

Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action

BACKGROUND PAPER

ALNAP 29th Annual Meeting
11-12 March 2014, Addis Ababa

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Introduction

Since its foundation in 1997, ALNAP (the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) has consistently highlighted the relationship between humanitarian agencies and crisis-affected populations as critical to improving both accountability and performance. In the early 2000s, ALNAP produced reviews of the Spanish, French and English literature on the subject, six country monographs on consultation with and participation by affected populations in humanitarian action, and a Practitioner's Handbook, published in 2003 (ALNAP and URD, 2003). Since then, many other studies and guidelines have been written by the Network and by member organisations. A selection of these is listed in the bibliography at the end of this report.

Despite this consistent concern with issues of engagement, participation, communication and accountability, 'beneficiary participation often achieve[s] rhetorical rather than real results' (ALNAP, 2010: 29). The most recent *State of the Humanitarian System Report* finds that compared to other aspects of the humanitarian endeavour, 'the weakest progress and performance [is] in the areas of recipient consultation and engagement of local actors, despite the rhetorical emphasis given to these issues' (ALNAP, 2012: 49). There is also considerable discrepancy between international aid providers' perceptions of their motivations and performance on the ground and the expectations and perceptions of affected populations, local organisations, and beneficiaries (Hallam, 1998: 13; Anderson et al., 2012).

Institutional commitments and rhetoric are thwarted in practice by a number of factors including time, bureaucratic impediments, lack of incentives and funding, security and political constraints, differences between the social and cultural values of outsiders and insiders, and lack of capacity. Engaging with crisis-affected populations can be costly, complicated, time-consuming and, arguably, inappropriate for international actors in certain humanitarian situations. Some remain unconvinced that the participation of affected people in humanitarian responses can be anything other than tokenistic or even manipulative. Hard data on levels, quality and outcomes of various approaches to engaging with crisis-affected populations are scarce.

This paper summarises current understandings of methods and approaches to engaging with crisis-affected populations in humanitarian action. It is based on a literature review and aims to provide a basis for discussion at the 29th ALNAP Annual Meeting in Addis Ababa in March 2014.

CHAPTER 1

What is meant by 'engagement of crisis-affected people'?

While there has been growing interest and considerable rhetoric around the challenges of engaging with people affected by crises, there is little clarity on the concept (Figure 1). Humanitarian agencies use a variety of approaches to establish relationships with people affected by crisis and to include them in the design or implementation of programme.

These approaches include the following:¹

- Provision by the humanitarian organization of information about the situation and about the response that affected people can expect (including amounts of assistance, eligibility criteria and location and timing of assistance). This is sometimes referred to as 'info as aid'.
- Direct involvement (often by providing labour or materials) of crisis-affected people in programme activities designed by the humanitarian organisation.
- Two-way communication between aid agencies and crisis-affected populations regarding the latter's needs and the quality, timeliness and relevance of the aid being provided. Some agencies refer to this as 'beneficiary communications'.
- Consultations and methods (including feedback mechanisms) to get the input of people affected by crisis on various aspects of humanitarian needs and assistance – often as part of needs assessment and programme design, but also during implementation and as part of monitoring and evaluation. The degree to which humanitarian agencies take this input into account varies significantly from one situation to another and from agency to agency.
- Accountability mechanisms, including complaints and response mechanisms, designed to allow people affected by crisis to hold humanitarian agencies to account for their actions.
- Participatory methods that involve people in all aspects of humanitarian operations, though this may often not include decision-making processes.
- 'Community-based' and 'partnership' approaches, in which an international humanitarian agency works with a local civil society organisation to jointly design or implement response activities. Again, the relative degrees of decision-making authority enjoyed by the international and local organisation differ significantly from one situation to another. In many cases, partnership has amounted to little more than subcontracting certain

1: These are drawn from the ALNAP/URD Handbook (ALNAP and URD, 2003), which adapts categories of participation from Pretty (1994) and expanded on by the authors based on more recent approaches.



Figure 1:
The term 'engagement' encompasses a wide variety of activities.

elements of the response. In a few, international aid agencies largely provide funding to local partners whom they assume are engaging more directly with crisis-affected communities.

- 'Community-based' and 'partnership' approaches, in which an international humanitarian agency works with a local civil society organisation to jointly design or implement response activities. Again, the relative degrees of decision-making authority enjoyed by the international and local organisation differ significantly from one situation to another. In many cases, partnership has amounted to little more than subcontracting certain elements of the response. In a few, international aid agencies largely provide funding to local partners whom they assume are engaging more directly with crisis-affected communities.

In addition to these approaches – all of which tend to be initiated from the outside by international humanitarian organisations – aid agencies can and do engage by providing support to many initiatives designed and implemented by affected communities themselves.

A single humanitarian programme may incorporate several of these approaches, to varying degrees, to achieve a variety of results. As a result, there is often some confusion in the terminology related to engagement. In the literature, 'engagement' is often used interchangeably with 'participation' and 'involvement' and sometimes with 'empowerment'. Similarly, there is often a good deal of overlap between ideas of participation, accountability, and communication. This investigation of 'engagement' and related concepts begins by defining the latter three terms.

Box 1: What do humanitarian actors mean by 'participation'?

The term 'participation' is often used interchangeably with 'engagement'; participation is the most common form of engagement discussed in the literature. One of the earliest humanitarian definitions appears in the handbook *Participation by Crisis-Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action*:

Participation in humanitarian action is understood as the engagement of affected populations in one or more phases of the project cycle: assessment; design; implementation; monitoring; and evaluation. This engagement can take a variety of forms. . . . Far more than a set of tools, participation is first and foremost a state of mind, according to which members of affected populations are at the heart of humanitarian action, as social actors, with insights on their situation, and with competencies, energy and ideas of their own (ALNAP and URD, 2003: 20).

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership standard includes the notion of informed consent and sees participation as a right and as a key principle of accountability. It defines participation as

Listening and responding to feedback from crisis-affected people when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes, and making sure that crisis-affected people understand and agree with the proposed humanitarian action and are aware of its implications (HAP, 2013: 18).

The Inter Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crises has this to say:

Participation is the involvement of key stakeholders in all aspects of the programme cycle – assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Opportunities for involvement should be transparent, free of coercion and open to all. It is essential to assure the participation of all groups, including women, men and adolescents (both male and female). It may be necessary to seek out the active involvement of often-marginalized groups such as minorities, young people, widows and the disabled (IAWG, 2010: 10–11).

