

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A guidance note to help National Societies take a stronger role in interagency coordination for community engagement and accountability.

Introduction

Crises are increasing worldwide, affecting more people each year. Yet, funding to meet these growing needs is shrinking. Now, more than ever, humanitarian agencies must work together to use limited resources effectively and ensure communities receive the support they need.

No agency—including Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies—can afford to work in isolation. Without coordination, efforts may be duplicated, resources wasted, opportunities for collaboration missed, and the quality of humanitarian response weakened. Donors also increasingly prioritize coordinated, streamlined action that maximizes impact.

National Societies can gain significant benefits by actively participating in—or even leading—CEA interagency coordination. With their strong community ties and extensive volunteer networks, they play a vital role in ensuring the needs and concerns of communities drive humanitarian priorities. At the same time, they can access valuable learning, expertise, and resources from the broader humanitarian sector.

This guidance note supports National Societies to strengthen their role in CEA interagency coordination. It answers key questions, including [what is interagency coordination for CEA](#), [why it matters](#), [the challenges involved](#) and [how to prepare for these](#), and [how National Societies can engage effectively in CEA coordination groups](#). Developed from the experiences of National Societies already taking on greater coordination roles, this guidance is accompanied by five case studies from [Cameroon](#), [Chad](#), [Indonesia](#), [Myanmar](#), and [Panama](#).

1. WHAT IS CEA INTERAGENCY COORDINATION?

<p>What is interagency coordination?</p> <p><i>“Is this not a UN thing?”</i></p>	<p>Inter-agency coordination is coordination with external partners who are not part of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. This includes governments, United Nations agencies, international and national NGOs, and community-based groups.</p> <p>Coordination aims to ensure agencies work together towards common goals, and do not duplicate each other’s work.</p> <p>There are usually coordination groups for different technical areas - sometimes called clusters or sectors.</p>
<p>How is CEA coordinated between agencies?</p> <p><i>“Why does it have different names?”</i></p>	<p>CEA is usually coordinated through a working group that brings agencies together to align CEA activities, plans, and approaches. This can be a permanent group or established for an emergency response. It could be called the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Working Group or Community Engagement Working Group (CEWG). In epidemics, it might be a Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group, which includes health and CEA staff.</p> <p>Smaller sub-groups may exist that focus on specific areas like community feedback or capacity building.</p> <p>In natural disasters and conflicts, UN OCHA supports CEA inter-agency coordination as part of the cluster system usually through an AAP working group.</p> <p>In public health emergencies, WHO or UNICEF leads coordination often alongside the Ministry of Health, usually through an RCCE working group.</p> <p>In refugee crises, UNHCR oversees AAP coordination.</p> <p>Sometimes, both AAP and RCCE working groups exist, particularly when an epidemic occurs in a country with an existing AAP WG. Efforts are ongoing to ensure a more harmonised approach to coordination across different types of emergencies.</p>
<p>Who takes part in CEA interagency coordination?</p> <p><i>“Is it only international agencies?”</i></p>	<p>CEA interagency coordination includes the government, UN agencies (e.g., UNICEF, UN OCHA, WHO etc.), international and national NGOs (e.g., Save the Children, Oxfam, IRC), specialist organisations (e.g., BBC Media Action, Internews), community-based groups, and research organisations (e.g., universities, Anthrologica).</p> <p>These groups are sometimes led or co-chaired by the government or a national organisation. In some cases, IFRC or the National Society co-chairs CEA working groups alongside a UN agency.</p> <p>Where no dedicated CEA coordination group exists, coordination on community engagement may take place through existing structures, such as government-led health promotion working groups (e.g., Cameroon) or through bilateral coordination with the Government (e.g., as per the Panama case study).</p>

