Engaging with Communities via 'WhatsApp Trees'
Version April, 2020

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance pulls together emerging practices from a number of UNHCR's operations where staff and partners have leveraged 'messaging Apps' to engage with communities. The majority of these initiatives have used "WhatsApp", but this guidance is applicable to a range of 'messaging Apps'. It specifically focuses on how 'messaging Apps' can support cascaded information flow to and from UNHCR and partners via established groups - these are often called "WhatsApp Trees". These trees build on traditional 'communication tree models' which were designed to speed up the delivery of information through phone calls from one central point via community members.

This guidance is designed to support UNHCR and partners to work through key considerations when establishing "WhatsApp Trees", to ensure that engagement with communities via such channels is safe and effective. This guidance recognizes that "WhatsApp Trees" are only one of the channels of communication that operations or partners may consider as part of their effective online and offline community engagement strategy.

UNHCR's commitment to Accountability to Affected People (AAP)

UNHCR's AAP commitments are outlined in the organization's Age Gender and Diversity policy - specifically through core actions 2-5: Participation and Inclusion; Communication and Transparency; Feedback and Response; and Organizational Learning and Adaptation. If appropriately adopted and correctly established, "WhatsApp Trees" can support across these four commitments.

Which App?

Many of the "WhatsApp Tree" initiatives to date have leveraged "WhatsApp" - with over 2 billion users worldwide, it is perhaps an 'obvious' first choice. However, it is important to consult with communities first - as "WhatsApp" may not be their preferred messaging App (or unavailable in certain operational contexts).

> **DO:** Consider conducting an assessment of the information and communications eco-system to better understand communities' communications preferences (including language) and trusted channels.
>
> **DO:** Consider leveraging different messaging Apps if you identify different user-groups have different preferences.

Modalities:

A "WhatsApp Tree" aims to cascade information from and to a centralized point (one) to several groups (many) to dispersed users (even more).
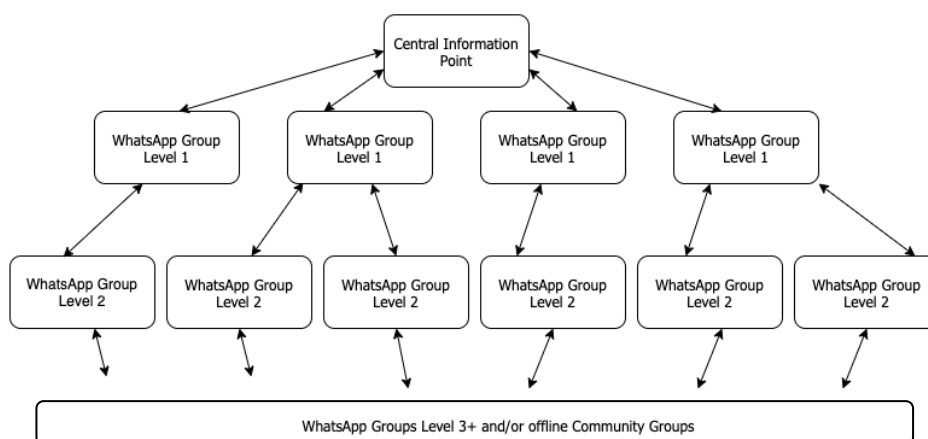

Fig. 1 Cascading WhatsApp Tree

While the concept of a "WhatsApp Tree" is relatively simple, UNHCR operations and partners have adopted a range of different approaches when establishing their trees. The following table indicates several different modalities that may be adopted (or combinations thereof); it also includes a number of strengths and considerations per modality.

Central Information Point	WhatsApp Group Level 1	WhatsApp Group Level 2	Strengths	Considerations
UNHCR acts as the main central information point sharing and receiving information (i.e Protection Officer or other designated focal point with appropriate language requirements).	UNHCR field colleagues act as Level 1 WhatsApp groups (max. 10 per group); this can be organized by Sub Office/Field Office/Field Unit etc.	Information is shared to UNHCR partners (implementing/operational) at Level 2; this can be organized by thematic group (e.g. WASH, Health, Food Distribution). This information is cascaded by offline channels.	Can be quick to establish given that the tree often mirrors existing roles & responsibilities and organizational structure. Minimal inputs required (i.e. SMART phones/credit) - assuming use of 'office' phone etc. Easier for information flow 'back' to be specific/targeted per sector.	Very limited community engagement in the tree itself - information shared may be very 'service-provider' driven (i.e. per sector). Requires field presence (at partner level at a minimum). Trust issues may inhibit sharing of information 'back'. Translation/contextualization of information is led by agencies which may inhibit their effectiveness.
UNHCR acts as the main central information point sharing and receiving information (i.e Protection Officer or other designated focal point).	Information is shared with UNHCR partners (implementing/operational) at Level 1; this can be organized by thematic group/geographic area.	Information is shared with online community groups consisting of up to 10 key focal points (e.g. Community Health Volunteers, Block Leaders etc), who then cascade the information through their own online and offline social networks.	Information can be adapted/contextualized by communities themselves, which may strengthen understanding. Physical presence of UNHCR/partners is not required.	Inputs may be required to ensure the 'branches' are always functional (i.e SMART phones, credit, charging). Consistency of phone numbers is critical/ensuring WhatsApp account recovery if required. May require significant digital literacy capacity building for certain groups; this includes training on