A European Union–commissioned report defines participation as:

Establishing and maintaining a relevant representative dialogue with crisis-affected populations and key stakeholders at every opportunity throughout the humanitarian programme to enable those affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them (Aguaconsult, 2012: 10–11).

The first and third definitions imply that participation should take place in all aspects of the project cycle, but do not clarify the degree of control which affected people should have over decision making. The second definition suggests that, at the least, people's views should be heard and responded to, while noting that this is subject to serious operational constraints (HAP, 2010: 25). The final and most recent definition suggests that participation requires an active role in decision-making processes.

Participation

The idea of 'participation' originated in the development sector. The term has been interpreted in a variety of ways by humanitarians (see Box 1) and, as a recent report notes, 'an agreed standard definition remains elusive' (Aquaconsult, 2012: 21). In some cases, the term 'participation' is used to cover all of the activities described above, and is qualified by terms such as 'active' and 'meaningful' to describe situations where affected people have power or influence. For the purposes of this paper, however, 'participation' is defined as an approach to engagement whereby people affected by a crisis have the power to influence their situation and the decisions and humanitarian activities affecting them. In this interpretation, participation is essentially about power, and specifically power over decision-making: the interpretation excludes rhetorical and non-meaningful participation from the definition and retains at least some of the original, developmental meaning of the term.

Accountability

The same report notes that in the humanitarian sector 'a large body of opinion concentrates on exploring participation through the lens of beneficiary accountability, within which a great deal of the current focus is placed on communications initiatives and feedback mechanisms' (Aquaconsult, 2012: 21). One might surmise that the current emphasis of humanitarians on accountability rather than participation denotes a difference in focus from the developmental emphasis on participation as key to effectiveness. This paper follows the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) definition of accountability: 'Accountability is the means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power' (HAP, 2010: 1). In this definition, accountability relates to power, but there is no assumption that power is transferred from external agencies to the community. While there is significant overlap between the ideas and goals of participation and accountability, the latter, rather than focusing on 'empowerment', is concerned primarily with ensuring that the power of international aid agencies is used responsibly.

Communication

In humanitarian contexts, communications activities can promote transparency and accountability (for example, by ensuring that people are aware of how international agencies should be working and what their beliefs are and by creating a channel for people to report any misuse of power) as well as participation (allowing the opinions of affected people to be heard and included in decisions). As such, communication between agencies and crisis-affected people is an important element of accountability and participation.

Engagement

This paper uses 'engagement' as a catch-all term to cover all instances of people in crisis-affected communities becoming involved in planning and implementing humanitarian response work. This broad definition covers the entire range of intentional interactions between international humanitarian aid providers and affected populations,

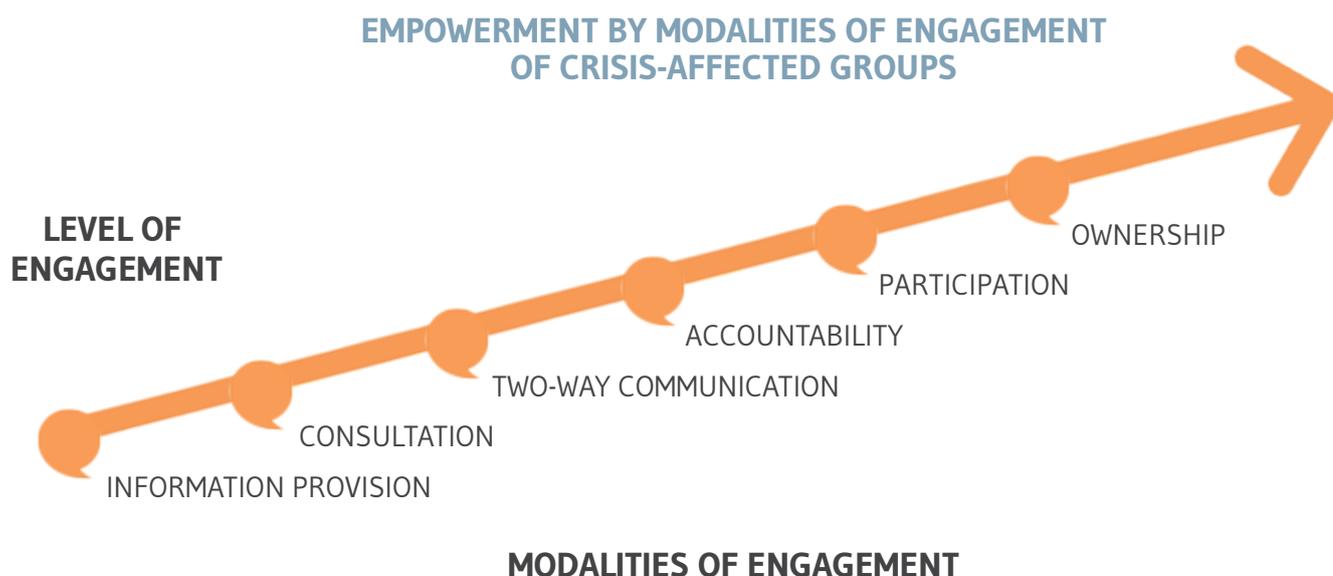


Figure 2:
Degree of empowerment of crisis-affected groups
in different approaches to engagement

including activities focused on communication, accountability, and participation. In this case, we are concerned with engagement of the crisis-affected population by international humanitarian organisations.

Importantly, this definition also covers actions taken by local actors or the crisis-affected population itself to respond to a crisis directly, without the intervention of international humanitarian organisations. These actions include first-response activities in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or crisis, as well as response and recovery activities led by community groups, civil society organisations, local governments and local businesses (supported, in some cases, by international organisations). In this case, we are concerned with the direct engagement of the population in the response, and also with how they engage with those coming from outside to support their efforts.

This definition of engagement thus covers a wide variety of activities. It may be useful to order these activities, and one way of doing so is by the degree of power that people affected by the crisis have over the response. Figure 2 summarises various approaches to engagement and organises them according to the level of influence and power that crisis-affected communities are able to exert through these modalities.

