

# THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACHES

## WHAT IS THIS BRIEF?

In 2019, [CDA Collaborative Learning \(CDA\)](#)<sup>1</sup> and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) jointly investigated Movement members<sup>2</sup> in institutionalizing participatory approaches to improve how they work with local communities. Findings and recommendations presented in this brief emerged from this research and illuminate key areas where the Movement and state institutions can enhance how they listen and respond to local people. This brief is part of a series of briefing notes that provide supplemental evidence for the Movement Minimum Commitments on Community Engagement and Accountability presented at the 2019 Council of Delegates.

The value of community engagement is seen in real experiences and heard in the voices of those who have experienced it. In recent fieldwork, local community members elucidated about the importance of listening to their perspectives, as one Red Cross community member explained, *“If they [the Red Cross] listen to us, then we can build better relationships, and they will become more accountable to our needs.”*

The DRC Ebola response example highlights the importance of rapid adaptiveness by the whole of system in order to be responsive to community perception, and fundamentally improve response efforts. In this case, years of distrust of outsiders and the government has meant that many community members do not trust health workers. With the Ebola outbreak, community members voiced that they could not see the remains of their loved ones in the opaque body bags; and therefore,

many believed that the health workers were lying to them about the whereabouts of their family members, or worse that outside organizations are trafficking their organs. The IFRC and partners first heard these rumors through a robust feedback dashboard system that enables the operation to rapidly listen and adapt based on community concerns, rumors, and feedback. And based on concerns related to the body bags, the IFRC was able to shift to transparent body bags, which assuaged community fear, increased trust, and importantly saved lives.<sup>3</sup>

While the Ebola example highlights the positive side of what can happen when local people are at the center of response efforts, evidence from inside and outside the Movement highlights the harm that can occur when local needs, voices, and perspectives are not integrated into the design, planning, implementing, monitoring, and exiting of programmes

1. For more see: <http://cdacollaborative.org>

2. Africa Movement members engaged in this process as part of the IFRC CEA Africa Roadmap. The Roadmap engaged over 400 people from IFRC, ICRC, Partner National Societies, and Africa National Societies, and included in-depth visits to the Sudan Red Crescent, Malawi Red Cross, Burundi Red Cross, and the Nigeria Red Cross. To achieve a more global perspective interviews were conducted with global movement members and in-depth visits to the Italian Red Cross and the Ukraine Red Cross.

3. Baggio, Ombretta, Abdoulaye Camara, Cheick and Christine Prue. 2019. “Bringing community perspectives to decision-making in the Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Humanitarian Practitioners Network, ODI: London, UK.

and operations.<sup>4</sup> In fact, ensuring that programmes are locally relevant remains a serious issue as highlighted by a [statistic](#), shared at the [2016 World Humanitarian Summit](#), that said while nine out of ten Syrian refugees in Jordan received aid assistance, only three in ten found that assistance useful.<sup>5</sup> Globally, organizations struggle to not only ensure that their services and programmes are relevant to those they serve, but that their work does not ‘do harm’ to the local context and communities.

### WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF GREATER COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION?

Community engagement and greater participation can enable the **building of trust and acceptance**, which in turn improve the **quality of programming** and **the safety of frontline Red Cross staff**. Furthermore, it can strengthen local structures that allow for **greater community resilience and sustainability**. All of this reduces the potential for **financial and reputational risk** by ensuring that the Red Cross is a vital contributing player in the response.

#### Community trust and acceptance

Relationships are built over time through sustained, honest, and transparent engagement. A [recent study](#) found, “that close relationships between frontline staff and affected people are highly important in understanding their perspectives and creating a level of trust that can encourage productive discussions on such issues as decision-making, modifications to activities and fraud.” When trust is cultivated with communities, it facilitates acceptance and ensures access. This is often seen as one of the primary contributions community engagement, as stronger community trust has other far-reaching impacts on humanitarian programming. One report notes, that even though people who receive aid are often unable to take their business elsewhere, as people do in an open market, lack of trust can deteriorate relationships and led to people disengaging from programmes.<sup>6</sup>

A recent analysis by Ground Truth Solutions demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between trust and programme outcomes (e.g. whether aid meets needs, and goes to those who most need it; whether people were satisfied with the education provided; whether assistance would help them to live without aid in the future; whether they felt well-informed about assistance available; whether life was improving; and their perceptions of safety). This study noted that, “people with high trust were **twice as likely** to agree that aid meets their needs and will help them to live without aid in the future.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Safety and access for staff and volunteers

Robust channels for two-way communication with communities can provide reliable information that can protect the safety and security of staff, volunteers, and community members. Information from the community helps to create a better understanding of the practical realities and evolving dynamics within and among communities. Enhanced knowledge and contextual understanding can offer institutions the opportunity to respond with greater efficacy to emerging security concerns. For example, the [Kenya Red Cross](#) implemented a strong community engagement strategy which strengthened communication channels between the Red Cross and the community. Increased dialogue and information sharing directly increased trust between frontline staff and the local community. These communication channels became essential when Red Cross staff were building a fence to enclose a meeting area. Through these communication channels, communities alerted staff to security concerns in the area, and suggested that the staff build two exits to the fenced-in area so that if a conflict arose (which is common in the area), staff would have a quick and safe exit.<sup>8</sup>

