REPORT SUMMARY ON

Participation and accountability to the subject populations of humanitarian action
Informative report
Report on “Participation and accountability to the subject populations of humanitarian action”

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think | decide | do
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This summary document focuses on the conclusions and recommendations of the study “Participation and accountability to the subject populations of humanitarian actions”. The complete study should be read in order to understand it better.

The objective of the study is to have a conceptual and practical model regarding Participation and Accountability (P&A) of the subject populations of humanitarian programmes. The study has been carried out based on a documentary analysis and a wide sample of interviews and questionnaires.

The analysis of the 12 international theoretical-practical frameworks studied reveals that the latest reasons for P&A are divided into utilitarian uses and ethical reasons. P&A is almost never approached from the perspective of the localisation of the humanitarian action and from the prominent roles deserved by the local populations. Frequently, P&A is reduced to the right to raise complaints on the part of the local population.

Humanitarian interventions approved by the Basque Agency for Development Cooperation (hereinafter, eLankidetza-BADC) during the period 2018-2020. In them, the subject population has, for the most part, been a displaced or refugee population, 84%; 36% of interventions have been implemented in camps for displaced persons or refugees; the Middle East has absorbed 40%.

Conclusions regarding the concept of P&A

They are two conceptual levels, very different from each other: Transformational Participation, understood to be the process of empowerment, and Operational Participation, limited to involvement in specific activities in the field of a project. The dividing line between them is the subject population’s capacity to take decisions regarding humanitarian programmes.

Many organisations find it difficult to move forward to the decision-making level, while they work comfortably at the operational level. Transformational Participation is only effective when promoted by organisations with strong local roots and it is only possible with a minimum level of stability, permanence, leadership and organisational capacity of the subject population.

Participation is only effective when processes are built to generate confidence and respect among communities and humanitarian organisations. This requires long-term work, transparency, knowledge, acceptance and deep respect for local culture and traditions.

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1 They are excluded 2018 humanitarian action programmes responding to crisis arising from natural disasters.
Conclusions regarding cultural and environmental factors affecting P&A

Participation and privacy-confidentiality frequently clash, especially in societies with heavy social pressure on certain collectives. Comprehension of cultural environments, which sideline women and children, and the capacity of organisations to adapt and respectfully confront said cultural environments is key to the success of P&A. Elderly people are the group with fewest opportunities to participate in P&A processes; at the same time, effective participation of children is far from becoming a reality.

In violent conflict environments with the presence of armed groups, P&A is only possible if humanitarian interlocution with said groups allows the generation of safe spaces for participation.

Limitations imposed due to COVID-19 in everything regarding the dynamics of participation bring about new challenges around how to bridge the technological gap between populations. The greater the poverty, ignorance, trauma and marginalisation of people, the more the possibility of ensuring effective P&A is reduced.

The capacities, values, and attitudes of humanitarian organisations and staff are key factors in the carrying out of P&A. The attitudes of humanitarian staff depend on the solidity of the values of the humanitarian organisations in which they work.

Conclusions regarding the management of P&A

In the majority of cases, the accountability to subject populations becomes a tool to improve forthcoming programmes, but it does not alter the policies and strategies of the organisation, nor does it have corrective or compensatory effects.

The fear of conflicts potentially produced between various population groups by participation in budgetary matters prevents humanitarian organisations from giving them greater opportunities.

P&A is essentially perceived as the implementing humanitarian organisations’ responsibility rather than a horizontal reciprocal responsibility.
Conclusions regarding the concept and approach of P&A

Humanitarian organisations should carry out an internal conceptualisation exercise regarding P&A from a perspective of Transformational Participation and promote it via long-term processes to generate trust; in such a way, that progress is made towards P&A involving transference of decision-making towards the subject populations.

Recommendations regarding the tackling of P&A environments

Humanitarian organisations should take proactive and decisive measures, which are culturally sensitive and designed for the specific contexts, to unblock the cultural factors impeding P&A, like the social exclusion of women.

