



# Mainstreaming Accountability Culture in a Refugee Response Context

Lessons from the Accountability to Affected Populations in Action (AAPA) Programme in Uganda

Spotlight  
March 2024



## Acknowledgements

### About U-Learn

[U-Learn](#) (Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability, and Research Network) is dedicated to enhancing outcomes for both refugees and host communities in Uganda. Through collaboration with the Government of Uganda and various implementing partners and stakeholders, U-Learn focuses on promoting learning, conducting assessments, and amplifying the voice and choices of refugees in the enduring protracted refugee crisis. The consortium is financially supported by UK Aid and is delivered by the Response Innovation Lab (hosted by Save the Children), together with IMPACT Initiatives and the International Rescue Committee. For inquiries or to connect with U-Learn, please contact [info@ulearn-uganda.org](mailto:info@ulearn-uganda.org).

### About the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

The IRC is cognizant of the fact that despite the commitment to be more responsive and accountable to affected people, humanitarian agencies find it difficult to systematically integrate feedback and response mechanisms into performance measurement and management systems. As part of the U-Learn Consortium, IRC is leading on the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) component which implements the AAP in Action Programme (AAPA), which aims to address this challenge.

This publication was developed in close collaboration with key AAP implementing partners. Special thanks goes to the Office of the Prime Minister – Department of Refugees, UNHCR, and all the organisations that participated in the Accountability to Affected Populations in Action (AAPA) training programme.

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This publication was made possible by the support of UKaid. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of UKaid/United Kingdom Government.

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## Abbreviations

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
AAPA	AAP in Action
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
BHC	British High Commission
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CFM	Complaints and Feedback Mechanism
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
COP	Community of Practice
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GoU	Government of Uganda
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IFRRM	Inter-Agency Feedback, Referral and Resolution Mechanism
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PoC	Persons of Concern
PSEA	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PWD	Persons With Disabilities
REF	Refugee Engagement Forum
RLO	Refugee-led Organisation
RWC	Refugee Welfare Committee
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SW	South West (region of Uganda)
ToR	Terms of Reference
U-Learn	Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability, and Research Network
UN/IO	United Nations / International Organisations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## Executive Summary

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is an active commitment by humanitarian actors to use power responsibly and involve communities receiving assistance in programming and decision making.<sup>1</sup> It is prioritised in the commitments of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS). While community engagement has been shown to increase support satisfaction and relevance, translating these principles into practice is a challenge for humanitarian actors and significant strides need to be taken to advance and systemise effective and genuine accountability.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the plethora of trainings, guidelines, and tools<sup>3</sup> available suggests efforts are underway in the humanitarian sphere to foster agency for affected communities. On the other hand, the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System report reveals that only one-third of aid recipients surveyed were able to log complaints or provide feedback regarding the services they received.<sup>4</sup> Global measurement against the CHS reveals that humanitarian agencies are **struggling to turn intentions into implementation when it comes to 'putting people at the centre' of programming and decision-making.**<sup>5</sup>

These limitations are not only rooted in access to knowledge or tools, but also touch upon the more fundamental problems of the power imbalance between recipients and aid-providing organisations.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these systemic problems, the power imbalance extends to junior staff, who work directly with communities and receive feedback, yet lack the influence within their own organisations to introduce the requested changes.<sup>7</sup>

The Accountability to Affected Populations in Action (AAPA) programme, led by U-Learn Consortium and implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Uganda, seeks to improve accountability towards refugees and host communities. The training programme translates theoretical knowledge of AAP into practical action at an institutional level. It supports selected cohorts of refugee response actors in Uganda to mainstream AAP in their operations by providing direct and one-to-one technical guidance. The programme was developed in collaboration with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) following an online training programme in 2021 during which participants expressed the need for further support to be able to actually operationalise AAP in their respective organisations. The AAPA programme bridges the gap between theory and practice by taking a peer-to-peer approach that diagnoses and tackles specific barriers to AAP implementation.

AAP has been identified as a priority in refugee responses in several host countries. However, there is limited evidence of any existing initiative similar to the AAPA programme. As such, this programme exemplifies a compelling practice for cross-country learning. This spotlight piece **highlights AAPA's innovative approach, implementation process and achievements**, and draws lessons to inform organisations aiming to achieve greater accountability to the populations they serve. This documentation was conducted through a desk review, field research, and qualitative interviews with the implementation staff and AAPA participants. Based on feedback, the AAPA programme successfully supported organisations to take practical steps towards accountability to affected populations. The essential components of the AAPA were:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/our\\_work/DOE/humanitarian\\_emergencies/AAP/two-pagebriefonaap.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/our_work/DOE/humanitarian_emergencies/AAP/two-pagebriefonaap.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/ground-truth-solutions-2022-listening-not-enough-global-analysis-report>

<sup>3</sup> [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH\\_Practice-Paper-8\\_AAP\\_draft7.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf), page 11

<sup>4</sup> <https://sohs.alnap.org/news/state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2022-briefing-crisis-affected-populations-accountability-and>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/har-2020/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/humanitarian-failing-crisis-un-aid-relief>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/putting-people-at-the-centre-accountability-to-affected-populations-briefing>



1. Defined curriculum of AAP modules to help organisations mainstream AAP in programme design and implementation stages, including proposal development, Complaints and Feedback Mechanisms (CFMs), Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), data-driven decision-making, and AAP indicators.
2. Structured analysis **of participating organisations' AAP strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and barriers** through baseline and endline assessments
3. Customised work plan for participating organisations to implement identified actions.
4. Tailored in-depth coaching from a dedicated AAP manager based in their respective region.
5. A cohort-based system that allows space for peer-to-peer learning and networking with like-minded organisations.
6. Graduation model at institutional level where participating organisations are assessed against graduation metrics to receive certification in AAP.

The findings demonstrate that the AAPA programme created a culture of accountability by strengthening knowledge and understanding of AAP practices, challenging the status quo, establishing new ways of working and holding humanitarian organisations to account. The enthusiastic and dedicated support of U-Learn staff and partners, the **consortium's strong independent brand and work with local communities** – such as the Refugee Engagement Forum – and the strong commitment of participating organisations towards AAP have been **important ingredients of the programme's success. Uganda's inclusive national policy and funding environment** for welcoming and supporting refugees also enabled positive outcomes of the programme.

This spotlight also discusses common challenges faced during implementation of the AAPA programme and draws on the AAPA experience to inform recommendations for organisations interested in developing similar initiatives in Uganda and beyond. Challenges included connectivity issues, competing priorities that impeded participation, lack of resources to implement activities, differing levels of senior management support, and barriers to the participation of local organisations. U-Learn modelled adaptive programming based on ongoing feedback and identified challenges. The experience informed key lessons learned and priorities, including promoting senior leadership buy-in and engagement when operationalizing AAP, supporting change management for example by investing in consistent commitment and attention from AAP-focused staff, and tapping into global best practices for cross-contextual learning.

This spotlight is not an evaluation and is not able to conclude the extent to which the AAPA programme has empirically increased application **of AAP in Uganda's refugee response. Verification and feedback** should be sought from refugees and host communities themselves about the **programme's impact on how trained partners** apply AAPA approaches to validate its success.



## Background

### [AAP in Uganda's Refugee Response](#)

Uganda is host to the largest number of refugees in Africa, with over 1.5 million registered refugees and asylum seekers. The Government of Uganda (GoU) has adopted a progressive self-reliance approach to refugee support. However, humanitarian assistance is still required to meet basic needs.<sup>8</sup>

Refugees and host communities are not always aware of their right to know how decisions are made or that they are entitled to contribute to them. Affected populations are sometimes unfamiliar with mechanisms in place to collect feedback and rules relating to staff conduct. According to the [Participatory Assessment Final Report 2022 for Uganda](#) conducted by UNHCR, refugee participation in decision-making and their knowledge and perspectives on complaint and feedback mechanisms was low. As per the findings, 54% of respondents considered that aid agencies do not provide assistance that is appropriate and relevant to their needs. Only 52% of respondents were aware of and knew how to use the complaint and feedback mechanisms in their community. Additionally, out of the 46% of the respondents who had reported to have used a complaint and feedback mechanism in the six months, 53% were not satisfied with the response they received. However, the AAP Task Team members in Uganda are closing the gap by strengthening the institutional AAP culture and systems within their organisations and creating awareness and removing barriers for refugees to be able to hold organisations accountable for their actions or lack thereof.