#### Programme quality and relevance

Far too often, projects are developed with little input from or knowledge about the realities of those who are experiencing an emergency or receiving goods and services, which can lead to inappropriate or poorly designed interventions. For example, during the [response efforts in Darfur, Sudan](#), one organization distributed fortified canola oil as part of the predetermined food rations. Community members however struggled to acquire the typical groundnut oil they traditionally used for cooking.

4. For example, see: Anderson, Mary B., Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean. 2012. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. Anderson, Mary B. 1999. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. *Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society*. CDA Collaborative Learning and IFRC. IFRC. 2018. “World Disaster Report: Leaving No One behind.” Cechvala, Sarah, and Isabella Jean. 2016. *“Accountability is a mirror that shows not only your face, but also your back.”* CDA-World Vision Ethiopia Feedback Loops Case Study. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning; Chambers, Robert and Ben Ramalingam. 2016. *“Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies.”* Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. Jean, Isabella, with Francesca Bonino. 2014. *“We are Here!: IFRC’s Experiences with Communication and Feedback with Affected Populations in Haiti”*. London: ODI/ALNP.

5. IPSOS. 2016. “Community Consultations on Humanitarian Aid.”

6. See: Nick van Praag, ‘Would you Recommend this Aid programme to a friend?’ in CHS, *Humanitarian Accountability Report*, 2015.

7. Ground Truth Solutions, *Humanitarian Voice Index*, 2019

8. Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. *Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society. CDA Collaborative Learning and International Federation of the Red Cross.*

So, instead of using the oil, communities sold the canola oil in the local market to soap manufacturing businesses.<sup>9</sup> A recent [ALNAP study](#) stresses this point by stating bluntly: “if a project isn’t relevant to peoples’ needs it can’t be successful.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, limited inclusion of local perspective often leads to irrelevant or inappropriate programming, which is very common in emergency response efforts. For example, the CHS Alliance’s 2018 scorecard shows that agencies were below passing – based on verified evaluations score 2.7 out of 4 on relevance and appropriateness of programming.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, however, when affected populations engage with and share their opinions on programming designed for them, programmes are more relevant, sustainable, and locally-accepted. Fundamentally, much of the relevance question is predicated on “choice” and people’s ability to determine what will best meet their needs. This same [ALNAP study](#) notes, “giving them [people] the means to decide which of their market-based needs to meet first and what is the most appropriate way of meeting them.” For example, cash based programming has been one way to broaden the opportunity for choice. As the [High Level Panel on Cash](#) explains that cash assistance, “better link[s] the responses that humanitarians deliver with the needs that people face.”<sup>12</sup> Inherently, there is a clear correlation between programme quality and increased space for communities to input on decisions that will impact their lives.

## OBSTACLES PREVENTING US TO ACT ON WHAT COMMUNITIES TELL US

While enhanced community participation can lead to more relevant and sustainable programmes, contextual limitations can hinder an organization’s ability to meet local needs. For example, in some countries cash transfer programmes are largely prohibited by the National Government. This situation creates a challenging dilemma for many aid agencies because refugees request greater choice to meet their needs through cash assistance, but agencies are unable to meet those needs due to the restrictions. In fact, in one case, 59% of the refugee population have reported selling their aid items to better meet their needs in cash.

Responding to issues of migration, is another area where humanitarian organizations are often constrained by political pressures or shifting priorities of host governments. In one European country for example, the research noted that government restrictions directly conflicted with the principles of the organization. Staff at one organization explained that the shrinking political space to support migrants creates gaps for the organization to listen effectively and re-

spond directly to the needs of the migrants they serve. For example, lengthy legal wait-times for processing of migration papers, loop holes in the immigration process, shrinking availability of resources to support migrants all along with little political will or action on the topic of migration has made for it very difficult for staff to engage with and respond appropriately to those they are serving. Many staff noted that they know community engagement is core to their work, but there is real fear among staff about what happens when they cannot respond to the feedback raised by migrants.

These examples demonstrate the need however for the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement to play an important advocacy role on behalf of the communities they serve.

