



Early warning Information sharing Material support Protection analysis
Risk analysis

📍 Global

Early warning mechanisms

Tools and template¹

Introduction

As seen in the [self-protection guidance](#), communities are most often the first responders to their own protection needs. They are also the experts on their own situations. Community members are often aware of protection incidents and related information in their area. Therefore, they can be valuable sources of information and provide warnings to their own communities and other communities around them, as well as for supporting humanitarian organizations. Early warning of a protection risk allows community members to take actions to protect themselves and their property and implement contingency plans.

An early warning mechanism is a means of rapidly communicating new information that could help prevent, avoid, mitigate or end a protection risk. It is essentially an information-sharing system – as such, it directly contributes to the Knowledge pillar of [community self-protection capacities](#).

The role of community protection structures

Community protection structures (CPSs) can play a vital role in facilitating the sharing of such information. Firstly, CPSs are already trained in [protection analysis](#). Thus, they are regularly monitoring the situation in their areas, and may find things out more easily.

Secondly, CPS members are usually elected by their communities and are thus well known. As a result, they can easily become focal points for the sharing of information between members of the community.

Finally, CPSs usually have well-established communication channels with supporting humanitarian organizations and other key actors, which can further facilitate information sharing.

¹ This template tool builds and further expands on existing guidance document produced by Oxfam's protection teams in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Box 1: Protection monitoring and early warning mechanisms

The objective of protection monitoring is to systematically collect data on the protection situation in an area and analyse trends, in order to inform responses. An early warning mechanism aims to facilitate the sharing of information on new and/or imminent risks that may have an immediate impact on communities' rights, safety and dignity, as well as on the running of programmes.

Their purpose is not to document protection incidents, but to alert communities and supporting humanitarian organizations of incoming potential risks.

Early warnings may build on protection monitoring, as some incidents may be the subject of a warning. However, warnings may be issued on other developments that do not amount to a protection incident and, as such, were not covered by the protection monitoring. This can be the case, for example, with population movements.

Types of events to monitor

Community members and CPSs may share warnings on a variety of developments in their areas (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: A non-exhaustive list of relevant protection scenarios

Type of event	Details	Examples
Population movements	Significant changes in demographics, especially of groups known or expected to have humanitarian needs, or those who play a role in addressing the community's needs.	New arrivals of internally displaced persons or refugees.
Intra- or inter-community tensions	New or exacerbated tensions between different communities or between different groups within the same community.	Disputes between host communities and internally displaced people at water points.
Government measures	Planned or actual government measures that put the rights, safety and dignity of people at risk.	A government agency planning the dismantling of a site hosting internally displaced people.
Dynamics between weapon bearers	Events that may contribute to increased tensions between armed actors (including within or between communities).	Clashes between armed group and government forces. Killing of the family member of a commander. A personal dispute between commanders. Armed clashes between different communities.
Movements of weapon bearers	Changes on the presence of weapon bearers in an area.	Arrival of troops. Movement of troops along a nearby road.

Types of information to be included in warning

A range of information should be circulated through early warning mechanisms (see **Table 2**). Warnings should not include any personally identifiable information, nor any information that could expose CPS members, community members or supporting humanitarian organizations to any risks.

Table 2: Examples of information to include in early warnings

Type of event	Details	Example warning
Place and date	Location and date(s) of the event.	<p>In the morning of 30 January 2015, about 10 armed men from government forces have attacked Village A. Most community members escaped to village B. Two adult women and one elderly man were injured; one young man was killed.</p> <p>Community members are advised to avoid the area as armed men may still be present. Armed men are moving in the direction of villages C and D.</p> <p>Humanitarian organizations to organise medical assistance for the injured in village B.</p>
What happened	The situation or event being reported.	
Who was involved	No personally identifiable information is needed – information on who was involved should simply complement the description of what happened.	
The impact	The actual and/or potential impact of the event.	
Request and/or recommendation	Any relevant requests for help from people receiving the alert and/or recommendations on what the receivers of the alert should do.	