P&A must be carried out with a sensitive approach towards conflicts, because in contexts of social or armed conflicts, P&A is not neutral and can add fuel to the fire.

Organisations should carry out P&A, which has been adapted and contextualised to different social, and age groups, and develop new P&A models from the COVID-19 experience, ensuring that the new online participation methodologies do not reduce the quality of P&A and do not create new exclusions.

Recommendations regarding the organisational and instrumental management of P&A

Humanitarian organisations should develop a P&A “culture” which covers all institutional components: values, policies, strategies, programmes, etc. Humanitarian organisations and their staff must systematically cultivate the values and skills favouring this, such as professionalism, transparency, social mediation and flexibility, and establish mechanisms for monitoring and control of attitudes and professional performance with regard to P&A.

Financial flexibility should be increased, thus allowing the accommodation of P&A results in terms of reassignment of priorities and budgets. In addition, there should be an active promotion of project community management experiences, including budgetary management.

A coherent framework of parameters upon which to carry out P&A should be agreed. All humanitarian organisations should involve governance and direction fields as actively as possible in P&A; and they should more clearly connect transparency, P&A and institutional reputation, in such a way that P&A becomes an ethics, reliability and efficiency evaluation scale for humanitarian organisations.

Finally, there must be an evolution towards transformational P&A, which is integrated, inclusive, localised, triangular, co-responsible and consistent.
The objective of the study on “Participation and accountability to the subject populations of humanitarian action” promoted by eLankidetza-BADC is to provide a conceptual and practical model, supported by empirical evidence, regarding the reality of effective participation of subject populations in humanitarian action interventions.

It also aims to suggest guidelines or tools to effectively tackle Participation and Accountability (P&A) so that humanitarian organisations can incorporate them into their day-to-day praxis.

The study has been carried out based on documentary analysis of both the international bibliography and 43 humanitarian interventions financed by the eLankidetza-BADC between the years 2018\(^2\), 2019 and 2020. In these projects and strategies, the subject population has for the most part been a displaced or refugee population, 84%; 36% of interventions have been implemented in camps for displaced persons or refugees; the Middle East has absorbed 40%.

The study has had a wide sample of interviews. Questions of confidentiality, access, language and COVID-19 made it non-viable to carry out the interviews with the subject population as had been initially planned. Therefore, the study results must be understood from the perspective of local, Basque and international humanitarian organisations. It is recommended to incorporate the subject population without delay when implementing the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

\(^2\) They are excluded 2018 humanitarian action programmes responding to crisis arising from natural disasters.
P&A to the subject population\(^3\) has been the object of intense work in the humanitarian action field. Some of the most outstanding references in this matter are summarised in the table available in the complete report that analyses the following documents\(^4\):

- Core Humanitarian Standard –CHS– (2014); Sphere Standards
- ALNAP; Closing the circle: Effective feedback in humanitarian contexts
- 2010 HAP Standard in matters of accountability and quality control
- Group URD, Quality & Accountability Compass Handbook, 2018
- Participation Handbook Group URD
- Grand Bargain
- Accountability commitments to affected people/populations (2017) (CAAPs) by IASC
- Criteria of the Development Aid Committee (DAC) of the OECD to evaluate development aid and humanitarian assistance
- Good Humanitarian Donorship. 24 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship
- European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid
- UN Updated Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) Life-Saving Criteria November 2020

\(^3\) In this document, the term “subject population” refers to the population to whom the humanitarian interventions are aimed and who are the leading subjects of said interventions. Other terminology, such as beneficiary, targeted or objective population have connotations that might be interpreted as pejorative in certain contexts, so they have been intentionally avoided in this text.

\(^4\) The different theoretical frameworks have been classified, first according to relevance, and secondly by chronological order.
The analysis of these theoretical-practical frameworks in matters of P&A applied to the subject communities of humanitarian action allows us to reach the following conclusions:

1. Community subject P&A is a subject which has been present in the international community since the mid-90s, with the appearance of the Humanitarian Code of Conduct, and has been systematically included in almost all later agreements and tools regarding the improvement of quality of humanitarian action.