### [AAP in the U-Learn Consortium](#)

Since 2021, U-Learn has been working to reinforce and raise the focus on AAP in Uganda and increase the voices and participation of refugees in decision-making about policies that affect their lives. Under the British High Commission (BHC)-funded U-Learn consortium, as one of the three components of U-Learn,<sup>9</sup> the IRC-led [AAP](#) is a vital aspect of the principally UKaid-funded consortium. UKaid holds AAP as a policy priority in recognition of its contribution to increasing cost-effectiveness<sup>10</sup> and the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and other forms of corruption.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly pertinent in the Ugandan context, which has been subject to several claims of fraud and abuse in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

As well as providing training and support to response providers, the AAP component of the U-Learn consortium also supports the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF). The REF ensures refugee participation in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Steering Group through representative community structures.<sup>13</sup> U-Learn AAP staff support both refugee committees to share community concerns and operational agencies to listen to refugee voices through community feedback sessions.

Alongside UNHCR, U-Learn co-hosts the AAP Task Team, which consists of 38 organisations and helps facilitate a coordinated approach to AAP initiatives in the Ugandan refugee response. The AAP Task Team aims to harmonise responses by developing an interagency strategy and common indicators, supporting advocacy and resource mobilisation, and providing technical support to implementing organisations. UNHCR also houses an interagency Feedback, Referral and Resolution Mechanism (FRRM), a coordinated and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/usaid-bureau-humanitarian-assistance-uganda-country-assistance-overview-august-2023>

<sup>9</sup> The other two components are the Learning Hub, led by the Response Innovation Lab and hosted by Save the Children, and Research, led by IMPACT Initiatives.

<sup>10</sup> <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15356>

<sup>11</sup> [https://ica-independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/01-AGU133\\_001\\_PSEA-Review-February-2022\\_100222\\_J-1.pdf](https://ica-independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/01-AGU133_001_PSEA-Review-February-2022_100222_J-1.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/09/17/Uganda-UN-staff-sexual-abuse-exploitation>

<sup>13</sup> Further information on the REF can be found here: [REF Good Practice Study Brief](#).

collective hotline to address queries and complaints by individuals affected by forced displacement. In 2021, U-Learn and UNHCR co-organised a training for response actors in Uganda with the aim of creating clarity about and integration of AAP in program implementation.

## The case for Accountability to Affected Populations

### What do we mean by accountability?

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is an active commitment by humanitarian actors to use power responsibly and involve communities receiving assistance in programming and decision making.<sup>14</sup> Simply put, being accountable means ensuring decision-making power is **in the hands of the people affected by crises. It recognizes that “women, girls, men and boys of all ages and in all their diversity are the first responders and active agents in their own relief and recovery”**<sup>15</sup>, and it upholds their right to influence the decisions that affect their lives.



Figure 1: AAPA training session with TPO Uganda Staff in Yumbe (credit: U-Learn)

### Why is it important, especially in a refugee response context?

AAP is understood to be key to delivering against Global Refugee Compact and Grand Bargain commitments. There is increasing evidence that it can influence the effectiveness and sustainability of assistance, which is vital given ever growing demands on increasingly constrained resources.<sup>16</sup>

On an ethical level, AAP ensures that humanitarian action protects and preserves the rights and dignity of crisis-affected people and upholds humanitarian principles. On a programmatic level, it makes sure that the assistance provided is relevant, inclusive, and effective. AAP is a way to measure the collective performance of the humanitarian system, in how programmes respond and adapt to feedback and how affected people experience

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/our\\_work/DOE/humanitarian\\_emergencies/AAP/two-pagebriefonaap.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/our_work/DOE/humanitarian_emergencies/AAP/two-pagebriefonaap.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ocha-message-accountability-affected-people>

<sup>16</sup> <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/characteristics-of-crisis-need-and-funding/>



and perceive humanitarian assistance.<sup>17</sup> Studies suggest that better engagement with communities contributes to building trust and acceptance. This can improve the operational environment, potentially increase the impact of interventions, and mitigate negative relationships between refugees and host communities.<sup>18</sup> However, when expectations are raised and not met, or community engagement is not done well, the results can be worse than if no efforts were made at all.<sup>19</sup>

Accountability plays an important role in prioritising decisions and encouraging increased linkages for refugees with longer-term response structures. Protracted refugee crises are challenging to fund as funding to respond does not rise in line with growing needs. The priorities of people in protracted displacement often fall beyond the remit of humanitarian response and focus on longer-term aspirations.

**Understanding and sharing information on communities'** needs and priorities can support more effective connection with longer-term development actors and objectives or engagement with national social-protection systems or local institutions.<sup>20</sup>

**“The gaps between what humanitarian actors provide and the priorities of people experiencing protracted crises are particularly stark when working with refugees in long-term displacement and internally displaced people”**  
ALNAP (2023)

### Global commitments and progress in accountability to refugees

The need for increased accountability to affected populations has evolved from its beginnings in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and emergence of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, through the Transformative Agenda and emergence of the CHS. AAP gained increased importance with the Participation Revolution in the 2016 Grand Bargain negotiations and more recent updates, including a revision to the IASC commitments and the second Task Force focused on system-wide change. Recent high-level initiatives such as the CHS revision and OCHA flagship initiative are an attempt to amplify the voices of local and national actors in humanitarian governance structures.

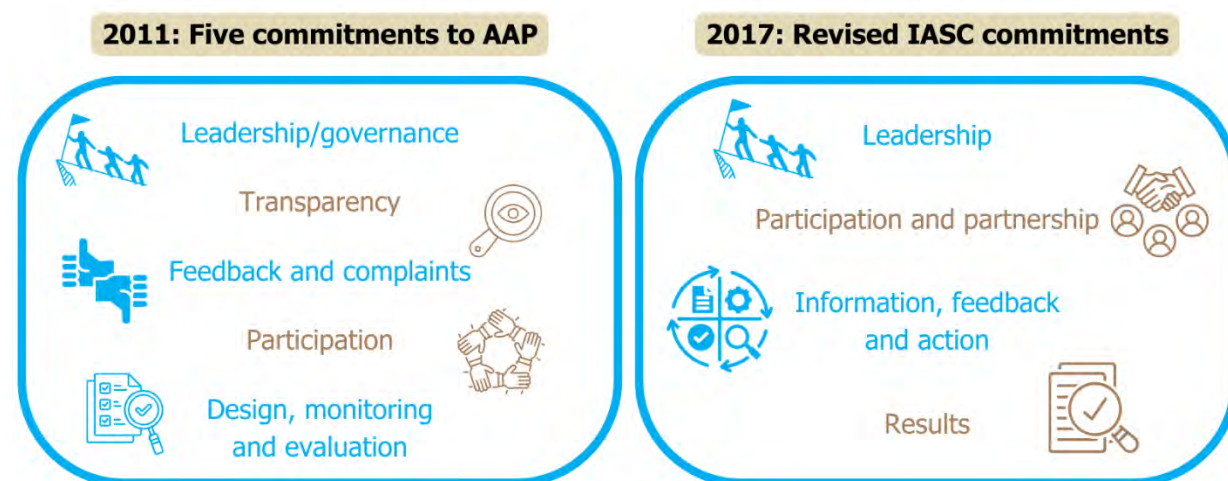


Figure 2: IASC AAP Commitments in 2011 and 2017

<sup>17</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ocha-message-accountability-affected-people>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/about-us/2019/12/18/trust-will-make-or-break-humanitarian-action>