A brief history of engagement in humanitarian action

The engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action is a goal to which the international aid community in general, and the humanitarian aid community in particular, has expressed a broad commitment, at least in discourse if not practice. Many approaches to engagement have their origins in the development arena, where participatory approaches blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, the concept of empowerment (seen as an outcome of participation) gained support, particularly among NGOs influenced by the ideas of Robert Chambers, Paulo Freire, and others. This was complemented by the emergence in the 1990s of rights-based approaches, which stressed the rights and responsibilities that people have to drive their own development and to hold duty-bearers to account (see Jupp et al., 2010).

Box 2: Inter-Agency Standing Committee commitments on accountability to affected populations

- 1. LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE:** Demonstrate their commitment to accountability to affected populations by ensuring feedback and accountability mechanisms are integrated into country strategies, programme proposals, monitoring and evaluation, recruitment, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, and partnership agreements, and are highlighted in reporting.
- 2. TRANSPARENCY:** Provide accessible and timely information to affected populations on organizational procedures, structures and processes that affect them to ensure that they can make informed decisions, and facilitate a dialogue between an organisation and its affected populations over information provision.
- 3. FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS:** Actively seek the views of affected populations to improve policy and practice in programming, ensuring that feedback and complaint mechanisms are streamlined, appropriate and robust enough to deal with (communicate, receive, process, respond to and learn from) complaints about breaches in policy and stakeholder dissatisfaction.
- 4. PARTICIPATION:** Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practices to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.
- 5. DESIGN, MONITORING AND EVALUATION:** Design, monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives of programmes with the involvement of affected populations, feeding learning back into the organisation on an ongoing basis and reporting on the results of the process.

Source: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-common-default&sb=89>

By the late 1980s, in the light of a number of studies which suggested that humanitarian aid failed to take account of local knowledge and attitudes (Harrell-Bond, 1986; De Waal, 1989), humanitarian actors began to consider how ideas of participation might inform humanitarian programmes (Mitchell and Slim, 1990). Interest in the topic intensified after the response to the genocide and displacement in Rwanda and the subsequent publication of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (Borton et al., 1996). While earlier attempts to increase engagement of crisis-affected populations in humanitarian action had been largely at the level of individual programmes or organisations, the Joint Evaluation helped inspire the creation of system-wide initiatives, such as Sphere, HAP, People in Aid, and ALNAP.

This increased focus on issues of engagement resulted in the institutionalisation of the commitment to participation by crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. For example, participation is an essential foundation of people's right to life with dignity as affirmed in Principles 6 and 7 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief. Similar statements appear in the Sphere and HAP standards. More recently, donors have also formalised their commitment to the participation of beneficiaries and crisis-affected people. The Good Humanitarian Donorship agreement calls for the involvement of beneficiaries in all aspects of disaster response.² The

² Good Humanitarian Donorship Principle 7 states: 'Request implementing humanitarian organisations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response'. OECD/DAC.

commitment of crisis-affected (and in some cases, crisis-causing) governments to ensuring the participation of those affected by crisis is less clear, however. Nevertheless, as articulated in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, all governments have an obligation to consult with displaced populations and to facilitate their participation in the decisions that affect their lives.

In sum, the importance of engaging directly with people affected by conflicts and disasters is a common theme in the literature on humanitarian action and development, as well as peace-building and human rights. The participation debate, which had its origins in development theory and practice – and earlier still in the social development policies of northern governments and institutions – has since expanded to other spheres of international cooperation. In the humanitarian sphere, the importance of engaging with affected communities has been enshrined in UN Security Council resolutions, UN agency manuals, international conventions, codes of conduct and countless frameworks, standards, and guidelines, although practice on the ground does not consistently live up to these commitments.

In 2011, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee agreed to incorporate the Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations into their policies and operational guidelines and to promote them with operational partners, within Humanitarian Country Teams and amongst cluster members. The commitments are focused on key issues needed to effectively engage with crisis-affected communities, as shown in Box 2.

Why engage with crisis-affected populations?

Most humanitarian actors and aid providers would agree that engagement is a worthwhile goal, particularly since all agree that the dignity of those affected by crisis must be respected. However, aid agencies are often not clear on why and for what purposes people affected by crisis should be more engaged in humanitarian action.

Broadly speaking, the literature identifies three main rationales for participation by and engagement with crisis-affected communities: value-based or normative, instrumental, and emancipatory (Brookings Institution, 2008: 10).

Normative or value-based rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it is the right thing to do, in order to:

- Fulfil a moral duty.
- Respect the fundamental rights and dignity of affected groups.
- Act in solidarity with those who have been affected by crisis or disaster.
- Fulfil written obligations.

Instrumental rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it makes humanitarian programmes more effective by helping them:

- Collect information to inform programmes.
- Gather intelligence, for example to assess security conditions or report on human rights violations.
- Improve the agency's visibility and funding prospects.
- Improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

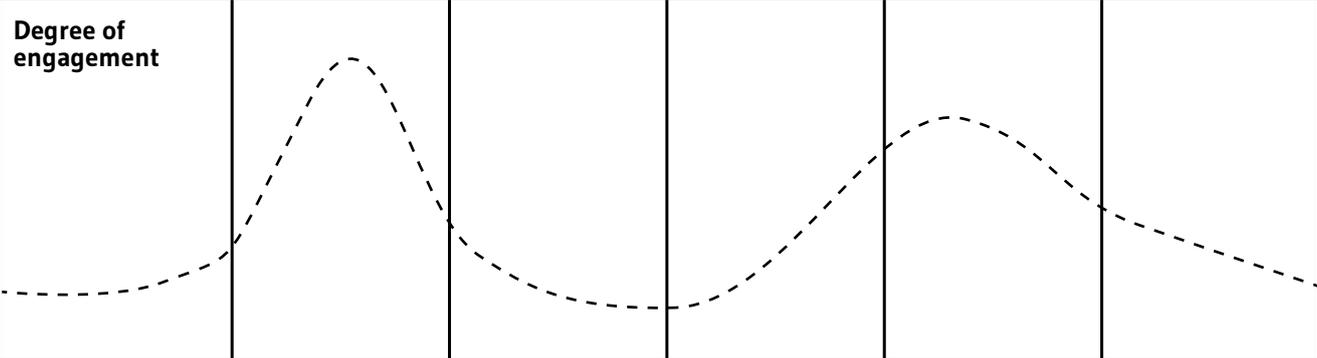
Project phase	Diagnosis	Design and preparation	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
Degree of engagement					
Type of engagement	Consists mainly of providing data	Very rare	Frequent in the form of in-kind contributions or labour	Rare	Extremely rare, although the current trend is to encourage more involvement

Figure 3: Levels and types of engagement at different phases of the project cycle (adapted from Grünewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 8 – original uses the term ‘participation’ instead of engagement)

- Meet the needs of those affected by crisis better, for example by improving targeting and timeliness.
- Reduce costs and waste or inefficiency.
- Gain access and improve the security of humanitarian staff.
- Encourage communities to contribute labour or resources.
- Keep managers satisfied and meet donor requirements.