2. Even if there is a clear majority agreement between humanitarian actors regarding the importance of promoting P&A, the ultimate reasons for doing it are less clear. There are at least two currents implicit in the different agreements and standards:

   ▶ For utilitarian reasons. P&A permits improved quality aid, more appropriate to needs and enjoying greater acceptance.

   ▶ For ethical reasons. The subject population are the receivers of humanitarian aid, the only “owners” of their lives and what affects them. Questions of dignity, respect and ownership, or even “humanitarian sovereignty” are essential reasons for P&A.

3. In general, the rhetoric in the statement of principles is not accompanied by an analysis of the factors implied in the effective application of P&A processes, nor in the consequences of it, and this leaves P&A principles at the level of wishful thinking rather than a practicality.

4. Some tools have avoided the general principles of more detailed operability with a “micro-management” approach, full of technical jargon, but which fails to tackle the transformational consequences it brings about.

5. Generally, the P&A approach presents itself as a concession of donors or external implementation agents and it is virtually never approached from the perspective of the localisation of the humanitarian action and from the leading role corresponding to local populations.

6. Often, the concept of accountability is reduced to the right to raise complaints on the part of the subject population. In practice, the conversion of these complaints into official claims that can become truly effective is very blurred.

7. The claiming of rights and the corresponding compensation are made more explicit to third parties than to the humanitarian organisations themselves. It remains to be seen whether the right to receive humanitarian assistance has components of rights which can be required of humanitarian organisations, or is merely voluntary.
8. The idea of the “limits of P&A” hovers above some documents, suggesting that it will not be possible or appropriate in some cases.

9. The tensions between confidentiality, consent and transparency when it comes to implementing P&A processes make an appearance in several documents.

10. The provision of affordable information to subject populations, that is, comprehensible, relevant, appropriate and accessible information, is one of the key elements in P&A processes.

11. P&A is intimately tied to the right to participate in decision-making on the part of subject populations in key aspects of humanitarian action programmes.

12. Documents from the most recent decade (2010-2020) very explicitly incorporate the right of subject populations of humanitarian action to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation on the part of humanitarian agents, and the duty of accountability around it on the part of said humanitarian organisations.
The main conclusions taken from the documentary analysis, interviews and questionnaire results, in the case of both Palestine and the group of countries analysed, are as follows:

Conclusions regarding the concept of P&A

1. There are two completely differentiated conceptual levels of P&A among humanitarian organisations. On the one hand, P&A taken to mean a process of empowerment, respect, dignity, rights and citizenship; on the other hand, P&A taken to mean involvement in specific activities in the area of a project, and as a facilitation process for the carrying out of the project. We could call the first one Transformational Participation; the second one would be Operational Participation.

2. The dividing line between Transformational Participation and Operational Participation is the capacity of subject populations to make decisions regarding humanitarian programmes. That is, the ownership, empowerment, and, in short, the leading level of involvement in the humanitarian action is reached when there is the capacity to make decisions regarding humanitarian programmes.

3. Many organisations find it difficult to move forward to the upper decision-making level, while they work comfortably at the operational-informative.

4. Transformational Participation is only truly effective when level promoted by organisations with strong local roots. Operational Participation is within reach of any organisation with sufficient project management capacity, given that the participatory approach is utilitarian, designed to implement pre-scheduled activities in the intervention with greater empowerment.

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5 In the case of Palestine, a deeper, more detailed examination of the way in which P&A is carried out has been made. The specific results for Palestine can be consulted in section 7.2 of the complete report.
5. The majority of organisations taking part in the study understand P&A as transformational, as part of a process of empowerment, promotion of rights of the subject population and appropriation and mutual trust between the population and the humanitarian organisations. However, participation understood in this way is only possible with minimum levels of stability, permanence, leadership and organisational capacity of the subject populations, which is not always the case. In highly changeable contexts, transformational participation is very limited and tends towards more operational and superficial participation.

6. The diverse participatory dynamics do not always give a clear indication of the level of decision-making that can be reached by the subject populations: some of them are limited to obtaining information and their consent. When organisations fail to give adequate space for P&A to populations, the “obtaining of information” to provide accountability to donors becomes, or is perceived as, an intrusive act towards communities.