<sup>19</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/tick-box-turning-point-getting-accountability-right-improved-humanitarian-action>

<sup>20</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/tick-box-turning-point-getting-accountability-right-improved-humanitarian-action>

### [Learning from global progress reviews](#)

Despite global commitments and increasing attention given to AAP, the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System report reveals that only one-third of aid recipients surveyed were able to complain or provide feedback regarding the services they received.<sup>21</sup> The wide plethora of training, guidelines, and tools<sup>22</sup> available highlights efforts to try and foster agency. However, the most recent global reviews concluded that operational agencies have too often **focused on how to 'do AAP' rather than more deeply engaging** with what it means to be accountable. These limitations are not only rooted in access to knowledge or tools, but also touch upon the more fundamental problems of the power imbalance between recipients and aid-providing organisations and staff mindsets in aid-providing organisations.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to these systemic dynamics, the power imbalance extends to junior staff, who work directly with communities and receive feedback, yet lack the influence to change budgets or programming in response.<sup>24</sup> Recent studies have shown that, if progress is to be made, the barriers to change need to be clearly identified and addressed.<sup>25</sup> A first step is embedding a culture of accountability that acknowledges and challenges the existing power balance. This also has linkages with recent debates around localisation and decolonisation and suggests a clear need to focus on leadership and culture, not just tools and processes.

**The barriers accountability have typically been tackled with technical solutions and increasingly professionalised, but siloed, accountability functions instead of engaging with decision-makers on issues of structure, culture, and political blockages.”**  
*ALNAP (2023)*



Figure 3: U-Learn team with NRC staff at AAPA Workshop in Arua city (credit: U-Learn)

<sup>21</sup> <https://sohs.alnap.org/news/state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2022-briefing-crisis-affected-populations-accountability-and>

<sup>22</sup> [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH\\_Practice-Paper-8\\_AAP\\_draft7.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf), page 11

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/humanitarian-failing-crisis-un-aid-relief>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/putting-people-at-the-centre-accountability-to-affected-populations-briefing>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/blogs/moving-humanitarian-accountability-from-a-tickbox-to-a-turning-point-the-crucial-role-of>

### [How has AAP been pursued or integrated in international refugee responses?](#)

Despite AAP's **centrality**, translating principles into practice remains a challenge for humanitarian actors and significant strides need to be taken to advance and systemise effective and genuine accountability.<sup>26</sup> A growing focus on the potential benefits has highlighted the need for greater leadership and collective action to address the slow progress seen in previous years. As a result, working groups, task forces or focal persons exist in all major current refugee responses, including in Venezuela, South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Rohingya response in Bangladesh. Over half (57%) of humanitarian country teams have a response-wide accountability framework for affected people and 66% have a country-level working group on AAP or community engagement.<sup>27</sup> AAP Working Group key functions often include training humanitarian responders and creating shared resources or tools for collective AAP. In many cases, there are strong links between AAP and communication with communities as well as interagency referrals.



Figure 4: Collective mechanisms for AAP in selected refugee responses

To date there is little evidence on how these coordination-level activities or processes have contributed to AAP outcomes. Initial review suggests that results from these collective mechanisms are often too disconnected from outcomes at the community level. Response-wide AAP activities need to be complemented with actively engaging individual organisations – who are the primary interface with affected populations – and address the barriers that prevent them from incorporating feedback from communities.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to collective structures, individual organisations often have their own processes and training to increase knowledge and understanding of AAP. However, global measurement against the CHS reveals that humanitarian agencies are struggling to turn **intentions into implementation when it comes to 'putting people at the centre' of** programming and decision-making<sup>32</sup> and that individual humanitarian agencies find the specific commitments on AAP among the hardest to implement.<sup>33</sup> Very limited evidence was found of the existence of a mechanism that supports response providers to practically

<sup>26</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/ground-truth-solutions-2022-listening-not-enough-global-analysis-report>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/note-on-iasc-coordination-structures-at-country-level-in-2021>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.r4v.info/en/AAP>; [https://www.r4v.info/sites/default/files/2021-10/R4V\\_APP\\_report\\_EN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.r4v.info/sites/default/files/2021-10/R4V_APP_report_EN_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/93593>; <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/strengthening-system-wide-accountability-affected-people-aap-ukraine-framework-report>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2022/05/Accountability-to-Affected-People-Assessing-NGO-engagement-with-the-Collective-AAP-Framework.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/the-grand-bargain-in-2022-an-independent-review>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/har-2020/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/har-2022/>

improve AAP by delivering 'on the job' catered training. Ground Truth Solutions in Afghanistan were found to provide direct support to local organisations working specifically on complaints and feedback mechanisms.<sup>34</sup>

## Accountability in practice: programme spotlight from Uganda

### Overview of the AAP in Action (AAPA) programme

Following an initial online AAP training organised by U-Learn and UNHCR in 2021, participants expressed the need for further support to operationalise the conceptual knowledge gained. The AAP in Action (AAPA) programme is a follow-up initiative to help integrate AAP in programming through tailored one-on-one support.

The AAPA programme is supporting organisations looking to strengthen AAP in their programming in Uganda through a process of technical training on core AAP concepts and practical application. The programme includes analysis of existing strengths, weaknesses, and gaps; identification of key actions to address weaknesses and gaps; development of customised work plans to implement identified actions; and tailored in-depth support and mentoring from U-Learn staff.

Originally implemented over three months and later extended to six, the programme covers the three regions (North, West Nile, and South-West) where U-Learn is present and which host most refugees. Participating organisations include UN agencies, international organisations (IOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), national NGOs, and community-based organisations (CBOs) or refugee-led organisations (RLOs). As of October 2023, the AAPA programme has successfully graduated three cohorts, totalling sixteen organisations, and selected additional six organisations (two organisations per region) for cohort four and five.

The AAPA programme was supported by a Programme Coordinator, a Senior Programme Manager, and three regional managers (one per region). Each of these roles also had responsibilities to support the REF, therefore a maximum of 50% of their time was directed towards the AAPA programme. These roles mutually reinforced each other and provided rich insights and experiences from which to draw examples for AAPA partners.

A total of 24 organisations were selected to participate in the AAPA programme, with 16 partners in cohorts 1, 2, 3 and 4 successfully graduating.

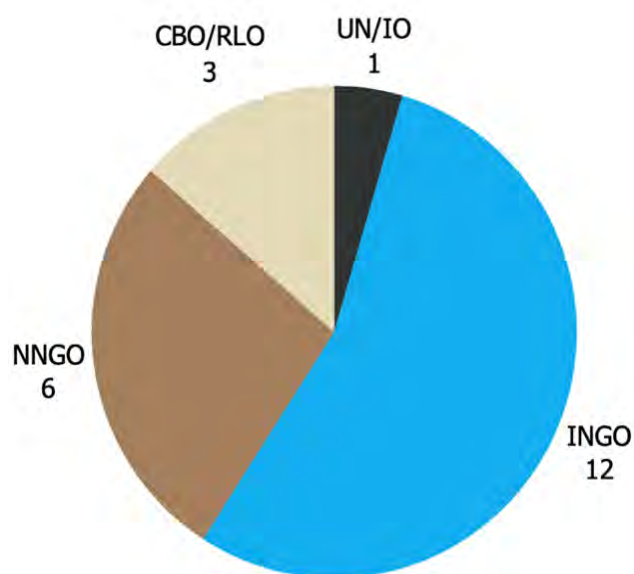


Figure 5: Overview of AAPA participants by type of organisation

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.groundtruthsolutions.org/projects/system-design-and-training-supporting-local-ngos-in-afghanistan>



Cohort	North	West Nile	South West
1 AUG – OCT 2022	Lutheran World Federation	World Vision International	World Food Programme
2 NOV 2022 – JAN 2023	Candidates withdrew	Caritas Andre Food International	African Women and Youth Action for Development Hunger Fighters Uganda
3 JAN – MARCH 2023	Medical Teams International	Candidates withdrew	Alight Tutapona
4 MAY – OCT 2023*	AVSI Foundation Humanity and Inclusion	Danish Refugee Council Norwegian Refugee Council	Adventist Development Relief Agency African Humanitarian Action
5 OCT 2023 – MARCH 2024*	Alliance Forum for Development Refugee Youth Self Help Association	TPO Uganda Global Rehabilitation and Transformation Response	Finn Church Aid Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development

\* implementation timeframe based on feedback from cohorts 1, 2 and 3

Color legend: NNGOs UN/IO INGO CBO/RLO

Figure 6: Participation in the AAPA programme by type of organisation

#### [Programme design](#)

Based on feedback from participants and an assessment of partners' needs following the online training in 2021, U-Learn identified five key areas for the AAPA programme.