Emancipatory rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it strengthens society and addresses underlying vulnerabilities and inequalities; it can:

- Give voice and agency to marginalised groups.
- Give people information that enables them to make more informed decisions.
- Strengthen the capacity of local civil society organisations.
- Increase citizens’ expectations of accountability.
- Transform power structures and dynamics.
- Improve the sustainability of projects and interventions.
- Give people greater control over their lives.

There is, then, a fundamental distinction between engagement to achieve a particular goal (such as better programme quality) and promoting participation as a value.

In practice, agencies do not always explicitly state why they believe engagement is important, and staff members working on the same project may have different opinions on the reasons for promoting engagement (Bonino et. al. 2014). This is important because, in many cases, the type and degree of engagement that an agency supports is determined by what the agency aims to achieve. Simple information provision or consultation may be enough to fulfil instrumental goals, while emancipatory goals are best served by approaches that encourage participation or support local ownership.

There may, in some cases, also be tension between the different rationales for engagement. Emancipatory approaches, in particular, may challenge humanitarian principles and values. We will explore these tensions in more detail in section 3. What is important to note here is that it is sometimes unclear whether engagement is seen as a right and a moral duty, and thus a valuable objective in itself – or simply as a way to achieve better humanitarian outcomes. Some current thinking, particularly in HAP and the EU Humanitarian Consensus, seems to be that it is a right (DG Humanitarian Aid, 2007; Davis 2007: 11), but there is no unanimity in the sector on this issue.

CHAPTER 2

To what degree are crisis-affected people currently engaged in humanitarian action?

We noted above that the idea of 'engagement' covers not only activities initiated by international humanitarian organisations, but also those initiated by members of affected communities, as volunteers (for instance with national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and faith-based groups) and as members of local civil society organisations.

While these activities, particularly those initiated by individuals and community-based groups, are often not recorded and can be hard to quantify, they obviously make a huge contribution to decreasing mortality in emergency situations. Particularly with regard to preventative action and to the initial responses to rapid-onset disasters, they account for the majority of lives saved. The importance of this type of engagement, and the potential for international actors to support it, is a theme which we expect to be discussed in some detail at the ALNAP Meeting.

This paper focuses on the degree to which crisis-affected people are engaged by international organisations in their humanitarian response programming. Even in this area, measuring how well, to what extent, and to what effect people affected by crisis are engaged is a difficult undertaking. Time pressures, short-term programming, and the can-do culture of humanitarian agencies often limit the scope for in-depth and long-term study and evaluations. One study that included a review of earlier reports affirms that, in general, practice has been disappointing: 'Participation in large-scale responses has often been more exploitative than emancipatory, being used as a means to obtain cheap labour, reduce costs and acquire information' (Davis, 2007: 23).

A recent report by ALNAP (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014) suggests that international agencies have some way to go before they can claim even to meaningfully consult potential aid recipients at the assessment, monitoring, and evaluation phases of the typical project cycle. The amount of consultation does appear to differ from one phase to the next, with the greatest amount of engagement tending to occur at the assessment phase, where aid agencies are gathering information on needs, but not always on existing capacity (Figure 3). Engagement drops off significantly during the design phase, when key decisions are made. While those affected by crisis may be engaged during implementation (including by providing time, labour, and feedback) and monitoring (again by providing feedback), they are even less involved during evaluation.

The research from which Figure 3 derives was conducted in 2008, and since then several trends have emerged in the humanitarian system which may arguably have increased the number of ways international organisations engage crisis-affected people throughout the programme cycle. For instance, there has been an increase in interest in establishing mechanisms for two-way communication between aid recipients and agencies, with widespread experimentation and innovative uses of mobile phones, text messaging, social media, interactive voice response, and

other new technologies (Chandran and Thow, 2013; Vinck, 2013). Many agencies have invested in feedback and accountability mechanisms (Knox Clarke, Mitchell and Fenton, 2011; Bonino et al., 2014), and there have been a number of advances in participatory evaluation, most notably in the area of participatory impact assessment (Catley et al., n.d.; SCHR, 2010: 15; Oxfam, 2012b).

However, while these initiatives may increase the amount of information affected people are able to provide, it is not always clear to what degree this information influences decision-making. Infoasaid and others highlight that 'community engagement will only be effective if aid recipients believe that they are being listened to and that their questions, concerns and problems are being addressed' (Chapelier and Shah, 2013: 25). It is also important to recognise that, in many of these approaches, the degree of engagement is fairly low: people are often only able to provide information on questions asked by the agencies, and these may not be the questions which are most important to them (Anderson et al., 2012; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014). Recent research by CDA and ALNAP on feedback mechanisms in humanitarian programmes shows that crisis-affected people are generally engaged in providing input and feedback on project-level details, but not often on broader programme, agency, or humanitarian strategies and principles (Bonino et al., 2014). As Darcy notes in the 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report, 'for all the progress made over the past 10 years, there has been a tendency to deal with accountability in increasingly technocratic, depoliticised and self-referential terms by humanitarian organisations. Put another way, there has been a shift in focus from macro- to micro-accountability (HAP, 2013b: 5). Box 3 highlights some of the more recent successes and challenges during the response to Typhoon Haiyan in late 2013.

These findings are echoed by crisis-affected people themselves. CDA's Listening Project found that most people in crisis situations do not feel they have been meaningfully engaged or included in critical decisions about the assistance they receive. Even though they may participate in various aspects of programmes and in consultations and different forms of engagement, they express their sense that much of the assistance has been predetermined, most decisions have already been made, and few opportunities exist for them to have a real voice, much less choice, in the aid they receive (Anderson et al., 2012).