<p>What happens in a CEA coordination meeting?</p> <p><i>“What should I expect if I attend one of these meetings?”</i></p>	<p>CEA coordination meetings happen in-person and online - weekly or more in a crisis, or monthly or ad-hoc in non-emergency settings.</p> <p>Typical agenda items include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing updates on CEA activities and approaches. • Discussing community feedback and how to act on it, including sharing feedback referrals with each other. • Planning joint CEA and RCCE strategies and activities. For example, how best to collectively respond to epidemics. • Share experiences and lessons learned, from how to run trainings to setting up community feedback mechanisms. • How to support other technical sectors like WASH, health, etc.
<p>What do CEA coordination groups do?</p> <p><i>“Is it all just talking, or do they actually implement things?”</i></p>	<p>CEA coordination groups vary in activity level - some implement joint initiatives, while others prioritize information sharing. Their role depends on the context, purpose, membership, and lead agencies.</p> <p>Common activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating information-sharing with communities (what, how, and when to communicate). • Establishing interagency community feedback mechanisms. • Creating an interagency feedback dashboard or reports to share with all responders and sectors. • Setting up feedback referral systems, including for sensitive issues (e.g., safeguarding, fraud, sexual exploitation and abuse). • Sharing CEA tools and materials. • Running CEA trainings for the working group or other sectors. • Organising webinars and trainings on specific topics, from COVID-19 perceptions to data security and misinformation. • Developing RCCE materials (e.g., posters, radio jingles, SMS) for epidemic response. • Running joint surveys and assessments during disasters.
<p>What is expected from National Societies?</p> <p><i>“What are we expected to contribute?”</i></p>	<p>A National Society’s role in CEA coordination varies but could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending meetings regularly. • Providing updates on community engagement activities and other relevant activities. • Sharing community feedback and discussing how to act on it. • Contributing to joint CEA plans, activities, and materials. • Participating in joint assessments and surveys. • Taking part in sub-groups on topics like community feedback.

<p>What is the cluster system?</p> <p><i>“I’ve heard the UN talk about clusters – what are these?”</i></p>	<p>During large scale emergencies, the UN may activate the cluster system to ensure a coordinated, needs-based response.</p> <p>It organises humanization activities into 11 sectors, and 4 cross-cutting themes, each led by designated agencies (e.g., WHO for health, IFRC/UNHCR for shelter). Learn more at https://reliefweb.int/topics/cluster-coordination</p>
<p>What is the collective service?</p> <p><i>“How can it help National Societies?”</i></p>	<p>The Collective Service is a partnership between IFRC, UNICEF, and WHO, launched during COVID-19 to coordinate and scale up RCCE.</p> <p>It now supports governments and partners during public health emergencies, providing coordination, research, toolkits (e.g., Marburg, Mpox, drought), a helpdesk, and training. Global sub-groups focus on media, migrants, refugees, and youth engagement and a regional sub-group exists for East and Southern Africa. Learn more at https://www.rcce-collective.net/.</p>
<p>What is the Flagship Initiative?</p> <p><i>“Is this something the National Society should be part of?”</i></p>	<p>Launched in 2023, the Flagship Initiative aims to reshape humanitarian action by prioritizing community needs over aid provider agendas.</p> <p>Piloted in Colombia, Niger, the Philippines, and South Sudan, it emphasizes participatory engagement and funding for local priorities.</p> <p>This creates opportunities for National Societies to influence how aid is coordinated, delivered, and financed. Learn more: https://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative.</p>

2. BENEFITS OF CEA INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Why should we coordinate on CEA?

“Is time and effort not better spent on projects in the community?”

Interagency coordination on CEA benefits communities by:

- **Enhancing the quality of aid:** For example, planning risk communication campaigns together ensures communities receive consistent information. In Panama, the National Society’s CEA training for local authorities led them to consult communities before planning response activities.
- **Identifying gaps:** Sharing community feedback helps agencies spot unmet needs and ensures critical issues are addressed. Coordination also helps ensure feedback is shared with technical working groups, such as WASH or health, so they can use it to improve their activities.
- **Reducing duplication:** Coordination helps agencies complement rather than duplicate each other’s work. In Cameroon, the National Society was able to adjust their plans for sensitisation in one community, when they learned through coordination another agency had already been there. Sharing assessment plans and findings also prevents multiple agencies from conducting surveys in the same locations, which leads to community frustration.
- **Better use of resources:** Time and funding are limited. Coordination ensures resources are used efficiently. For example, by producing shared tools and materials instead of each agency creating their own.

What are the benefits for the National Society?

“What have National Societies gained from being part of CEA coordination groups?”