For each support area, U-Learn developed a package of technical training modules and tools, such as baseline and endline assessments, action plan templates, checklists, and a benchmarking form to track improvements. Participating organisations selected two or three technical support areas from the menu for more in-depth coaching based on their needs and priorities.



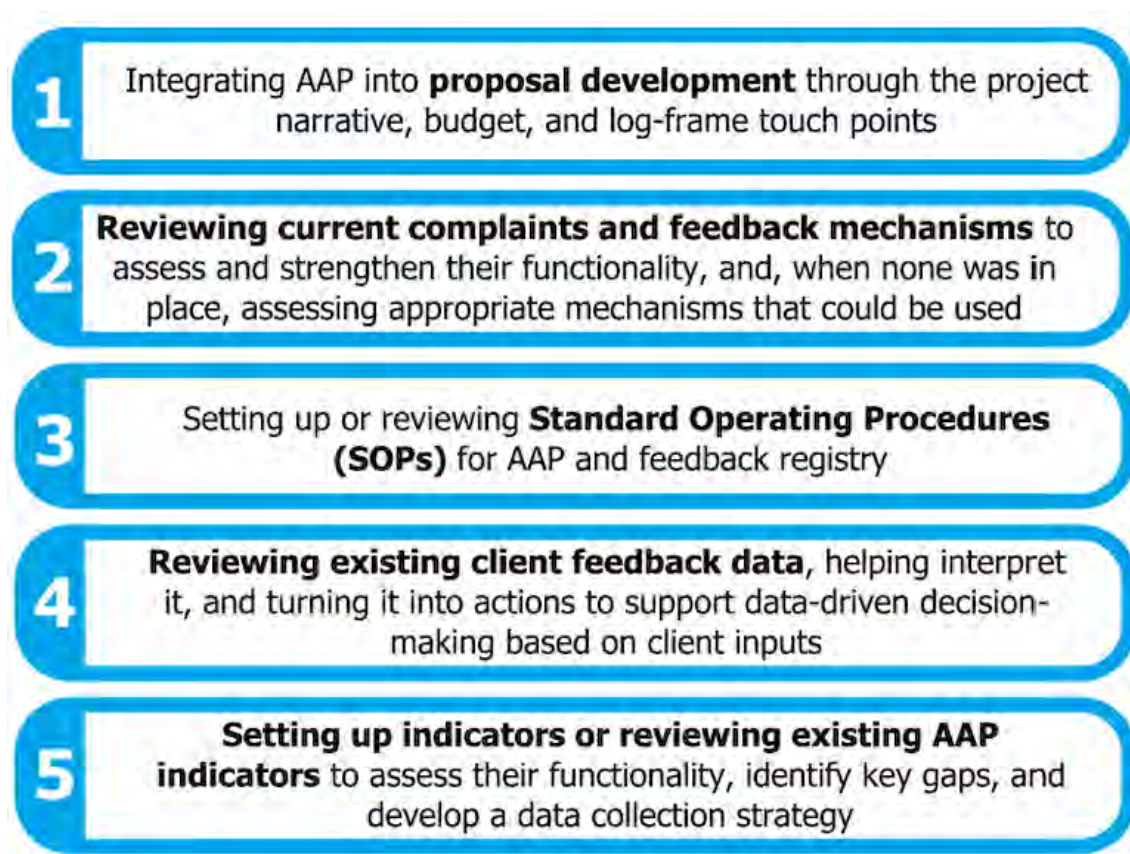


Figure 7: The five technical support areas

Across the five cohorts, Area 2 on complaints and feedback mechanisms was the most demanded – selected by twenty out of 22 organisations – followed by Area 1 (integrating AAP into proposal development), and subsequently Area 3 (standard operating procedures). Areas 4 (interpreting feedback data) and 5 (setting up indicators) were selected by only four organisations.

**This distribution reflects participants' preference to work in areas where they have already taken some action and want to evaluate and improve, rather than suggesting that organisations are already doing well in the less chosen areas, or that they are not a priority. In addition, Areas 1-3 often include aspects of 4 and 5.**

### Implementation

While each cohort and organisation have a slightly unique experience because trainings are tailored to their circumstances, the overall training journey can be summarised as follows in the figure below.

## **Step 1 Application**

A call for applications to participate in the AAPA programme is widely shared by U-Learn on their website and social media and promoted by UNHCR and Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) via email and through the AAP Task Team. The call is shared with settlement committees and posted on notice boards to encourage a wide variety of partners to apply. A one-month period is given for interested organisations to submit their applications via an online form, which collects information on why they are interested in mainstreaming AAP and what the current gaps are.

## **Step 2 Selection**

Organisations are selected by U-Learn based on the criteria set in the call for applications. Criteria includes: expression of interest and commitment to dedicate the necessary time and effort, previous participation in the online training, and support from senior management provided through email endorsement and identification of an AAP focal point (preferably with Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning - MEAL background). In general, priority was given to organisations with the shared goal of promoting an AAP community of practice in the Uganda refugee response. As the number of applicants significantly supersedes acceptance, the selection process also considers the range of thematic sectors as well as the organisation's geographical presence and programmatic reach in the region to ensure diversity.

## **Step 3 Onboarding**

Selected organisations are matched with a U-Learn AAP manager based in their region to agree on a schedule in line with participants' needs, goals, and availability, as well as alignment with ongoing programme implementation. This step includes an email verification from senior leadership. The initial commitment was two hours bi-weekly over the three-month period.

## **Step 4 Technical training**

Each support area has training materials developed by U-Learn. The AAP Manager and participating organisations work through key considerations and methods within each technical area. Participation from all relevant and interested staff in the partner organisation is encouraged. Modules are worked through in weekly online sessions. Field visits are also arranged to assess implementation in practice.

## **Step 5 Baseline assessment**

During training sessions that cover the five technical support areas, organisations assess their own status and evaluate strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in their programming and current AAP activities. This self-appraisal forms a baseline assessment in their chosen support areas guided by a benchmarking tool developed by U-Learn. This tool systematically identifies current mechanisms in place and related gaps and provides a framework to determine and plan specific solutions.



## Step 6 Workplan

Together with the AAP manager, organisations collaboratively develop a customised work plan and AAP goals for implementation. This plan lays out the required actions or steps to address the identified weaknesses or gaps, whether this is strengthening or improving existing mechanisms or establishing new ones. The organisation sets their own goals and dates by which they aim to achieve them. This allows them to consider internal organisational schedules and decisions that may need sign off from senior leadership. With the AAP manager, they also determine a schedule of regular check-ins and availability for further practical sessions or site visits.

## Step 7 Implementation support

Together with the AAP manager, organisations collaboratively develop a customised work plan and AAP goals for implementation. This plan lays out the required actions or steps to address the identified weaknesses or gaps, whether this is strengthening or improving existing mechanisms or establishing new ones. The organisation sets their own goals and dates by which they aim to achieve them. This allows them to consider internal organisational schedules and decisions that may need sign off from senior leadership. With the AAP manager, they also determine a schedule of regular check-ins and availability for further practical sessions or site visits.