			Groups (online/offline) can be tailored to specific demographics/communities.	data protection/privacy and how to synthesize and share information back.
Community representatives and/or CBOs act as the main central information points sharing and receiving information - using verified information from UNHCR as appropriate (e.g. unhcr.help.org)	Information is shared with online community groups consisting of up to 10 key focal points who then cascade the information through their own online networks.	Focal points in online networks are responsible for onward information sharing offline.	Ownership of the WhatsApp tree sits with the community strengthening contextualization of messages etc. As above, physical presence of UNHCR/partners is not required. Once established, this system may require limited input (information/content) by UNHCR as communities develop their own. Using informal networks and capitalizing on existing online/offline structures expands reach.	It may be hard for UNHCR to 'listen' from outside the WhatsApp tree - delaying the sharing of information back from communities. There will be limited/no opportunity for UNHCR to address misinformation or make corrections from outside the WhatsApp tree. Moderation and quality assurance may require significant capacity building. As above data protection, privacy and information management may require capacity strengthening. Inputs may be required.

Is 256 the Magic Number?

A WhatsApp group can contain up to 256 group members. Learning from UNHCR's operational WhatsApp trees demonstrates that this is definitely not the optimal number for a group in the tree. Imagine returning to your phone after a meeting and scrolling through 100s of messages, images and voice memos in one group - knowing when and how to respond would be impossible. Establishing a maximum group size of no more than 10 participants helps with the management of the two-way information flow. It allows focal points to view and respond in a timely manner, without it becoming a full-time job.

> **DO:** Establish a preferred limit for each WhatsApp group in the tree.
>
> **DO:** Consider reducing the size of the groups and adding in additional cascade levels if management of the tree becomes overwhelming at any level.
>
> **DO:** Ensure that you check information you plan to broadcast for comprehension with a smaller group to minimize misunderstandings/follow-up questions via the tree (or as private messages following a broadcast).

256 people in one group is more manageable as a 'broadcast list'. Broadcast lists can be used to reach a large number of individuals assigned to certain groups with a single message. Broadcast lists are often considered as 'one-way' and may even state that responses will not be answered. Rather than creating a group forum for responses, any responses to messages sent through a broadcast list come back to the individual sending the broadcast as a private message - remember there could be many responses.

Developing and Sharing Information

WhatsApp trees can enable UNHCR and partners to share text-based information, images, audio and video. Low/no-text content may be preferable for specific groups with lower literacy levels and audio/visual content may be more accessible for persons with disabilities. Conducting an information and communications needs assessment will help you identify the preferred content type across the diversity of a community.

Although it is entirely possible to share audio, video and image, it's important to understand if there are barriers to accessing this content. Individuals may be unwilling or unable to access certain multimedia content due to data consumption and cost implications.

> **DO:** Test different accessible multimedia content with diverse groups - further information on how to develop audio messages is available here.
>
> **DO:** Check the 'Double Blue Ticks' (or similar function) to determine if content has been accessed (i.e. has an Audio message been listened to).
>
> **DO:** Seek feedback from users on the content - how could it be adapted/improved?
>
> **DO:** Consider how you can support the tree branches with Data Packages to maximise the use of multimedia content.

Building Trust and Triangulating Information

When sharing content it's important to ensure that the information shared states the source (i.e: From UNHCR Field office X) and can be triangulated against other channels to help build trust. Examples from operations include sharing consistent information across the WhatsApp Trees, the Operation Facebook tree and cross referencing with help.unhcr.org. Ensuring consistency with information being shared offline is also important.