The Listening Project also showed that crisis-affected people feel that the rush to get things done and to meet deadlines limits their participation and leaves them feeling frustrated and disrespected (Anderson et al., 2012). Additionally, the perceived arrogance and highly direct approach of many humanitarians can discourage local people and cause them to disengage rather than participate in consultations and other participatory processes. And when they do participate, they feel that there often is no follow-up; some even feel used. As a Listening Project report from Ethiopia noted:

Some people said they had participated in many assessments and projects but that they had never seen any of the reports that had been written by international agencies or donors. A few did not have much hope of changing the system and one person said, 'Why should we tell you what we suggest? No one ever listens to us. Even if you will listen, they won't, so why should we bother?' (Anderson et al., 2012: 73)

Community perceptions of crisis-affected people in Borena, Ethiopia, reported in the 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report (HAP 2013b) echoed many of the views and analysis highlighted by the Listening Project. The following findings from the HAR survey show that reality still does not match the rhetoric and that there is much more progress to be made (HAP, 2013: 68–69):

On information and transparency:

'Communities lacked detailed information about organisations' backgrounds or expected staff behaviours, and were not adequately informed about the project life spans . . . communities also repeatedly and strongly emphasised the need to have fuller details regarding the purpose and intended impacts of projects before they are implemented.'

On participation:

'Communities repeatedly highlighted the need for informed consent, agreement, discussion and participation before and during programmes, along with the importance of recognizing their context and culture.'

On complaints handling:

'Members of some communities had to travel great distances to access suggestion boxes, while others who had lodged complaints noted that "follow-up is necessary. We give suggestions but there is no follow-up and the NGO did not even come back."

Can we realistically expect this situation to change? One possibility is that, in the immediate future, increased engagement of affected people in humanitarian response programming may be driven as much by changes in the external environment as by approaches advocating for improved communications, accountability, participation or engagement. Gains in global development, coupled with more frequent operations in urban areas, where people usually have better access to information and technology, may increasingly lead crisis-affected communities to demand higher levels of engagement in decisions which concern them. The dynamics and language humanitarians use to talk about engagement will likely change as 'citizens' rather than 'beneficiaries' demand accountability and redress from national authorities, including via the ballot box. And while there may well continue to be situations where national authorities or non-state actors are unwilling or unable to uphold humanitarian principles and where international humanitarian agencies will continue to play a key role, the tolerance for sub-par services and arrogant behaviour will diminish.

At the same time, as more middle-income countries develop their national capacity to prepare for and respond to crises, the role of international humanitarian agencies is bound to change and may well become more advisory and less operational. Oxfam has suggested that the impact of international NGOs will rest on becoming 'humanitarian brokers: facilitating, supporting, and bringing together local civil society' (Oxfam 2012a: 3).

Related to these political and economic changes, innovative uses of communication technologies will increasingly enable crisis-affected people to organise their own responses and to publicise their views and demands for accountability (Chandran and Thow, 2013; Development Initiatives, 2013).

At a more programmatic level, increases in unconditional cash transfers will provide people in crises with more control over how they access resources and rebuild their livelihoods and thus more ownership over the response. And in conflict situations,

Box 3: Engagement during the response to Typhoon Haiyan

While it is too early to evaluate the impacts, some progress towards more effective engagement was evident in the recent response to Typhoon Haiyan/ Yolanda in the Philippines, where much of the response was locally driven, given the strong existing capacity of the government and civil society actors. In the first days after the typhoon struck, a number of UN and international NGO staff with an explicit focus on communication and accountability engaged with local communities, civil society, media and technology providers. Based on the findings from community consultations and feedback gathered through Twitter, text messaging, radio, help desks and other channels in the first month of the response, aid agencies made rapid changes and noted that engaging with and getting information from crisis-affected communities influenced their decisions. The end-of-mission report from the first inter-agency coordinator reported:

It was demonstrated that addressing the communication, information and connectivity needs of communities is a clear first line priority in any humanitarian response, and additionally, that the quality of this approach is enhanced by an Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) lens that encourages community involvement at a deeper level, clear problem definition, consideration of cross cutting issues according to gender, age, diversity and protection, and greater follow through and response to two-way communication. (OCHA, 2013b: 2)

The Communication with Communities (CwC)Working Group update from less than six weeks after the typhoon showed both progress made and challenges faced by humanitarian actors trying to engage with communities at this early stage of the disaster – all of which are common challenges in later phases of responses as well:

Agencies need to place equal weight and resources in the capacity to engage in dialogue rather than defaulting to a very limited one-to-many messaging approach. The ultimate goal, a continuous and systematic loop of drawing real time feedback from communities, analyzing it, acting upon it, and communicating those actions back to the community, is still some way off. With regard to listening to feedback offered by the community, there are a range of systems run by radio stations, implementing agencies, and government, which are gathering and collating complaints, thanks, requests, and information from the ground. However, improvements need to be made in the management of this information. Collating the various datasets to more broadly represent the voice of the community, making that information available to a broader range of relevant actors, and ensuring that subsequent programming takes this feedback into account, are all areas in which agencies also need to invest capacity, skills and resources. (OCHA, 2013b: 1)

further restrictions on international agencies' mobility and access to crisis-affected populations, and the resulting use of remote management approaches, may lead to an increase in the power of grass-roots and civil society organisations at the point of delivery.

However, we cannot expect that all of these changes will necessarily lead to more effective engagement. Increased remote management, for example, may increase power at the grass roots, but it also means that the chain of intermediaries between funders and recipients of humanitarian action is becoming longer and more remote. The combination of the growing institutionalization of the system, multiplication of standards, coordination processes, and reporting requirements – as well the implications of anti-terror legislation and insurance concerns – are resulting in an increasingly risk-averse and 'bunkerised' posture by the humanitarian aid community. This is clearly the case in volatile situations such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Darfur, where remote management technologies have blossomed (Donini and Maxwell, 2014). The temptation to resort to untested intermediaries and chains of subcontracting agreements, as in Syria today, in lieu of a more robust and principled negotiation of access, also carries risks for substantive engagement as well as for the quality of humanitarian work, in particular with respect to protection.

This raises the important question, to which we will return, of what sort of engagement humanitarians want. Is the objective to ensure that people are more supported in their own response efforts (which might signal a very limited role for international agencies), or is it to ensure that people are more engaged with humanitarian action initiated by international agencies? From this perspective, questions about the aims and value of engaging with crisis-affected people highlight fundamental questions about the role and value of international involvement in humanitarian responses.



CHAPTER 3

What are the main obstacles to engaging with crisis-affected people?

Challenges for humanitarians seeking to engage with crisis-affected populations fall into two main categories: operational and conceptual.

