

THE NECESSARY BUILDING BLOCKS FOR GETTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RIGHT

WHAT IS THIS BRIEF?

In 2019, [CDA Collaborative Learning \(CDA\)](#)¹ and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) jointly investigated Movement members² 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.

WHY NOW MORE THAN EVER?

As of 2017, 201 million people required humanitarian assistance, and the number of people forcibly displaced by conflict had increase to 68.5 million people.³ The dramatic increase for humanitarian interventions has been coupled with a growing demand from local people and governments to have a voice and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.⁴ From the launch of the [Core Humanitarian Standards \(CHS\)](#) to the [World Humanitarian Summit Grand Bargain](#), donor countries and humanitarian organizations have increasingly called for greater accountability to affected people. In fact, the [Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2018](#) noted that over 75% of reporting organizations had reported taking action in the Participation Revolution workstream.⁵ And yet, gaps in the practical application of these commitments have come up short. As the [2018 State of the Humanitarian System Report](#) notes, “many interviewees

are concerned that [accountability to affected people] is becoming a ‘box-ticking exercise.’” The report further explains that while the system has seen one-off improvements in accountability and participation, there has been limited change to the system as a whole.⁶ Such findings are further validated by the [CHS verification process](#), which highlights that commitments related to community engagement, participation, and feedback are among the weakest for organizations in terms of implementation.⁷

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is firmly rooted in local communities, and has increased its efforts to improve how it engages with and is

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. ALNAP. 2018. The State of the Humanitarian System: Summary. London: ALNAP/ODI.

4. See: Chatelet, Alice and Meg Sattler. 2019. “Coordinating a revolution: the critical role of response leadership in improving collective community engagement.” Humanitarian Exchange: Special Feature Communication and community engagement in humanitarian response: 74; Brown, Dayna. 2018. “Participation of Crisis-Affected People in Humanitarian Decision-Making Processes.” Chapter 2: Humanitarian Accountability Report: CHS Alliance, Geneva, Switzerland; Anderson, Mary et al. 2012. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

5. Metcalfe-Hough, V. and Poole, L. with Bailey, S. and Belanger, J. (2018) Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report. London: ODI/HPG.

6. ALNAP. 2018. The State of the Humanitarian System: Summary. London: ALNAP/ODI.

7. For more see: <https://www.chsalliance.org/about/our-data/>.

accountable to local communities through the Movement Commitments on Community Engagement and Accountability presented at the 2019 Council of Delegates.

WHAT ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR GETTING IT RIGHT?

Making the Movement Commitments a reality however requires a nuanced understanding of what it takes to adequately place local people at the center of response efforts. Evidence from research conducted throughout 2019 identified building blocks that will enable a more successful approach to engaging the community, which can support the actualization of the Movement Commitments.

COMMITMENT 1: All Movement members commit to integrating community engagement and accountability in their strategies, policies and procedures.

Ensuring that strategies, policies, and procedures are well-established and serve the function of greater participation and accountability, requires both leadership and timing aligned with change processes.

- **Leadership** – Bold commitment and clear direction by leadership can catalyze system-wide change, while the lack of interest or strategic thinking by leaders can stifle and undermine even the most innovative approaches. To foster change from within an institution requires leadership and responsibility at all levels. Leaders are in a unique position to ensure that the Movement lives up to its commitments to affected communities. Yet, staff across the Movement noted that leaders can often be the most difficult constituent to persuade. One staff member explained that this is, “Because the work is different now than how they [leadership] did things. Ultimately shifting the balance of power which is often threatening to people, but good leaders get over this.” At every level, leadership can effect such change through **modeling, engaging, valuing, and resourcing approaches** that allow for greater community participation. Research showed that when a leader or a leadership group establishes systems for internal accountability, it can facilitate better external accountability to communities, partners, and peers.⁸

IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

In Ukraine Red Cross (URCS), senior management expressed a deep commitment to improving internal and external accountability mechanisms to enhance their programmatic work with communities. Support from management to advance CEA across the URCS’ programmes and operations was noted as essential for garnering staff buy-in while also setting the tone and precedent that this approach is fundamentally the way in which the Red Cross works. One senior manager explained this by saying, “It is our [SMT] role to signal that this [CEA] is important and the future for us and to show them how.”

- **Alignment with other institutional initiatives** – Institutionalizing approaches to greater community accountability are often strengthened when they align with wider organizational strategy development or institutional change initiatives. For example, the Canadian Red Cross (CRCS) was able to accelerate its commitments for greater inclusion of Indigenous Peoples (IP) into its programmes, because of, as one staff person noted, “a perfect storm”. This ‘storm’ included multiple policy level changes and additional financial resources within the Canadian Government that catalyzed change in the CRCS. The momentum of both processes created the right moment to address mistakes by the CRCS with the IP community. One staff member noted, “These changes forced change within the organization. The Red Cross could no longer sit in place. Now, we walk all staff through community engagement and IP framework. While our systems and processes are not yet aligned, it gives us a wonderful place to strive for.”

COMMITMENT 2: All Movement members commit to regularly conduct an analysis of the contexts they work in to better understand and address the diversity of needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of the people and communities they seek to serve and assist.