## Resilience and local sustainability

Local communities are not helpless: they are resilient, innovative, and adaptable. Inherently, local people often have a better idea of their acute needs in both the short and long term. Put yourself at the center of an emergency, as someone who has lost family members, your home, and access to your livelihood. **Who would know better than you about what you need to survive, and better yet, thrive again?** However, far too often, interventions are crafted far away from the crisis – whether it be in a different country, continent, or perhaps in the capital as oppose to the local area impacted by poverty or an emergency. [CDA’s Time to Listen](#) emphasizes this point, “Pre-packaged projects that arrive already designed and funded through proposal and funding procedures negate meaningful participation of recipients.”<sup>13</sup>

When programmes are designed in this manner they can undercut existing local capacities or duplicate or undermine functioning power systems or local response processes. And in the worst case, they can ‘do harm’ and create or exacerbate existing tensions and conflict dynamics. The [experience of communities in Bolivia](#) emphasizes the frustration people feel when they are not engaged in the process, “In Bolivia, people commented on the importance of NGOs engaging with them in a participatory

9. Jean, Isabella, with Francesca Bonino. 2013. *We are committed to Listen to you’: World Vision’s Experience with Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms in Darfur*. London: ODI/ALNAP.

10. Swithern, S. 2019. More Relevant? 10 ways to approach what people really need. ALNAP Paper. London: ODI/ALNAP.

11. CHS Alliance. 2019. ‘CHS verification data’. [Webpage].

12. High Level Panel on Cash. 2015. *Doing cash differently: How cash transfers can transform humanitarian aid*. London: ODI.

13. Anderson, Mary B., Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean. 2012. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects: 70.

*fashion, which encouraged and allowed people's involvement in priority setting, project design, decision-making and management of participants, materials, and even funds. People also voiced disappointment, frustration, and even humiliation when NGOs refused to treat them in this manner and opted for a more vertical, authoritarian, top-down approach.*"<sup>14</sup>

Local ownership often strengthens community resilience and may extend the life of the project, even after outside support has left. For example, in [one case](#) the Chinese Red Cross (CRCS) evaluated their community vulnerability reduction programme and realized that "communities could have had a greater say in what was done and in what order of priority. In other words, more could have been done to raise communities' awareness and involve them in decision-making." So, as a way to address this, the CRCS engaged in participatory exercises that involved "mapping risks and gaining a perspective on a village's history of disaster to understand traditional coping and survival strategies. Based on what emerges from the assessment, the community develops its own tailored disaster preparedness plan and decides on a disaster risk mitigation project to undertake."<sup>15</sup> An outcome of this process was that villagers owned and led on various disaster mitigation approaches that they saw as necessary, such as planting on hillsides to prevent landslides, digging wells to prepare for drought, etc.

In [another example](#), refugees were frustrated when they observed that five separate organizations were working in their settlement on protection issues, and each with overlapping services and clients. In this case, "the community has therefore taken matters into their own hands, inviting local incentive workers from the NGOs to a Sunday meeting to map the services being provided and create their own overview of the various protection efforts in the settlement."<sup>16</sup>

### **Reduction of reputational risks**

With potential impacts on access, safety, and programme quality, a lack of community engagement can expose organizations to reputational risks that may lead to a loss of funding. In several examples, National Societies saw partners stop funding projects due when community feedback that revealed concerns of corruption and lack of transparency within the National Society. For example, in one country, some branches suffer from the historical perspective that the Red Cross took "forced donations" from the community. This perception has damaged the organization's image and ability to work with the local communities and other ex-

ternal partners working in the area. Reputational damage caused by these negative perceptions has also made it challenging to convince donors that the organization can change its way of working and address community concerns.

Increasing access to technology and more global platforms that enable sharing of information provides local communities a space to voice their dissatisfaction with organizations and their work. Technological advances have also shrunk the space between donors and community members, which only enhance the concern of reputational and financial risk for organizations. A [UN OCHA report](#) notes, "As beneficiaries have increasing access to information and communication technologies and can better evaluate, compare and ultimately rank the 'performance' of various humanitarian actors, the more the latter will have to prove their worth and earn their reputation through relevant, effective action."<sup>17</sup>

More research in the area of financial loss due to poor community engagement and accountability could bolster this argument. During this research, several staff members noted that making the case related to the for money of community participation or the loss of money due poor engagement could also greatly improve advocacy efforts for greater community participation. In [Kenya Red Cross](#) for example, as a way to strengthen arguments for increased resourcing for their community engagement strategy the MEAL<sup>18</sup> team explicitly linked the approach to a value for money matrix. "This enabled them to make a stronger case for pursuing AtC integration on the basis of improved institutional efficiency, effectiveness, economy, and equity."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>. Anderson, Mary B., Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean. 2012. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects: 69.

<sup>15</sup>. IFRC. Case Study: China and Cambodia: Integrated programming and cooperation with local authorities boost communities' disaster preparedness.

<sup>16</sup>. Degett, Ayo. 2019. "Why attention to detail matters in the participation revolution." Humanitarian Practitioner Network, ODI: London, UK.

<sup>17</sup>. United Nations. 2015. "Leaving No One Behind: Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Age of the Sustainable Development Goals." OCHA Policy and Studies Series.

<sup>18</sup>. Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning team

<sup>19</sup>. Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. *Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study*. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society. CDA Collaborative Learning and International Federation of the Red Cross.