Operational challenges

Practitioners, academics, and crisis-affected people all seem to agree that international humanitarian programmes do not consistently engage with local people. This failure occurs despite numerous commitments to increase engagement, and despite the committed efforts of many individuals and some organisations.

The problem is not simply a lack of willpower on the part of international humanitarian agencies. The obstacles to engagement are many. The following summary lists some of the challenges that are most often cited in the literature.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian contexts:

Cost

'Participation is priceless but comes at a cost' (Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 4). In rapid-onset disasters, engaging with those affected can slow down emergency responses and divert staff time from life-saving activities. The balance between getting the job done, getting it done well, and getting the principles right is often skewed by urgency. Those affected by crisis often feel disrespected and left out of the process when they are not informed, consulted, or able to participate because aid agencies say they do not have the time to involve them. In protracted crises, this sense of urgency is less apparent, and the cost is less one of time than one of financial and human resources. Often aid agencies do not allocate the resources needed to engage consistently and effectively. However, this choice can be more costly and inefficient in the long run if the wrong people are targeted, the wrong types of assistance are provided, or if the motivations of humanitarian aid agencies are questioned.

Access

It is hard to engage with those affected by crisis without access and presence. In volatile contexts, attempts at remote management have been made with mixed results. As World Vision's Country Director in Khartoum noted when discussing the formal feedback mechanisms the organisation has established in camps in Darfur, 'If we had enough staff and were closer to the ground regularly in the camps, and implementing our programs in a more participatory manner, we wouldn't need a Beneficiary Accountability Officer' (Jean and Bonino, 2013: 29). There is also a trend towards the increased use of remote management technologies for needs assessment and feedback, which have obvious negative impacts on engagement by external agencies (Donini and Maxwell, 2014), though they may in some circumstances give local people more influence over programmes.

Information

Transparency is a key ingredient of engagement. But security and transparency are often conflicting goals; providing information can bring unwanted attention or put staff and partners at risk. At the same time, it can enable affected groups (and non-state

actors) to better understand how the aid enterprise functions, and they can use this information to demand accountability but also to manipulate aid for non-humanitarian purposes.

Replicability

Given the differences in history, context and types of humanitarian emergencies, and the different mix of actors involved in humanitarian action, some approaches may not be replicable or scalable in other places. Many crisis-affected people have criticised projects which are predetermined and note that aid agencies need to get to know the situation and the local culture to be able to know how to effectively engage with local people. For humanitarians who often move from emergency to emergency, learning how to engage people effectively in each place can be a daunting task.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian staff:

Skills

To effectively engage with crisis-affected people requires a range of interpersonal skills. Listening, communication, facilitation, conflict management, and collaborative problem-solving skills are often not prioritised in recruiting and do not come naturally in the heat of an emergency. Providing training to staff requires resources, time, and a longer-term commitment. 'Listening is a special skill and you cannot assume everyone can do it appropriately in all contexts. It needs to be nurtured instead of assumed. This has implications on training and on the need for awareness of how our way of listening is based on our assumptions about the world and our way of working' (Anderson et al., 2012: 131). A Haiti real-time evaluation noted, 'Participatory approaches and consultation with the population and local institutions should be seen as a must, not as a constraint' (Grunewald and Binder, 2010: 60).

Attitudes and behaviours

As several studies on perceptions have noted, aid workers are not necessarily perceived as benevolent or competent. While humanitarian principles and solidarity may be generally accepted and understood, the personal behaviour, cultural baggage, management style and perceived arrogance of some outsiders are often problematic.

Staffing

Short-term assignments, which are common in emergencies, do not enable staff to interact and develop relationships with those affected by crisis. The constant turnover and changing management styles send confusing messages and undermine the confidence of national staff and partners, who are often on the frontlines engaging with communities. Too often the decisions and approach to engaging with crisis-affected people – and the seriousness with which it is pursued – depend on the vision and ideals of the staff in charge rather than on agency policies.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian structures and procedures:

Projectisation

There is a tendency in the humanitarian sector to 'projectise' or set up new initiatives to address new challenges rather than conducting more wholesale organisational or procedural change (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Anderson et al., 2012). This is certainly evident in the area of engagement (Bonino et al., 2014). To more effectively engage with local populations, humanitarian organisations may have to rethink how they are structured, funded, and evaluated, not just start a new project or initiative.

Institutional changes

A variety of changes in humanitarian organisations – including the increased use of electronic communications and distance technologies, adaptation to anti-terror legislation, and security and insurance concerns – arguably result in a more risk-averse international aid community, with operations more centrally managed and more determined by set procedures. As a result, humanitarian actors on the ground in many cases have limited agency and are less able to engage with local communities than they may have done in the past (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Collinson and Duffield, 2013).

Measurement and reporting

It can be hard to measure the effects of engagement, particularly its longer-term impact on social structures. There is currently only limited evidence on the results of using participative approaches in a humanitarian context. This arguably makes it harder to demonstrate the value of engagement. One (as yet unusual) example of research into the outcomes of accountability mechanisms has recently been completed by HAP, Save the Children, and Christian Aid in Kenya and Myanmar. The research showed that ‘participation was considered an important contribution to ensuring that the project met the needs and priorities of communities. Lack of participation was considered a significant hindrance to successful interventions. . . . Accountability mechanisms have strengthened trust between agencies and project participants, and highlighted the link between community participation and ownership. . . . A modest investment in information sharing (in terms of financial resources, staff time, and agency commitment), involvement by project participants in the design and delivery of programmes, and ensuring there is a means of listening to and acting on feedback, brings a significant return – not only in participant satisfaction and engagement in projects, but also in the tangible success of projects’ (Featherstone, 2013: 9, 13, 14).

A ‘supply-led’ paradigm

The current structure of the humanitarian system (top-down and supply-driven with a focus on fast action and short-term project and funding cycles) does not provide incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people. Mainstreaming meaningful and active (as opposed to rhetorical and passive) approaches to participation requires a substantial change to the current ways of working in the humanitarian system. ‘Having a participation strategy should theoretically mean being participatory at every stage of the operation. But it is difficult to find humanitarian operations which are participatory at every stage, unless there is a real paradigm shift: It’s not the population that participates in the agency’s project but the agency which participates in the population’s project . . . engaging with the population throughout the project cycle, especially at the design and monitoring phases, can be like opening a “Pandora’s box” and turning the humanitarian sector’s priorities upside down (Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 8, 9).’

