not to exclude certain groups from service provision. If it is not possible to resolve the problem at the call centre, operators either refer the call to the relevant organisation or provide the caller with an alternative number.
- In Uganda, the aim was to ensure a coordinated and effective response to refugee needs by establishing a robust, comprehensive and confidential inter-agency feedback, referral and resolution mechanism.
- Operations divided incoming cases into five categories, ranging from returns requiring no intervention, to complaints, fraud and sensitive protection cases.
- Once a hotline is in place, it could be used for activities far beyond its original purpose. The helpline was initially designed to receive incoming calls only. But with the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, it has enabled information sharing, post-cash distribution monitoring, remote protection monitoring, as well as surveys and questionnaires.

4. IDENTIFY BARRIERS

- You will need to assess whether there is a risk of exclusion of the most vulnerable people and how you will address this. Exclusion factors for some groups could be access to devices, language barriers or digital literacy levels.
- Some of these barriers can be overcome by providing financial support or digital literacy training programmes to vulnerable groups. Depending on the refugee community, language support will be needed.
- Some people may prefer to use the helpline, while others may prefer face-to-face contact with field staff.
- Anticipate the capture of cases through multiple sources of input such as protection desks, the helpline, community outreach volunteers, emails, complaints and suggestion boxes. This ensures that the system is accessible to the majority of different population groups across the country.

5. CONSIDER THE RESOURCES NEEDED

- A phone line can operate with several operators and a complex CRM system or a single operator with a mobile phone and a spreadsheet.
- To determine whether a call centre is a worthwhile investment for an operation, a cost-benefit analysis that looks specifically at how a call centre could meet protection needs is essential.
- Costs are to a large extent determined by staffing requirements. In Uganda, helpline staff capacity was identified based on the language requirements of refugees living in Uganda. UNHCR tracks the number of calls received in each language group, the total number of calls received per day, and the number of callers who were unable to reach the helpline because it was too busy.
- This allows the organisation to understand where additional staff resources are needed and for which languages. As the number of calls received increased during the coronavirus crises, the tool was useful in identifying that additional resources would be needed to support the demand

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In summary, before investing time and money in a helpline, we recommend that you consider the following 5 steps:

- Map the landscape in which you operate and the wider community engagement strategy.
- Conduct an information and communication needs assessment to identify your users' preferred communication channels.
- Define the purpose of the call centre.
- Understand the potential access challenges that specific communities may face and how these can be addressed.
- Determine what you will need in terms of funding to cover the costs of setting up and running the call centre.