7. Participation is only effective when processes are built to generate trust and respect among communities and humanitarian organisations. This requires long-term work, transparency, knowledge, acceptance and deep respect for local culture and traditions.

8. Accountability to the subject population involves several components: legitimacy, transparency, trustworthiness and exact information; capacity for taking decisions, shared responsibility, improved governance and improved quality of programmes.

9. Elderly people are the group with the fewest opportunities to participate in P&A processes; and this does not seem to really worry the majority of humanitarian organisations. At the same time, participation of children is far from becoming a reality, despite the fact that they are a priority group for humanitarian action⁶.

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10. Articulating the **“map of participating actors”** beyond subject populations requires clear objectives, deep knowledge of the environment, as well as appropriate methodologies and resources to render P&A effective. The mere extensive coordination of dozens of actors does not only fail to favour P&A of subject populations, but can also become a diluting factor, undermining P&A.

11. The great majority of organisations understand that participation and accountability **are part of the same process, although in practice there are considerable lacunae** in how these two parts are integrated: participation focuses on previous phases and implementation, and accountability focuses on closure and evaluation phases.

12. There are at least **three models** of P&A: **unidirectional**, from organisations towards subject populations; **bidirectional**, where there is a greater level of co-responsibility between communities and humanitarian organisations; and **triangular**, where P&A is carried out among populations, competent authorities and humanitarian organisations. The latter model is only possible in highly articulated societies; otherwise, the relationship with the authorities is limited to coordination and administrative reporting.

**Conclusions regarding cultural and environmental factors affecting P&A**

1. Participation, privacy and confidentiality security frequently clash, especially in societies with heavy social pressure on certain collectives: women, young people, LGBTI, etc. Participation requires a minimum level of **security and confidence**, without which it is impossible to carry out.

2. **Comprehension of cultural environments**, which particularly affect women and children, and the **capacity of organisations to adapt and respectfully confront said cultural environments is key** to the success of P&A. For example, the choice of places, adaptation of timetables and meeting days to favour participation, as well as the proper use of local languages, are key factors to ensure the participation of certain collectives, particularly women.

3. In violent conflict environments with the presence of **armed groups**, participation is only possible if **humanitarian interlocution** with said groups allows the generation of safe spaces for participation. This requires comprehension on the part of all involved humanitarian agents, donors and executors, of Humanitarian Diplomacy and the limits of neutrality.
4. The **limitations imposed by COVID-19** in everything involving the dynamics of participation, attendance numbers, P&A methodologies, etc. is evolving towards greater virtual participation and less physical participation, which poses new challenges, insofar as how to overcome the technological breach and how to adapt participation methods to the new reality. This impact is insufficiently offset using *alternative methods of participation and accountability*. Although there are some experiences of the distribution of tablets, computers and telephones among the subject population and the structuring of new ways of working online, efficient and future-sustainable P&A models have not yet been drawn up.

5. The **greater the poverty, ignorance, trauma and marginalisation** of people subject to humanitarian action, the more the possibility of ensuring effective P&A is reduced.

6. The **capacities, values and attitudes of humanitarian organisations and staff are key** factors in the carrying out or limitation of P&A. The endowment of suitable resources in terms of knowledge-skills, policies, time and economic resources are crucial for P&A. The attitudes of humanitarian staff with regard to P&A depend on the solidity of the values of the humanitarian organisations in which they work.

> “Organisations and their humanitarian workers who have a culture of pedagogy and mediation, and who incorporate patience as a working value, are more capable of promoting effective participation processes among the subject population.”

Humanitarian organisation in Latin America
Conclusions regarding the management of P&A

1. In the majority of cases, the accountability of subject populations becomes a tool to improve forthcoming humanitarian programmes without substantially altering the policies and strategies of the organisation, nor does it have corrective or compensatory effects in projects in progress.