Conceptual challenges

The challenges to engagement are not exclusively practical or operational. Some critiques challenge the idea of engagement itself, and its relevance (specifically the elements of participation and ownership) to humanitarian activities. Three of the most relevant critiques focus on technical, political, and philosophical issues.

The technical critique argues that in rapid-onset disasters, top-down approaches save the most lives, at least in the first few days or weeks, because they allow

the unencumbered use of technology – everything from military-style emergency medicine to humanitarian drones – by the military, government, local authorities, and local and international agencies. At that stage, time and technique are of the essence, and centrally managed approaches allow the best mobilisation of disparate response efforts. Moreover, certain humanitarian activities – for example, triage, emergency surgery, nutritional feeding of the malnourished, and search and rescue – are guided by technical standards and neither lend themselves to participatory approaches nor require much consultation.

Elements of this critique can certainly be challenged: command approaches may neglect important aspects of a humanitarian response, such as protection, and they may diminish their effectiveness by setting objectives which are not shared by the people affected by the disaster. But the main point of the critique, that in some situations participation is neither feasible nor advisable, deserves consideration.

A second, politically focused critique argues that development and humanitarianism have different objectives and thus different approaches to politics, and that the participatory approaches derived from (and important to) development work are not necessarily appropriate for humanitarian action. Development, because it pursues change (social transformation), is intrinsically political. Participatory approaches, at least those that aim at empowerment, are political tools: they aim to change the balance of power. 'In addition to being a fundamental right, active participation demonstrates respect for affected populations, helps develop skills and confidence and contributes to capacity building of stakeholders and local institutions' (Brookings Institution, 2008: 11). Ultimately, participation may lead to a better-educated public, increased civic participation, empowerment of local populations, and increased gender and social equality.

Some humanitarian agencies explicitly recognise these potential benefits in policy and programming. For example, World Food Programme (WFP) policy calls for the use of 'participatory approaches to bring the poorest and marginalised people into its assistance programmes, strengthen their representation in community structures and overcome gender inequalities by creating opportunities for both women's and men's voices to be heard' (WFP, 2000). However, while participation is political, humanitarianism is (in theory at least) apolitical: aid is given on the basis of need alone. Thus, activities with the goal of empowerment challenge fundamental humanitarian principles, because they require an agency to take sides.

This presents not only a theoretical challenge but also a practical one. Engaging with affected populations may wittingly or unwittingly involve outside aid providers in local power dynamics, controversies, and divisions. An understanding of the context and local relationships is needed to ensure that agencies do not unintentionally strengthen the strong rather than the weak and amplify the role of brokers, translators, and gatekeepers. This requires time, analysis, resources, and skills that often do not exist in humanitarian agencies adapted to working in rapid-onset emergencies. As a result, attempts at engagement can have unintended negative consequences: further marginalising people (such as women and members of low castes) who are not included in community groups targeted by the engagement effort, or disempowering local institutions. For example, in the Haiti earthquake response, the participatory approaches of external actors resulted in the marginalisation of state structures, some of which (for example, the health services) had at least some capacity to respond (Schuller, 2012).

There are a number of responses to these arguments. The conceptual difference between development efforts (seen as more political and transformative) and apolitical humanitarian action often seems less important to the people affected by crisis than it does to (some) humanitarian workers since people in many crisis-affected societies do not distinguish between different types of assistance and often experience disasters and conflicts as a normal part of their long-term development process (Anderson et al. 2012; Scriven, 2013). The practical challenges inherent in working with local political institutions may be outweighed by the damage that can be done by not working with them and leaving an institutional vacuum. One recent analysis noted: 'In contexts of protracted crisis like Darfur and Eastern DRC, aid organisations have tended to continue the same short-term responses over many years. Given the inevitable tendency of protracted aid programmes to become part of the local political economy, with potentially damaging effects, organisations whose programmes fail to evolve or to include plans for effective transitions should surely be held accountable' (HAP, 2013: 8). The same can be said about humanitarian activities in Afghanistan, where many programmes have been running for more than 20 years (and where, under the Taliban, many rehabilitation and small-scale development activities had to be labelled 'humanitarian' in order to comply with donor policies against doing capacity building that might have benefited the Taliban).

Whatever one's position on the overall value of the empowerment approach, this critique provides a good reminder of the challenges and tensions that exist when attempting to provide humanitarian relief in politically sensitive situations where societies are not homogenous, authority structures may not represent the interests of the most needy, and there are huge power imbalances between the humanitarian organisation and the people it seeks to help.

A third - more philosophical - critique argues that the engagement approach has lost its innovative edge and too often serves to mask rather than resolve power imbalances. While the call for more participation was originally a backlash against the role of the omnipotent outside expert (usually white and male), engagement has now become the new orthodoxy, embraced by the World Bank and even multinational corporations. What was initially a radical critique of top-down development has become a staple of international development practice, and more recently of humanitarian practice (Cornwall, 2000). But critics see participatory development as flawed, idealistic and naïve. A key articulation of this view is *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), which challenges the notion that participation is a universal good. It argues that in practice, participation has not promoted the liberation and redistribution of power in the aid relationship that its rhetoric suggests, but rather largely maintains existing power imbalances and masks them with the rhetoric and techniques of participation.

Participation: The New Tyranny? challenges assumptions about the ability of top-down-oriented development organisations to transform themselves into bottom-up facilitators of locally grounded processes. How, it asks, can local knowledge and capacities transform and transcend bureaucratic organisations whose primary stakeholders are not truly those affected by crises and disasters? In practice, the participation of local people in processes designed by outsiders often simply lends credibility to decisions that have already been made. As a local business owner and grassroots activist in Ecuador told the Listening Project, 'This is how the verb "to participate" is conjugated: I participate, you participate, they decide' (Anderson et al., 2012: 69).

This critique suggests, ultimately, that current participatory approaches to engagement may be at odds with the way the humanitarian system is structured, and may not be compatible with the architecture of the system. From this perspective, it is meaningless to talk about engagement unless we are prepared to completely overhaul the system, and the power imbalances that currently underpin 'a relationship without reciprocity' (Fassin, 2010: 11; Donini and Walker, 2012: 246).

CHAPTER 4

Where do we go from here?

Across the humanitarian system, there is widespread support for the engagement of crisis-affected people in response activities. This desire is demonstrated both by the large number of resolutions, commitments and guidelines, and by the many initiatives on the ground.