National Societies report gaining many benefits from participating in CEA interagency coordination. These include:

- **Tools and materials:** National Societies have accessed risk communication materials for diseases like COVID-19 and Mpox through RCCE working groups, saving the time and resources it would take to produce these. These materials are often pre-approved by the Ministry of Health, enabling rapid distribution.
- **Increased impact:** National Societies have found they can do more by teaming up with others. For example, Myanmar Red Cross is part of an interagency feedback platform that analyses community concerns and shares these with humanitarian leadership. This is something the National Society could not do on their own. In Chad, agencies pool feedback from different channels, meaning all agencies can hear feedback from more channels than they could run by themselves.
- **Learning from others:** National Societies have saved time and money by learning from others’ experiences. Examples include scaling a feedback mechanism to be nationwide (Myanmar) to managing multilingual calls (Cameroon).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to data, research and expertise: In Indonesia, the National Society accessed research, data, and experts such as epidemiologists, through participation in the RCCE working group. They were able to call on these experts to support their radio shows, podcasts and Instagram live sessions. • Training and capacity strengthening: Interagency groups can provide trainings that benefit National Society staff and volunteers, from topics such as misinformation to feedback. • Reputation and relationships: National Societies have improved their reputation and relationships with governments, partners, and donors through interagency coordination. In Cameroon, government representatives now join National Society CEA trainings and mobile cinemas. While in Indonesia, collaboration on a perception survey with WHO positioned them as critical actors in the COVID-19 response – earning them a Certificate of Appreciation from the MoH and donor support. • Funding and resources: Being part of CEA coordination groups can provide access to funding and resources. For instance, Myanmar’s AAP working group offers small grants to members. In Panama, the National Society and government combined resources to run community meetings as part of a response. • Effective referral of feedback: National Societies also benefit from a structured feedback referral process, enabling them to direct unresolved issues to the appropriate agencies for action. This includes reporting and referral of sensitive feedback.
<p>What are the risks of not coordinating on CEA?</p> <p><i>“What do we miss out on if we don’t take part?”</i></p>	<p>Not coordinating on CEA can harm both the community and the National Society by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating confusion and increased suffering: Sharing conflicting information causes confusion and reduces people's ability to access support and stay safe. • Causing frustration and mistrust: Repeating assessments and activities in the same community causes frustration and can harm the trust and acceptance of humanitarian actors. • Waste time and resources: Duplicating efforts means fewer people will be reached and get the support they need. • Lower the quality of services: By not sharing expertise, lessons learned and resources. • Missed opportunities for collaboration: Not attending CEA coordination groups, means National Societies may miss out on the chance to be part of joint initiatives. • Missed funding: Donors prefer to fund coordinated, efficient interagency efforts and want to see National Societies play an active role in CEA coordination groups.

3. CHALLENGES OF CEA INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

What are the challenges of interagency coordination?

“What problems could National Societies experience?”

The **benefits of interagency coordination outweigh the challenges**, but being aware of them helps National Societies to prepare. These include:

- **Time commitment:** National Societies may have limited or no CEA staff, meaning they have to balance attending coordination meetings with time spent in communities or on other work.
- **Demands on the National Society:** With their wide volunteer network, National Societies may be asked to implement joint activities or partner with other organizations, putting additional strain on already stretched resources.
- **Risk to neutrality:** In conflict contexts, the need to maintain independence from UN or government may limit the National Society’s ability to participate in coordination and joint activities.

How can we manage these challenges?

“What solutions have National Societies used to address these challenges”

National Societies have found creative solutions to these challenges.

Addressing limited time to participate:

- **Join CEA coordination meetings virtually** to save travel time.
- **Share responsibility for attendance** with a colleague, your line manager, or CEA focal points from the regions.
- **Read meeting minutes if you can’t attend** to stay informed.
- **Focus on key areas where the National Society can add value** if it’s not possible to follow everything the working group does.

Addressing demands on the National Society:

- **Be honest about National Society capacity** and don’t be afraid to say no to activities that exceed it.
- **Be clear on the National Society’s goals** for interagency coordination and where it can add value.
- **Set clear boundaries** on what the National Society can and cannot do, such as what level of feedback data can be shared.

Addressing risks to neutrality:

- **Use the fundamental principles** to guide participation and explain what the National Society can and cannot do. The Panamanian Red Cross has a rule that the seven fundamental principles must be present or they cannot participate.
- **Contribute without the Red Cross Red Crescent logo.** For example, by sharing unbranded community feedback for interagency analysis so it can still help improve the response.
- **Coordinate discreetly through calls with the interagency CEA coordinator** to access information and influence from ‘behind the scenes’.