2. In those organisations where P&A is wider and more committed, there is a balance in decision-making between the subject population and the implementing organisation, and, to a lesser degree, with the international organisation channelling the funds. Sometimes, this balance is not without tension, because it directly affects project management and requires careful handling of social and institutional relationships.

3. Lack of security in the approval of funds has a negative effect on participation of populations in the design of humanitarian programmes.

4. Integral management of participatory projects, including budgetary management, is an advanced way of working, with multiple social benefits for subject populations, which is only at an embryonic and experimental stage.

5. The fear of conflicts that can potentially arise between various population groups prevents humanitarian organisations from giving subject populations greater opportunities to get involved in budgetary participation.

6. The “Logical Framework Culture” of international organisations can be the least “logical” from the cultural anthropological point of view of subject populations of humanitarian action programmes. This creates a large imbalance in the way of understanding humanitarian programmes and their P&A.

7. P&A tools are often designed for stable populations, making them unsuitable for contexts with very high population mobility.

8. P&A is essentially perceived as the implementing humanitarian organisations’ responsibility and not a horizontal reciprocal responsibility, probably because it reflects that decision-making (power, in short) is still far from being transferred to local populations and their humanitarian action management committees.
Conclusions regarding the concept and approach of P&A

1. Carry out a **P&A internal conceptualisation** exercise from the perspective of Transformational Participation and make the necessary organisational adjustments arising from said exercise.

2. Promote P&A through long-term processes generating **trust** from subject populations towards humanitarian organisations. Keep promises and do not project expectations during the diagnostic, needs assessment and programme design phases which will probably not be possible to fulfil. The latter generates a lack of trust, making any later effective P&A impossible.

3. Move forwards towards P&A involving the **transfer of decision-making** to subject populations, their committees and community organisations, in order to make progress towards more horizontal and reciprocal P&A.

Recommendations regarding the tackling of P&A areas

1. Take **proactive and definite measures that are culturally sensitive** and designed according to specific contexts to gradually unblock the multiple cultural factors, which, in many places, impede participation and accountability, such as the cultural exclusion of women.

2. Have a **sensitive approach to conflicts** so that they do not cause increased harm to the community. In social or armed conflict contexts, P&A is not neutral and can become an additional source feeding the conflict or generating new forms of conflict.

3. Carry out an extended P&A, **adapted and contextualised** according to realities, needs and interests of the different **social and age groups**: children and teenagers, young people, adults and the elderly.

4. Systematically and collectively, analyse the limitations and opportunities that the new **online P&A** techniques have made available due to the context of COVID-19, and, starting from there, **systematise the new methodologies ensuring effective and non-discriminatory P&A**, in accordance with technological access. Internet-based systems must be developed with a community-based and multi-purpose approach. These new forms of participation require the development of structured and evaluable models, as well as the setting up of pilot models allowing accelerated familiarisation with the different available alternatives.
Recommendations regarding the organisational and instrumental management of P&A

1. Develop P&A methodologies and tools based on a P&A "culture" covering all institutional components: values, policies, strategies, programmes, projects and activities.

2. Design instruments to ensure effective P&A of subject populations from an anthropological-cultural approach specific to each population’s context.

3. Design P&A processes specifically for each humanitarian context and coordinate between humanitarian organisations acting with the same population, with the aim of avoiding duplication of P&A processes and creating confusion among the population.

P&A culture must be maintained at all levels of the organisation.
4. Systematically cultivate values and skills favouring P&A culture, such as professionalism, transparency, a pedagogical approach, social mediation, patience and flexibility, and establish mechanisms to monitor and control attitudes and professional performance with regard to P&A. Control “hygienic factors”\(^7\) to ensure effective P&A, in particular, knowledge of the local culture and languages and an empathetic attitude on the part of humanitarian staff.

5. Actively promote community project management experiences, including budget management, within a set management framework, with control, efficiency and impact indicators.

6. Agree a coherent framework of parameters on which to carry out the accountability including (at least) humanitarian principles, budgetary assignations, efficiency (cost-benefit ratio), implementation of scheduled activities and implementation quality (quality standards).