> **DO:** Establish procedures (rules of engagement) for developing and sharing information on the tree and ensure these are understood by each focal point and end user.
>
> **DO:** Engage with appropriate local coordination structures (eg CCE working group) if active, to ensure information being shared is consistent across actors.
>
> **DO:** Follow this guidance to help minimize the sharing of misinformation, and ensure that focal points are aware of their responsibilities.

Feedback and Referral

As information is shared from community members through the WhatsApp trees, it is important that partners and UNHCR are responsive to this information. As with other feedback channels, a system for feedback and referral is necessary - without this community members will quickly lose confidence in the channel. Standard Operating Procedures should be established and monitored so that focal points know when, to who and how to refer inbound questions, comments and complaints.

> **DO:** Establish SOPs for feedback and complaints from the outset and ensure that these are shared and understood by partners, focal points and end users.
>
> **DO:** Ensure that the WhatsApp tree is integrated into broader operational feedback and response mechanisms.
>
> **DO:** Use alternative channels for response (e.g. direct in-person) if more appropriate - particularly for confidential/sensitive complaints (see below).

Data Protection

While WhatsApp provides for end-to-end encryption to ensure confidential messaging between parties, sharing of personally identifiable information is not advised, as the potential for third party access, onward sharing and unintentional misuse is heightened. Efforts should be taken to refer individuals to alternative secure channels for sharing such information.

Within WhatsApp tree structures, different levels of the tree will span different organizations and community members. If absolutely necessary to share sensitive data

> **DO:** Consider the implications of sharing data across different organisations and with persons of concern themselves if involved in a WhatsApp tree
>
> **DO:** Have alternative channels in place for sharing of sensitive data / information both within and across organisations and refer to them as necessary - ensure that referral pathways are governed by Standard Operating procedures.

across Whatsapp, the implications for sharing sensitive data will differ depending on the individuals involved and the organizations they work for. Sharing within an organization is more straightforward, with an implementing partner it would generally require their adherence to the UNHCR Data Protection Policy on Persons of Concern (generally covered in the scope of UNHCR Partnership Agreements).

Data Privacy

The primary reason for breaches in privacy is that users are not aware of the implications of sharing data, including their own individual data. Users should be made aware that when joining groups on WhatsApp their phone number will be made available to all users in that group. Likewise, they will have access to other users' numbers. They should consent to that, and also to act responsibly. Procedures both mitigatory and punitive (including removal from the WhatsApp tree) should be put in place for users who misuse the WhatsApp Group or their access to numbers as part of it.

When using groups as a part of a WhatsApp tree, it is possible for Administrators to share the group via a link.

> **DO:** Advise and guide Tree participants on the Do's and Don't's of sharing information within WhatsApp Groups as part of the tree (see Annex A).
>
> **DO:** Ensure that focal points and end users understand the data privacy settings of their own accounts - this information can be actively shared when new groups are formed and as regular reminders.
>
> **DO:** Keep Group sharing via links to a minimum to avoid potential access from unauthorised users and search engines indexing your group's link.

While this has the potential to support sharing a link within a community for wider adoption, it can be also prone to misuse when the link is sent to untrusted parties. Given these links cannot be 'closed' it will potentially allow for unauthorised individuals to access the WhatsApp group in question.

Useful Contacts

You can also contact UNHCR colleagues for additional support, to raise questions or provide feedback:

Katherine Harris Protection Officer
Division of International Protection (DIP)
harrisk@unhcr.org

Katie Drew Innovations Emergency Officer
UNHCR Innovation
drew@unhcr.org

Gisella Lomax Senior Social Media Officer
Global Communications Service (GCS), DER
lomaxg@unhcr.org

Annex A:

Example Rules of Engagement for WhatsApp Group

- Always keep to the purpose of the group! Don't share irrelevant messages about other topics.
- Do not spread unofficial information. Only official UN/UNHCR confirmed information is welcome.
- Do not spam the group! Too much information kills information; consider also the timing of messages that you share.
- If a call to action is sent out or a request to acknowledge the message (ACK) please confirm shortly and concisely.
- If someone asks a question and you don't know the answer don't respond with "I don't know". Just wait for someone who knows the answer to reply.
- Do not have one-on-one conversations in the group. Switch to private messages.
- Please don't send in a hundred "thank you" messages. If you feel gratitude towards someone – tell them in a private message.
- If someone asks a question of a personal nature don't respond if someone else has already answered, or else responds to the person directly in a private message.
- Do not send confidential information via this channel.
- Keep in mind, the UN values and CoC apply in this space.