4. HOW TO COORDINATE ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

<p>How can I find out about CEA interagency coordination in my country?</p> <p><i>“I don’t know where to start or who to ask!”</i></p>	<p>To find CEA interagency coordination groups in your country, you can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask National Society colleagues, such as health for RCCE working groups or PMER for accountability working groups. • Ask IFRC, ICRC, or partner National Society delegates in country. • Contact IFRC CEA staff in the cluster or region as they are part of regional coordination and can connect you with in-country groups and explain what to expect from the meetings. • Check with UNOCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF or WHO, as they may lead CEA coordination efforts. • Ask CEA colleagues in international NGOs.
<p>Who should attend these meetings?</p> <p><i>“Is it only a CEA manager who can attend?”</i></p>	<p>Interagency coordination meetings typically focus on operational matters so are best attended by the CEA focal point. However, many National Societies also invite other colleagues, including regional CEA focal points, PMER staff, or technical colleagues from sectors like disaster management and health, especially for RCCE working groups. If an IFRC CEA delegate is in-country, they can also attend, but the National Society should be in the lead.</p> <p>To respond promptly to requests and questions about joint activities and funding, the CEA focal point will need backing from National Society leadership and technical colleagues.</p>
<p>What value can National Societies add?</p> <p><i>“How can they improve joint efforts?”</i></p>	<p>National Society volunteers are in almost all communities, so can ensure vital information is shared nationwide to help people stay safe.</p> <p>As local organizations, they have deep community knowledge that can improve response efforts. Their trusted presence also allows them to hear feedback other agencies may miss. They have a responsibility to amplify community voices and ensure their insights shape decisions.</p>
<p>How can the National Society prepare?</p> <p><i>“Is there anything we need to do internally before attending these meetings?”</i></p>	<p>National Societies stress the need for internal preparation before engaging in interagency coordination. Key considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership support ensures someone is allocated to attend CEA coordination meetings and it is a recognised part of their role. • CEA staff capacity is needed to ensure effective participation, especially if the National Society is taking a leading role. • Institutionalizing CEA through policies, training, and integration strengthens external coordination. As one National Society put it, “If we’re strong inside, we can be strong outside.” • Good Internal coordination and communication on CEA across operations, programs, branches, and leadership ensures issues raised in meetings are quickly addressed.

<p>Advice from National Societies?</p> <p>“What are the lessons learned from National Societies involved in CEA interagency coordination?”</p>	<p>Conduct the meetings in local languages</p> <p>“The AAP/CE WG meetings used to be conducted in English, so it was difficult for national and local organisations to discuss issues in depth. Now it’s conducted in Burmese, with English translation, and this has made a huge difference. Now civil society organisations and local and national NGOs are very talkative.”</p> <p>Myanmar Red Cross Society</p> <p>Choose the right person to attend</p> <p>“The person attending coordination meetings needs to be the right person, or it could affect the reputation of your organisation. You are seen as your organisation, not as an individual – so you are carrying the reputation of the National Society. It needs to be the right person, with the right capacity and technical skills.”</p> <p>Indonesia Red Cross</p> <p>Be proactive</p> <p>“Don’t be afraid and stay in the office. Go and look for other agencies who are working on community engagement, including the Government. Ask to be involved or even take the lead and set up a group yourself. I didn’t know what existed, so I asked around, and I’m really glad I did as it saved me a lot of time.”</p> <p>Cameroon Red Cross</p> <p>Allocate budget for coordination</p> <p>“A small amount of budget allowed us to host the meeting in the Red Cross office 3 times in the last 6 months. This changed our role in the group from being seen as a member, to one of the lead agencies.”</p> <p>Chad Red Cross</p> <p>Don’t focus only on the capital</p> <p>“While some provinces have implemented CEA, there are others where there is very little coordination space, and decision-making is political, rather than evidence-based decisions that benefit communities.”</p> <p>Panamanian Red Cross Society</p> <p>Involve the regions</p> <p>“It was sometimes difficult to encourage focal points from the provinces to attend the CEWG meetings. They were very busy and focused on the response. We had to gain their acceptance and recognition that CEA coordination is valuable. It really helped to invite them as a spokesperson and give them a platform in the meeting, so they felt valued. Those in the provinces have critical information on the needs and priorities at community level. By sharing this in coordination forums, we can help all agencies to better meet the needs of the community.”</p> <p>Indonesia Red Cross</p>
<p>More sources of help?</p>	<p>Read the Cameroon, Chad, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Panama case studies</p> <p>Ask IFRC CEA colleagues at the Cluster or Region. If you’re not sure who this is email: Alexandra.SICOTTELEVESQUE@ifrc.org.</p> <p>Ask peer National Societies through the CEA community of practice.</p>