There is also a general consensus that international agencies are not doing enough to engage people in their programmes, or to otherwise facilitate popular engagement in emergency response. Clearly, more needs to be done. In order to move forward, agencies might do well to consider more closely what they expect to achieve through engagement, a question which is closely related to how they see their role in future humanitarian responses. They also need to consider and address the conceptual challenges to engagement that have been outlined above, as well as the more practical, operational constraints.

To some degree, the position that an agency takes on these issues will be determined by its organisational mission, values and role. One size does not fit all: Dunantist, Wilsonian, solidarist, developmental, and faith-based agencies may well come to different conclusions on their rationale for engagement and on the degree of engagement that they hope to achieve. It is possible to imagine a future, more competitive humanitarian arena in which people affected by crisis are well informed and technologically connected enough to understand the potential sources of aid – local and international, state and church, free and with obligations attached – and decide who they want to help them, in what ways, and for how long.

The nature of engagement in any given response will also depend on the specific context, nature, and phase of the programme. In the first weeks of a rapid-onset disaster, agencies may well focus on immediate life-saving activities; as the situation stabilises, more opportunities will arise to actively involve survivors and others in affected communities in decisions concerning their future. Similarly, in volatile or fragile environments, where access is limited and there are high levels of inter-group tension, engagement modalities will be different from those in protracted, relatively stable situations where outside agencies are working with more homogenous communities, often for longer periods of time.

For example, while an agency might generally aim to be transparent about its plans, in certain situations (such as Syria today) a high level of transparency would put staff and crisis-affected people at risk. Agencies must ask themselves ‘how much transparency is reasonable and at what cost’ (Heller et al., 2011: 53); ‘sometimes keeping a certain distance can be a real strength’ (Abu-Sada, 2012: 68). In some situations, emphasising an international profile can be a better strategy for creating access and engagement than relying on local staff or partners. In other cases, it is the other way around. Decisions on how transparent and open to be – and on what issues to engage with those affected by crisis – must be grounded in fine-grained assessments that include the perspectives of those who want to engage with humanitarian agencies.

The nature of, and approach to, engagement should also take into account cultural norms about power. Various authors have pointed out the cultural and linguistic

divides in the humanitarian system, including on accountability (Heller et al., 2011). The act of speaking up and engaging directly with people in positions of power or leadership is valued differently across cultures. In some, challenging the views of foreigners or people in authority is not socially acceptable. In others, people may fear losing assistance if they are too critical of it. If engagement does not occur on the community's terms, misunderstandings or worse can ensue.

Approaches to engagement are also determined by how various stakeholders understand the relationship between giver and receiver. Is this relationship inherently disempowering, or could it promote equality (Anderson, 2008)? Perhaps recognising that crisis-affected people do their utmost to survive and protect themselves, and are not as dependent on the largesse of relief agencies as commonly thought, would be a good place to start in reconsidering power balances.

Another way to challenge power imbalances might be to re-envision the humanitarian relationship as a contractual one rather than as an unequal exchange. In a contractual relationship, all sides know what to expect – what will be done in exchange for what – in a deal without sentimentality or rhetoric. Participation has too often been romanticised and crisis-affected communities mythologised. Adopting a more contractual approach to the humanitarian relationship will not address the asymmetries of power inherent in the relationship, but it might help clarify what both outsiders and insiders can expect from one another.

Questions for the ALNAP Annual Meeting

There is substantial evidence that humanitarian action often fails to meet the expectations, needs, and priorities of crisis-affected people. The forthcoming ALNAP Meeting, hosted by African Humanitarian Action in Addis Ababa, provides an opportunity for humanitarian actors and representatives of communities affected by crises to consider fundamental questions and share experiences of what works and what can be improved. In particular, participants at the meeting may wish to consider questions such as the following:

What type of engagement do we wish to achieve? Are we primarily interested in understanding how humanitarian agencies can engage with crisis-affected communities, or are we looking at how those affected by disasters or conflicts can design and implement their own aid efforts? What does this mean for our understanding of the role of international humanitarian responders?

How do we deal with issues of power and politics? Can humanitarians support empowerment and remain non-political? How and to what degree should external actors engage with existing power structures? Should humanitarians take a more activist stance to enable crisis-affected people to be more engaged in decisions which affect their lives when rights are violated or serious protection issues arise? What are the risks if they don't?

Does an engagement agenda mean more Disaster Risk Reduction, recovery, and development work?

If people affected by crisis often want to see closer links between life-saving and development activities, will engagement inevitably lead humanitarians into longer-term, more developmental work?

To what degree are common standards and approaches useful?

Differences in the types and levels of engagement that various humanitarian actors will aim for are likely to continue. One size does not fit all, and just as in development, peace-building, and other fields, what is important is for those involved in humanitarian action to clearly articulate their theory of action. Given this, are there minimum requirements that should apply to all agencies?

How do the different cultures and languages of various stakeholders affect the conceptualisation of and approaches to engaging crisis-affected people?

Is engagement a universal good? Do different stakeholders understand engagement, participation, consultation, and ownership in the same way? What can be learned from how communities are dealing with the crises affecting them and how they want to engage with outsiders who want to support them?

Where are examples of success?

What have ALNAP members found that works to build relationships and effectively engage with crisis-affected communities? What are the key factors for success? To what degree are these factors dependent on context?

How do we know what works?

Given the weak evidence base, what can be done to increase the capacity of the system to generate field-based data that would produce a more accurate picture of the effectiveness and impact of different approaches to engagement? How can the humanitarian system better support, value and use locally driven research on, and approaches to, engagement?

How can we harness changes in our environment to improve engagement?

How can humanitarian agencies and other actors use new technologies to more effectively engage with crisis-affected populations, and how will these populations use such technologies themselves to engage with aid agencies? What do we know about the benefits and the risks of these new practices? How will the increase in cash transfers and remote management affect the ways that humanitarian aid agencies engage with local people and institutions? What are the implications for humanitarian principles and protection?

What can we learn from development actors?

While the evidence on engagement with crisis-affected communities is fairly weak in the humanitarian sector, much can be learned from development actors (many of whom work together in multi-mandate agencies). There are numerous new initiatives and approaches to improving participation, transparency, accountability, and local ownership where more sharing of experiences and lessons learned would benefit actors in both sectors. How can we build bridges on this issue between sectors and between humanitarian and development staff and structures within organisations?

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