## Step 8 Endline assessment

At the end of the implementation period, organisations and AAP managers assess their progress and changes in AAP practices through an end-line survey. This reviews all the actions taken by participants and the extent to which the initially identified weaknesses or gaps have been addressed. Organisations are deemed to have fulfilled the requirements and are eligible for graduation if they have successfully enacted changes to achieve pre-defined indicators.

## Step 9 Graduation

Upon successful completion of the programme, a graduation ceremony is held to recognise the efforts made by partners and highlight key changes and success stories from the cohort.

## Step 10 COP

After graduating from the programme, participants are invited to join the AAP Task Team monthly meetings. U-Learn plans to collaborate with the AAP Task Team to establish an AAP Community of Practice (COP) in which members can exchange lessons and best practices on a regular basis. Many previous participants also remain in contact with their AAP manager and continue to reach out and receive support on an informal basis.

Figure 8: Steps in AAPA programme implementation

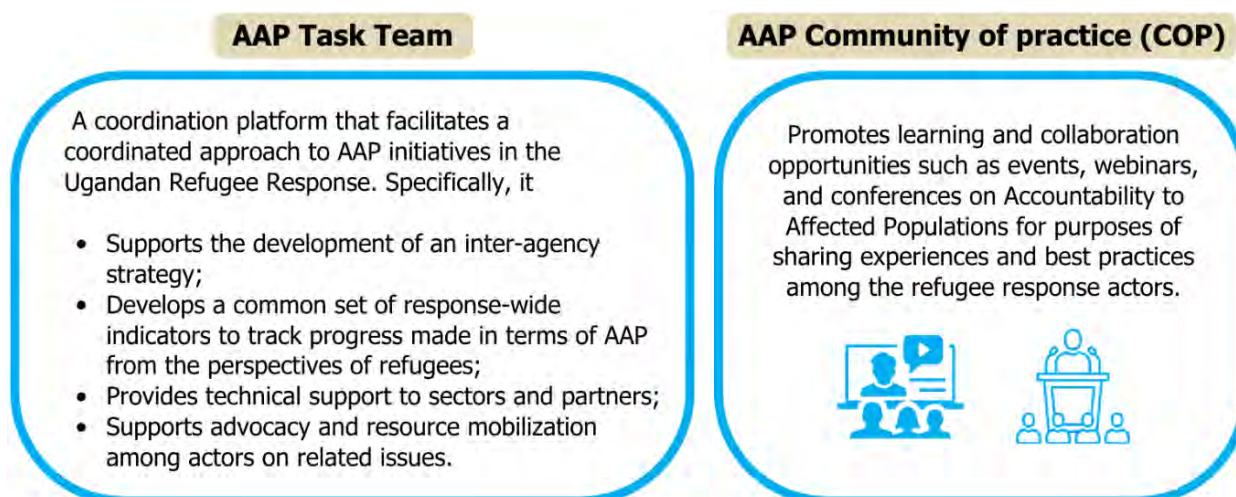


Figure 9: Definitions of AAP Task Team and AAP Community of practice (COP)

### Challenges faced

Key informants highlighted several challenges faced during the process of participating in the AAPA programme.

Participating organisations and programme staff cited:



**Connectivity issues:** Online trainings had difficulties due to lack of internet data, poor network coverage and staff availability that resulted in key information being missed or delays in covering the material. Online sessions were still useful to increase the number of staff involved across a wide range of locations and to touch base but were less productive than in-person sessions.



**Conflicting responsibilities:** Often the identified focal point for the AAPA programme was assigned this position as an additional responsibility to their day-to-day tasks. Participants therefore had to balance their engagement with ongoing job requirements unrelated to AAP. This sometimes led to delays in implementing the tasks assigned to them in the AAPA work plan or inconsistent participation in training sessions.



**Lack of budget allocation:** Organisations faced barriers to implementing all the identified actions, particularly when actions required resource allocations not previously included in the budget, or which had been cut because of decreasing funding envelopes. This especially affected NGOs and CBOs and projects with very inflexible budgets. However, it also pushed organisations to be creative in finding other ways to meet their objectives.

Participants also mentioned:

**Buy-in of senior management:** Although senior leadership support was a requirement at the selection stage, partners experienced different levels of engagement and commitment from organisational leadership, particularly when decision-makers were not part of the training and additional resources or organisation-wide changes were required.



**Attempts to coordinate with other response providers:** Some participants faced challenges reaching an agreement with other organisations working in the same geographic area, such as collective feedback mechanisms. Organisations also needed guidance around how to share feedback from the training with their partners. Local organisations sometimes experienced an unwillingness to listen or patronising attitude from INGOs when they suggested collaborative approaches or referral mechanisms for AAP.





U-Learn staff additionally identified:



**Differing organisational capacity:** While some organisations already had a solid understanding of AAP and established AAP mechanisms, others (particularly national NGOs and CBOs) had little to no exposure to the concept of AAP or key concepts such as standard operating procedures. This required more time and investment to develop a strong foundation which limited the extent and depth of topics covered within an organisation. Staff turnover also caused difficulties if key staff were trained only to leave the organisation without imparting knowledge.



**Concerns over negative perceptions:** AAP managers would carry out spot checks to assess to what extent organisations implemented what they stated. This could give an appearance of mistrust if not implemented in a sensitive manner. The strength of the relationship with the AAP manager was vital to ensure that the organisation prioritised increasing the participation of affected people and did not interpret AAPA oversight as policing their work.

### Evolution and adaptation

The AAPA programme was designed to be dynamic and evolve over time based on ongoing feedback from participants. Given the sensitive nature of mainstreaming programmes that appear to monitor the actions of an organisation, the ability to implement an AAPA programme fundamentally rests upon implementation through empathetic cooperation. Some changes were implemented in response to the challenges while the AAPA programme was ongoing; other challenges will require further effort beyond the programme. Key changes implemented included:

- **Increased number of areas covered:** Organisations expressed the desire to receive further training in technical support areas beyond the two that they initially selected. As a result, U-Learn expanded the selection to three out of five support areas for Cohorts 4 and 5. Although the three selected areas provided the basis for assessment and graduation, the technical training was expanded to address all five areas, allowing organisations to identify gaps and continue to work on solutions beyond the timeframe of the programme.
- **Increased timeframe:** The first three cohorts all had a three-month timeframe in which to implement the programme. Participants found that the time needed to fully explore the technical support areas left limited time to practically implement the necessary actions. Alongside the addition of an extra focus area, U-Learn extended the timeframe to six months for Cohorts 4 and 5.
- **Support for in-person workshops:** Although consensus was reached that an in-person workshop was a more conducive way to cover the required training material, this was not an option for certain organisations due to resource constraints, particularly NNGOs and CBOs. As a result, U-Learn took this into account and adjusted the budget to support organisations struggling to mobilise the necessary resources (accommodation, travel, per diem of participating organisations).
- **Shift to in-person technical training:** Based on the success of the initial AAP online training co-organised with UNHCR in 2021, the AAPA programme combined a large component of online technical training sessions, which helped to include staff from widespread locations, with planned in-person site visits and hands-on support. However, due to challenges in online engagement, one organisation opted to complete all the technical modules during a one-week face-to-face workshop rather than weekly online sessions. This guarded the availability of designated personnel



and avoided long gaps between sessions. Over time, as the efficacy has become apparent, one-week in-person technical trainings have increased, while still utilising online engagement to provide check-ins and continuous support.

- Leadership support for time commitment: In later cohorts, participating partners were expected to be available for one week-long in-person training. They also committed to at least two hours weekly to enable regular check-ins and progress assessments. U-Learn proposed and implemented a system where a commitment agreement was **signed by the partner's senior leader(s), AAP focal point(s), and U-Learn** before technical support commences, to ensure high-level engagement.
- Combination of technical training with site visit: The in-person technical training workshop combined desk-based learning with a one-day site visit. This format was seen to be successful, as the on-site excursion clearly demonstrated the link between the theory presented in the training and the reality on the ground.
- Revised criteria for inclusion of local organisations: Few CBOs and RLOs took part in the initial online training (selection criteria), which created a barrier to their inclusion. Noting limited engagement in the first cohort, this selection criterion was relaxed to accommodate local organisations eager to increase their understanding and application of AAP. CBOs and RLOs were instead provided with online AAP resources to increase awareness prior to starting the AAPA training, ensuring their inclusion in subsequent cohorts.