Setting up an early warning mechanism

Protection volunteers and other protection actors may support communities in the establishment of a structured early warning mechanism. This can help disseminate information that is essential to ensure community members' rights, safety and dignity. It can also be a way of improving existing information sharing practices, for instance, by establishing safer communication protocols. However, early warning mechanisms can also carry risks, and may therefore not be appropriate in every situation in every context.

An example of an early warning mechanism can be found in a [case study from Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (DRC) written by the organization Solidarité pour la Promotion Sociale et la Paix (SOPROP).

Community members should meaningfully participate in decisions throughout the process of setting up an early warning mechanism, the key steps of which are:

1. Identify focal points

- Clarify that focal points (FPs) are responsible for collecting relevant information and disseminating it through warnings.
- Ensure that FPs are selected through a participatory process involving multiple groups from the community, based on criteria established by them – similar to the selection of CPS members. This can ensure that community members know who their FPs are and what their role is, which contributes to trust in the warnings and effectiveness of the mechanism. Nonetheless, in some countries CPSs have chosen not to make the identity of FPs public because of the risk posed.
- Consider both CPS members and other community members as potential FPs:

- CPS members are familiar with protection analysis; were previously elected by the community, so are representative; and may have contacts with humanitarian actors.
 - Other community members may also benefit the mechanism, for example, by providing access to certain sources of information or interlocutors in the [communication chain](#).
- Ensure all different areas and/or groups of a community have a designated FP.

2. Conduct a risk analysis

- Conduct a thorough [risk analysis](#) on the potential risks to which the early warning mechanism may expose FPs, community members or other actors.
- Identify mitigation measures as appropriate.
- Consider the findings of risk analysis when setting data collection and communication protocols.

Box 2: Examples of potential risks linked to early warning mechanisms

FPs may be perceived as ‘informants’ and thus be targeted by those involved in protection events, such as weapon bearers. For example, [in DRC](#), community members were exposed to killings and kidnapping by the armed men that the warnings usually reported on.

This risk may be exacerbated if FPs are provided with material resources for the purpose of sharing the warnings, such as satellite phones or handheld radios, as this equipment may draw more attention, and contribute to a perception of them being ‘spies’.

The provision of such material resources may also expose focal points to the risk of being robbed.

Early warning mechanisms may also pose risks to community members not directly involved in the reporting. That can be the case, for instance, if information shared is not kept confidential (e.g., because an FP was overheard while speaking on the phone).

FPs may also risk losing communities’ trust if their information is not acted upon.

3. Establish data collection protocols

- With FPs, establish [types of events](#) to be monitored for warning purposes.
- With FPs, establish the [information needed](#) to be included in each warning.
- Ensure FPs agree on basic principles for data collection, such as:
 - Ensuring the confidentiality of information sources;
 - Not collecting personally identifiable data;
 - Whenever possible, triangulating information received; and
 - Committing to neutrality and impartiality (i.e. sharing information regardless of one’s beliefs or political opinions, and without discriminating about to whom the information is sent).

4. Establish communication protocols

- With FPs, establish protocols to guide information sharing, including:
 - Disseminating warnings in a discreet manner;
 - Disseminating warnings through SMS messages only – never phone calls;

- Deleting SMS messages once sent; and
- Not sharing the sources of information.

5. Determine the communication chain

- Identify key interlocutors outside the community with whom warnings should be shared, taking into consideration the risks that this may pose to them or others. Such key interlocutors may include:
 - Traditional authorities;
 - State authorities;
 - Non-state civilian authorities (e.g. the civilian branch of an armed group); and
 - Humanitarian organizations.
- With FPs, agree on a communication chain, which generally should follow the pattern shown in **Figure 1**:
 - starting with the FP with information to be shared;
 - to other FPs, to ensure the entire community receives the warning; and then
 - to identified interlocutors.
- Establish response communication protocols, both for identified interlocutors and among FPs, so that FPs and community members can know what action was taken based on the warning.

Figure 1: A simple early warning mechanism communication chain