7. Have a catalogue of different practical P&A tools to be applied and adapted to their specific contexts.

8. With P&A being a subject whose roots lie in the values and working approach of organisations, all humanitarian organisations should involve their organs of government and directives in a more active manner with P&A.

9. Provide a clearer connection between transparency, P&A and institutional reputation, in such a way that P&A becomes an evaluation scale for ethics, trustworthiness and efficiency of humanitarian organisations.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS AND FUNDING AGENTS**

6.2

1. Have essential skills and capacity in humanitarian matters, with the aim of ensuring that your solidarity is joined-up based on quality humanitarian programmes.

2. Increase your flexibility towards local humanitarian organisations in such a way that P&A results can be accommodated, in terms of reassignment of priorities, budgets and ways of implementing programmes, including the deadlines involved.

\(^7\) “Hygienic factors” are those whose existence is a *sine qua non* condition for the effective carrying out of P&A, but whose mere existence does not favour it.
3. Make sure that programmes have **specific budgetary lines** of support for P&A framed within **systematic institutional support**, in such a way that there is an institutionalised P&A policy, strategy and operative that form a part of the organisational culture.

4. Make **speedy budgetary reassignment** possible, based on solid P&A processes in order to be able to realign programmes according to needs, priorities and contexts of the subject population at all times. To do this, funding agencies, international fund-receiving entities and implementing entities should agree a speedy and transparent framework to carry out these budgetary reassignments.

5. Continue to promote strategic programmes allowing local organisations **greater predictability** of accessible funds.

6. The **evaluation of humanitarian programmes** must contain detailed P&A aspects arising from this study.

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**Final recommendation**

Evolution should take place towards P&A, which is:

- **Transformational**: based on rights, dignity and empowerment of populations approach.

- **Integrated**: that integrates participation and accountability as parts of the same process.

- **Inclusive**: that takes into account all population groups in their specific contexts.

- **Localised**: developed locally with local protagonists and leaders.

- **Triangular**: involving subject populations, humanitarian organisations and competent authorities.

- **Co-responsible**: where each party assumes its responsibility in the integral management of the programme and there is shared responsibility between the parties.

- **Consistent**: where the consequences of P&A are taken on board with regard to the political, strategic and structural aspects.
Based on the model used to evaluate practices involving P&A and taking into account findings and conclusions obtained in this study, a model is proposed in order to facilitate improvement of P&A practices and carry out monitoring of their quality.

This model is an initial proposal to be developed later on by the entire group of humanitarian organisations involved in this process.

This tool is designed for shared use by humanitarian organisations, whether local-domestic or international.

Parameters, components and elements. It follows a similar plan to that used to evaluate current P&A practices in the field of Basque humanitarian action.

It is structured as three large parameters:

1. Concept
2. Context
3. Management

Meanwhile, these are broken down into the following components:

1. Concept Integrated P&A concept
2. Context
   - Cultural context of the population
   - Socio-political and humanitarian environment
   - Cultural context of humanitarian organisations
3. Management
   - Policies and strategies
   - Practical tools
   - Institutional involvement

Parameters, Indicators and Evaluation. Parameters are evaluated in accordance with the tables displayed in the Excel sheet contained in Annex 2.

A simple P&A quality assurance mechanism is added, based on the final recommendation of this report. (See Annex 2 for its application).
**ACRONYMS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>eLankidetza-AVCD</td>
<td>Basque Agency for Development Cooperation</td>
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<td>CAAPs</td>
<td>Commitments on Accountability to Affected People/Populations</td>
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<td>ACBC</td>
<td>Autonomous Community of the Basque Country</td>
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<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women</td>
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<td>DAC</td>
<td>Development Assistance Committee</td>
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<td>IASC</td>
<td>Inter-Agency Standing Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTI</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>P&amp;A</td>
<td>Participation and Accountability</td>
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<td>World Humanitarian Summit</td>
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**TOOLS FOR P&A EVALUATION**

Annex 2. Document
Annex 2.1. Document

**METHODOLOGY**

Annex 3. Document
Annex 3.1. Document