### Results of the programme

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with AAPA programme participants and key stakeholders shed light on their experiences prior to the AAPA programme and difficulties in achieving AAP in the Uganda response. These challenges reveal problems in awareness, attitude, comprehension, and practical application. The table below captures how involvement in the AAPA programme addressed these issues and increased the possibility to meaningfully identify and respond to community-raised concerns in programme implementation.

KIIs also revealed how awareness and understanding of AAP varied considerably across different organisations prior to the AAPA training. Some organisations have already developed detailed guidance training programmes and regularly implement refresher sessions.<sup>35</sup> Others had made gestures towards AAP without understanding the purpose, particularly through attempts at CFMs. Some community-based organisations (CBOs) and refugee-led organisations (RLOs) had not heard of the term AAP, yet already demonstrated respect for many of the key principles in their relationships with communities.

 We had these complaints mechanisms in place [and] indicators in our projects... but we never thought about having these as a mechanism for monitoring our contributions to the community."  
— LWF, INGO, Cohort 1

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<sup>35</sup> As shared by World Vision and WFP

Before	After
Disconnect between verbal commitments and concrete actions	Greater alignment between stated priorities and actions on the ground
AAP considered the remit of only one person or team	AAP recognised to be an organisation-wide responsibility that requires involvement at all levels
Assumptions made that refugees and host communities do not have much to contribute	Recognition of the skills and knowledge refugees and host communities can contribute
Struggle to justify the importance of activities that support AAP when faced with budget cuts	Prepared with information of how taking community feedback into account makes assistance more relevant and effective
Understanding of AAP principles but lack of clarity on how to practically implement them	Aware of processes that support AAP at every stage of the programme cycle
Limited integration of AAP approaches into project proposal development	Increased application of AAP approaches into the proposal narrative, budget, and indicators. Out of the ten AAPA participating organisations that integrated AAP into proposals, three of them confirmed receiving additional funding from their donors, before graduating from the programme.
Very limited options for aid recipients to share feedback with organisations	Diversification of client feedback collection channels by partners
Partner utilization of IFRRM toll free line for collection of feedback was very limited	Increased awareness raising and utilization of the IFRRM toll-free line for receiving client feedback among eight AAPA organisations
Absence of standard operating procedures for AAP	Six AAPA participants developed a SOP for AAP to guide organisational staff

Figure 10: Challenges to AAP implementation in Uganda addressed through the AAPA programme

The AAPA programme adapted to whether participants were more or less familiar with the terminology or underlying ideas. U-Learn supported incremental progress within a structured menu of AAP core concepts in accordance with the skills and capacity of the organisation.

<p><b>Dedicated AAP capacity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AAP focal points identified within organisations and projects</li> <li>• Accountability champions established in each district to sustain learning and cascade it through the organisation</li> <li>• Complaints response officer hired</li> <li>• Increased involvement of senior management with AAP staff</li> </ul>	<p><b>Proposal development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AAP narrative and indicators included in funding proposals</li> <li>• Field staff participation in project design and development</li> <li>• Budget allocation to support community engagement activities</li> <li>• AAP and PSEA position included as standard in proposals, even when not required</li> </ul>
<p><b>CFMs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variety of community feedback mechanisms established or upgraded including helplines, protection desks, village agents, face-to-face, suggestion boxes, community monitoring, social media, walk-ins tailored according to populations needs and preferences</li> <li>• Awareness raising in communities on available mechanisms</li> <li>• Adaptation of existing feedback mechanisms to make them more appropriate and accessible: helplines become toll-free, access for PWD, and language or literacy barriers lifted</li> <li>• Reduced time between complaints being received and addressed</li> <li>• Closing the feedback loop through development of tracking system to ensure complaints were logged and followed up on</li> <li>• Sharing of consolidated feedback to inform lessons across all locations</li> </ul>	<p><b>SOPs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of SOPs drawing together previously disparate guidance</li> <li>• Developed clear guidance and standards to monitor AAP indicators and capture AAP narrative in proposals</li> <li>• Creation of a centralised feedback registry</li> <li>• Development of clear referral pathways</li> <li>• Submission of systematic feedback reports with dashboard to track closing the loop</li> <li>• Inclusion of previously overlooked issues in SOPs, such as disability</li> </ul> <p><b>Use of data and indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged staff at various levels and explained their role in using client data</li> <li>• Clarified relationship between CFM mechanisms and programme design and accountability</li> <li>• Expanded range of indicators to measure AAP compared to previously only measuring satisfaction</li> </ul>

Figure 11: Examples of actions taken to improve accountability across core AAP concepts across participating organisations

### [Key successes and contributing factors](#)

The clearest success of the AAPA programme is an improved culture of accountability, as **seen in participating organisations' growing awareness of the need to improve and the practical steps taken to increase the extent to which they seek, listen to, and act upon client feedback.**

This spotlight is not an evaluation, and therefore is not able to conclude the extent to which **the AAPA programme has empirically increased AAP in Uganda's refugee response. The** impact of the AAPA programme could only be measured by seeking direct feedback from refugees and host communities about the changes they have experienced in the way

participating organisations interact with them. While this study can surmise that the actions taken by AAPA participants has strengthened the likelihood that voices of affected populations will inform programming at all stages, it acknowledges the risk of overclaiming **success based on “maintain[ing] the focus on process instead of outcome”**.<sup>36</sup> However, several distinct achievements establish a strong basis for successful positive outcomes.



Figure 12: Key successes of the AAPA spotlight programme

### Increased knowledge and understanding

The AAPA programme increased participants' knowledge and understanding of the importance and value of being accountable to affected populations. The course shifted the focus and understanding of accountability being primarily towards donors, and onto the people being served.

- Attitudes towards refugees were challenged and changed, by increasing recognition of what they can contribute and their position as rights holders.
- Participants recognised how AAP contributes to better programme design: by improving communication and increasing trust between communities and providers, and by ensuring needs are met and resources are used efficiently.
- Partners developed in-depth understanding of what accountability practically entails, and the variety of different elements that need to be considered throughout the programme cycle.

“ [AAPA] has increased my passion for working with the community...I came to realise that this community we serve, they have brilliant ideas that they can add to the progress of an organisation.”  
— AFI, CBO, Cohort 2

### Increased analysis of current practices

The AAPA programme provided an opportunity for organisations to critically reflect on current accountability practices, to what extent they were effective, and how they needed to be improved.

- The training promoted contemplation on why specific elements were in place and what they aimed to achieve. Many actors realised existing actions were empty **gestures or ‘box-ticking’ that fell short of accomplishing what they were intended to do.** In this way, **the AAPA programme challenged complacency and the ‘comfort zone’ of many organisations.**
- Organisations understood the purpose behind actions and recognised that it is not enough to have a process in place, it needs to be responsive to the needs, preferences, and circumstances of the people they serve.
- Organisations addressed weaknesses that created barriers to being accountable and systematically adjusted mechanisms to strengthen and improve existing processes and systems.

<sup>36</sup> [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH\\_Practice-Paper-8\\_AAP\\_draft7.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf), page 11

Established new procedures and ways of working

The AAPA programme filled a gap in organisational capacity to practically apply theoretical principles.

As a result, organisations were able to establish robust systems to give account, take account and be held to account.


- Changes were made in a short period of time that positively influenced relationships between organisations and refugee communities and their inputs to programming.
- Organisations found that when faced with limited resources, it was possible to think creatively and put in place low-cost approaches. Partners learned both the importance of allocating resources for activities that support AAP, but also that it does not require costly interventions.

 It has helped us in continuous review and amendment of the services we deliver to ensure that they actually reach the people they are intended to.”  
– AHA, INGO, Cohort 4

Raised awareness of AAP

AAPA drew attention to AAP as a key area within organisations and as a whole organisation responsibility.

- AAPA highlighted how AAP is more than just the role of the focal point. The greater the level of organisation-wide recognition and support, the more progress there was and prospects of being accountable increased.
- The knowledge and confidence gained by participants increased their ability to approach senior management to argue for what is necessary and why. Participants can now justify why AAP is important, as well as how AAP benefits the organisation, for example by increasing effectiveness or the likelihood of securing funding.
- The training resulted in greater advocacy for, and inclusion of, budget required to facilitate activities that support AAP. Partner organisations have replicated the changes made across sectors or sub-offices and some have been able to cascade the training through the organisation and to implementing partners.

 With the technical guidance from U-Learn, you could actually see that kind of technical support coming in is a very good backing for us in the M&E department to actually go to management and lobby for additional funding to go to the AAP aspects.”  
– Alight, INGO, Cohort 3

Increased commitment to accountability

The dedicated attention of the AAPA programme staff created a situation in which participating partners were held responsible for the measures they were taking to be accountable to those that benefited from their programmes

- Ongoing oversight from U-Learn encouraged and motivated organisations to tackle areas where improvement was required, knowing that they would be asked to demonstrate their efforts.
- The AAP Task Team and proposed Community of Practice provided peer-to-peer accountability by the continued sharing and strengthening of organisational efforts. Participants who have graduated from the programme and know what to look for can hold other actors to their intentions as well as provide practical advice.


Several factors laid the groundwork to achieve these results. U-Learn led by example in the process of asking for input, seeking feedback, and modifying the AAPA programme as necessary according to participant needs, preferences, and programmatic effectiveness. By **‘walking the talk’ on accountability**, U-Learn modelled how adaptive programming allows the opinions and suggestions of participants to be valued and helps to achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, by recognising barriers and adjusting the selection criteria, U-Learn mitigated discrimination towards local organisations and eliminated the exclusion of those



who had not taken part in the previous online training, ensuring CBOs and RLOs were not left behind.

U-Learn staff provided dedicated support, resources, time, and attention to programme participants. This often went beyond the timeframe of the programme itself, and all participants recognised that without external support, many **changes would not have occurred and peoples' understanding** would still be at a much lower level. The level of attention provided by AAP managers ensured that AAP was taken seriously by participating organisations.

The strong independent brand of U-Learn established a neutral body that did not push the agenda of any one organisation. Despite strong linkages with UNHCR during the training, this autonomy became particularly relevant in the selection process (as many organisations were UNHCR implementing partners). **U-Learn's impartiality also gave the AAP managers a remit to probe** AAPA programme participants with the premise of advocating on behalf of refugees and their rights.

 The follow-up continues, and even now, we continue to discuss with them. They continue to check on us [...] I think [this is] something to appreciate the team from U-Learn: **for not saying, 'We ticked our box, we've completed with WFP'.**  
– WFP, UN/IO, Cohort 1

The concurrent work of U-Learn with the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) indirectly contributed to the AAPA programmes. Staff linkages and direct engagement with elevating refugee voices lent experience and gravitas to the engagement of the AAP managers with operational agencies. This likely also contributed to the increased engagement of AAPA partners in REF community meetings.

Organisational culture and priorities play a vital role in meaningfully improving AAP. The selection of participant organisations considered those already committed to AAP but lacking in knowledge or skills. Participants were willing to commit time and resources to secure additional support and to improve internal practices.

The Ugandan context provided a conducive environment for increasing AAP. Refugee agency and involvement is particularly important in a context promoting self-reliance to determine what assistance may be most effective. AAP creates an impetus for response providers to take this into account. In addition, refugee representation at the CRRF steering group through the REF and their ability to inform response priorities sets a positive example and encourages partners to consider AAP. The ongoing integration of service provision with local government entities further increases the relevance of AAP in identifying and being able to address the longer-term aspirations and priorities of refugees.

Participants also mentioned that the drop in overall response funding contributed to some of the increased attention to AAP and highlighted obvious benefits of AAP, particularly two-way community engagement. Organisations were under more pressure to ensure that proposed programmes would be effective, or to engage communities to avoid tensions or suspicions around changes, for example, to food baskets. This required greater participation and improved communication with communities and was reflected in proposal development and programming.

### Lessons Learned

Focused effort and attention pay off

Dedicating resources towards actively pursuing accountability results in greater and more effective AAP. Every participant interviewed acknowledged that without the AAPA programme, the implemented changes would not have been possible. Dedicated attention


from U-Learn and the focused efforts and commitment of participating organisations have achieved significant progress at the personal, programmatic, and organisational level.

Furthermore, participants saw advantages to having staff dedicated to AAP, as this was seen to provide an internal advocate who can work on mainstreaming and aligning actions across programmes. The location of this position within the organisation makes a difference and it was generally considered most appropriate if it related closely to the M&E function. However, to make the most of this, partners highlighted the need for an organisational culture that recognises collective responsibility and starts addressing accountability from the proposal stage.

#### Change requires consistent commitment

The AAPA programme removed a huge barrier to AAP by helping organisations focus on practical application. However, improved AAP systems tend to increase the burden on NGOs to use and respond to information. One AAPA participant highlighted how being **sensitive and responsive to refugees'** contributions generated further contributions. This reveals the importance of following through on commitments to avoid raising expectations and causing greater dissatisfaction or disillusionment, as well as the energy and resources required from organisations to continue to do this.

In addition, participants mentioned the need for organisations to prioritise AAP and commit to developing awareness and understanding for new staff joining the organisation as well as periodic refresher training for existing staff.

 You will find that actually a number of staff are overwhelmed responding to feedback...especially in terms of reduced food rations [which] creates some kind of a workload for the team on the ground to also continue handling or responding to."

– Alight, INGO,  
Cohort 3

#### Leadership buy-in and engagement is vital

A key lesson emphasised across the range of key informants was the importance of spreading AAP training across the organisation, and in particular, the engagement of senior management and decision-makers. **Participants highlighted the challenge of 'arguing up'** because even in organisations where AAP principles were well-known, AAPA partners faced resistance defending or advocating for resource allocation from their superiors, especially when faced with decreasing funding. Conversely, those who had strong support from higher levels, as part of the organisational culture or through direct involvement in the training were able to make more progress against the identified gaps.

#### The outcome is as important as the process

Some participants initially defined accountability as being something that they did (an action, a process to follow). The AAPA programme challenged existing attitudes and built practical know-how. In many cases this led to a deeper understanding of what it means to strive to be accountable. However, several key informants used language that drew heavily **on jargon and set phrases. Success was variously described as "having an SOP" rather than what the SOP enables or leads to/achieves; "having a CFM" rather than being able to hear and respond to refugees' concerns; or "having indicators and being able to track them"** rather than what indicators reveal about their accountability. This spotlight reminds us of the importance of maintaining a focus on the outcomes and not only the process. The AAPA programme appears unique in the level of support provided to operationalise AAP principles. It also highlights how a focus on practical implementation carries a risk of emphasising process over outcome, which can lead to the flawed assumption that carrying out certain steps or having certain procedures in place automatically leads to greater accountability.

## Recommendations

The AAPA programme raised awareness on the importance and value of AAP in programme implementation, within organisations, and across the Uganda refugee response. It has encouraged organisations to take steps that can lead to greater involvement and agency of affected persons, as well as expanded **receptivity to refugees' knowledge**, skills, and needs.

### Policy recommendations to address power dynamics and increase AAP

Donors and decision-makers play a vital role in facilitating and promoting accountability to affected populations. Relevant and effective support to accountability should build on the localisation agenda and take steps to shift power in the system. Placing more decision-making power in the hands of affected populations can increase effectiveness of aid, reduce risks and ensure desired outcomes. Based on the successes of the AAPA programme and learning from global best practice, the following policy recommendations encourage decision-makers to:

#### Direct more funding to local organisations

While to a certain extent, CBOs and RLOs are generally less familiar with, or aware of, key accountability concepts or terminology, and may lack the standardised procedures typical of INGOs, they often reveal the potential to be inherently more accountable to their counterparts. Due to their intimate connections with communities, many local and refugee-led groups have systems to hold themselves accountable already, although do not necessarily identify them as such. Strengthening local organisations can contribute towards accountability goals and contribute to improved practices in INGOs.

#### Support adaptive programming that can respond to changing needs

More adaptive programming approaches are necessary to prioritise the knowledge and desires of refugees and host communities in design and implementation and facilitate the adaptation of programming to respond to changes without heavy bureaucratic procedures. Donors should facilitate more flexible grant management that focuses on how best to achieve outcomes, rather than predefined or limited activities and outputs. Programs that make linkages between collective structures and agency-specific actions should be invested in, as well as those that seek to increase connections with longer-term representative and responsive structures.

#### Promote accountability as a whole organisation endeavour

The role of community engagement by frontline staff in developing two-way information sharing and fostering trust with communities should be recognised and supported. Community engagement activities need to be included in budgets and not deprioritised in favour of direct assistance, with donors requiring that a specific percentage of the budget be allocated. Inputs from frontline staff should be sought for programme design and proposal development. Concurrently, senior leadership have a key role in reviewing and responding to gathered feedback.

#### Invest resources to increase evidence of what works

More verification is needed to measure actual change in increased accountability. Strong data on the outcomes of training and guidance to support AAP is of global relevance and value, as this is an area in which robust evidence is lacking.<sup>37</sup> The impact of the investment by implementing organisations should be determined by seeking the opinions of refugees and other affected persons themselves. Investing in measuring the impact rather than just outputs of institutional or collective level mechanisms is critical.

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<sup>37</sup> [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH\\_Practice-Paper-8\\_AAP\\_draft7.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf), page 11.

### Programmatic recommendations

Based on the challenges, contributing factors and lessons in this spotlight, the following programmatic recommendations encourage response actors interested in continuing or implementing a similar approach to the AAPA.

**Make yourself accountable to being accountable through peer structures**  
AAP is not so much a series of steps, as a fundamental shift. It requires aid organisations to recognize that their primary responsibility is towards affected communities to whom they provide services. Programmes aiming to increase accountability need to start by challenging preconceived notions or misconceptions about the contribution of affected populations or about aid as a gift. To support this, organisations need to open themselves up to scrutiny and use external third parties or collective structures to create and reinforce a culture of accountability. In the case of Uganda, the AAPA staff, AAP Task Team and the establishment of an AAP community of practice (COP) encouraged organisations to hold each other to account. Consider inviting community leaders to certain COP sessions to validate claims made by partners and maximise linkages with existing structures, such as the REF in Uganda. The structures and opportunities may vary country to country but should be harnessed to support impact monitoring and feedback on accountability claims.

### **Design and implement programmes iteratively**

The AAPA programme sought continued input to respond to the needs of participants. Adapt the design as necessary in response to feedback. Based on successes from Uganda, organisations should maximise in-person workshops to ring fence participants' time and engagement. Ensure that training sessions are engaging and use a variety of participative methods. Consider extending the time allocated for site visits to directly link theory to practice. One-on-one mentoring and coaching and tailored support to action plans allows adaptation to the individual needs of each participating organisation to maximise the results. Implementation timeframes and the selection of targets should be developed in consultation with participants, making sure there is adequate time and resources for the development of the work plan and implementation.

### **Combine theory and practice but prioritise outcome over process**

The strength of the AAPA programme is clearly linking theoretical approaches with practical actions and developing implementation capacity. Similar programmes should ensure input from AAP experts. However, support to increase accountability should not be overly technocratic. The focus on the process needs to be balanced with messaging on its purpose **of being responsive to needs and choices. It is possible to 'tick all the boxes' and still miss the mark** in terms of meaningfully **increasing refugees' agency in** decision-making, and the overall relevance and usefulness of assistance.<sup>38</sup> Attention needs to be maintained on people. Actions should be clearly promoted as a means to an end, so that it is unambiguous **that the ultimate goal is not 'doing AAP' but being accountable.**<sup>39</sup>

### **Ensure involvement at all levels**

While identifying dedicated AAP focal points is positive, ensure responsibility for AAP is spread throughout the organisation. Ensure senior management participation in as much of the training as possible. AAP training should not only be aimed at frontline or mid-level management. Consider a session specifically on the role of senior management and whole organisational support in the curriculum. Developing refresher training to address staff turnover and train new staff as they join organisations, as well as provide a reminder to those who have already graduated. Consider how training can be disseminated widely through the organisation, such as by adapting materials to include a training of trainers

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2023/04/05/ways-aid-system-can-improve-its-accountability>

<sup>39</sup> [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH\\_Practice-Paper-8\\_AAP\\_draft7.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf), page 13.

component that can be used to transfer learning between and within organisations, including CBOs and RLOs. If in-person support is not feasible, make AAPA modules available via an online training module.

#### Include and learn from local organisations

The existing strengths of local organisations should be identified, rather than being measured against a series of protocols or checklists and found lacking by comparison. This requires understanding accountability and having an unbiased attitude towards local organisations. Recognise and utilise the underlying value and function of existing relationships with the community. Facilitators can draw this out to help organisations analyse their own strengths and use nuance to combine existing strengths with knowledge or practical actions. Such an approach can counteract power dynamics between INGOs and local organisations. Instead of the condescension experienced by some AAPA participants, diverse organisations can learn from relative strengths and contextual subtleties.<sup>40</sup>

#### Validate positive change for affected people

The ultimate focus of AAP is not on implementing organisations, but on refugees and host communities. While improved AAP can have benefits for organisations, the real measure is the way in which affected populations experience interactions with response providers. This spotlight does not speak to the extent to which the actions taken by organisations changed **the lived experience of refugees and host communities included in AAPA participants'** programming. To have that information, carry out a rigorous impact evaluation focusing on the effects of changes and potential positive outcomes for affected populations as a result of AAP training or programmes. In the meantime, triangulate and test perceptions of programme changes made by organisations using representative structures or feedback mechanisms.

## Conclusion

The positive response from programme participants highlights that this focus on operationalisation fills a much-needed gap in strengthening AAP. However, being accountable is more than implementing activities or utilising tools and resources. Attempts to **develop AAP capacity can generate an understanding of how to 'do AAP' while failing to address the underlying purpose of becoming responsive to communities' needs and preferences.** The AAPA programme faces the same risk if it is implemented as merely a training programme that focuses more on activities or processes than intended outcomes of establishing accountability.

**By encouraging greater consideration of affected populations' agency, fostering self-reflection and critical thinking, and developing the confidence and evidence required for frontline workers to 'argue up', AAP programmes should both increase awareness of the ethics and importance of accountability and engage with key barriers and power dynamics that can prevent meaningful change.**

The promising AAPA practice highlights the need for a shift in attitude and engagement with systemic barriers to AAP in the humanitarian sector. Stakeholders intending to replicate the experience of the AAPA training or to generally advance the AAP agenda first and foremost need to learn from and build up the work of local actors, who despite less awareness of catchphrases and buzzwords, are often more inherently connected and accountable to their communities. Senior leaders and decision-makers need to be further sensitised to the concepts of AAP and the importance of responsive programming. Finally, the impact of any

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.alnap.org/putting-people-at-the-centre-accountability-to-affected-populations-summary>, page 4.



AAP-support work needs to be assessed from the perspective of affected communities, to verify and contribute to a body of evidence on what works for them.

These recommendations draw on experiences from the programme as well as global best practice and encourage partners to strengthen linkages between the theoretical and practical, the institutional and collective mechanisms, the community-based and the systemic, at both programmatic and policy level.



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