Understanding the context in which the organization operates is fundamental to effective and relevant responses. **With its vast volunteer network,**

⁸ For more see: Jean, Isabella. 2014. ‘The leadership factor’. [Blog]. 10 July. Washington, D.C.: Feedback Labs; Buchanan-Smith, Margie. 1999. “Humanitarian leadership and accountability: contribution or contradiction?” HPN: ODI; Chatelet, Alice and Meg Sattler. 2019. “Coordinating a revolution: the critical role of response leadership in improving collective community engagement.” Humanitarian Exchange: Special Feature Communication and community engagement in humanitarian response: 74.

the Movement has a competitive advantage in ensuring that programmes and operations are informed by local perspective and knowledge. And yet, recent research highlights that often National Societies' assume that they understand the local dynamics, but this knowledge is not grounded in the practical realities of the evolving context from the local perspective. To truly be responsive to the diversity of local needs organizations should first 'do no harm' and then ensure they are agile in acting on community input.

- **First, 'do no harm'** – Context analysis⁹ is the knowledge of the power structures, community dynamics, conflict connectors and dividers, etc. that make up the context in which an agency is operating. Such analysis should be informed by local perspectives, which is not a one-time activity. Rather, the most effective analysis builds upon existing knowledge and evidence. Creating systems to capture, store, analyze, and review local feedback and information can deepen the organization's understanding of the evolving context and the diversity of needs. It is well documented that when local perspectives are not at the core of context analysis, organizations can do more harm than good with their well-intended programmes and operations.¹⁰ For Italian Red Cross, for example, it has increasingly become essential that staff place volunteers and community perspective at the center of the response, given the evolving context and concerns about migration.

ACT ON LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

A recent study noted that preparedness and response must be more agile and localized. This should be done through enhanced understanding of community knowledge (e.g., regarding the use of local languages, alignment with public authority structures, preferred communication channels, etc.). This knowledge must be translated into action and used to course correct. Community engagement must be mainstreamed so that it is cross-cutting and is understood to be the responsibility of all response actors who should receive training in interpersonal engagement techniques.

See: IFRC. 2019. "From Words to Action: Towards a community-centred approach to preparedness and response in health emergencies."

COMMITMENT 3: All Movement members commit to facilitating greater participation of local people and communities, including Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers, and support them to apply their knowledge, skills and capacities in finding appropriate and effective solutions to their problems.

Greater participation among community members and volunteers requires organizations to act on the interest of community members and volunteers to be in engaged.

- **Build upon communities' desire to engage** – Increasingly, community members understand that they have a right to input into programmes and give feedback about the services that are intended to support them. Throughout this research community members consistently expressed a desire and willingness to more actively participate in Red Cross Red Crescent activities. Harnessing this desire for greater engagement can enhance trust and cultivate meaningful relationships between communities and National Societies, which can impact the organization's ability to access communities safely and reputation, as well as the relevance of programmes (see box for example).

GREATER ENGAGEMENT PROVIDES SAFE ACCESS

In Sudan Red Crescent, one branch experienced challenges in accessing a particularly conservative community. Through consistent engagement and requests for community input, the branch slowly gained access. Branch leadership praised this community engagement approach and affirmed that it was important in helping them access this community. One branch staff member explained, "*We had a sense of what the community needed before, but now we are accountable to them. Now the community is a partner to us.*" A community leader explained, "*In the beginning, we were not listening, they [Sudan Red Crescent] did not speak our language and we did not see their value. But, at the end, we realized that they are here for good. Sudan Red Crescent was very patient and listened and responded to us.*"

⁹. For more see: <https://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/preparing-for-disaster/disaster-preparedness-tools/better-programming-initiative/>

¹⁰. For more examples see: Anderson, Mary B. 1999. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 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.

- **Create champions by engaging volunteers** – Helping volunteers to see their role as fundamental to strong community engagement leads to better quality programming and enhanced trust and access to communities. The Movement’s strong volunteer network is a unique asset for National Societies and is an added value because volunteers are often the bridge to safely accessing the community, building trust with local people, and ensuring that people feel that they have a voice in the programmes and operations. For example, in Sudan, many volunteers have been engaged in accountability-related process since the early pilots. In this context, the branch’s engagement with the community is highly dependent on the strength of its volunteers and their understanding of accountability to communities. Likewise, for the Ukraine Red Cross (URCS), the changing social constructs in Ukraine, staff and volunteers agreed that **building volunteer capacity, particularly for young volunteers, can increase relevance and improve local perceptions of the organization.**

COMMITMENT 4: All Movement members commit to systematically listen, respond and act on feedback from the people and communities we aim to serve.

Establishing effective feedback practices ensures that the organization is responsive to the actual needs of the communities it serves. However, listening, responding, and acting on community feedback requires explicit systems and flexibility.

- **Systems are necessary** – Evidence from within and outside the Movement suggests establishing the institutional systems to receive, analyze, make decisions on, and respond to community feedback are as important, if not more important, than erecting the channels for collecting the feedback. If channels for collection are created without processes to use and respond to feedback, organizations may find that communities become frustrated or disillusioned by the process and stop providing feedback or threaten the organization’s ability to operate effectively.¹¹ Listening, but also responding to communities creates a foundation for trust between National Societies and the communities they serve. A community member in Malawi explained, “If they [the Red Cross and Red Crescent] listen to us, then we can build a better relationship, and they will become more accountable to our needs.”

- **Adaptability is paramount** – Talking with and listening to communities is only the first step in community engagement. If communities share things that need to change, but the organization is inflexible and cannot or will not make those changes, then communities will eventually get frustrated and stop providing input or using the systems available. In the DRC Ebola response the IFRC and partners have established a feedback dashboard that enables them to understand community perceptions in real-time. Real-time feedback allows the response efforts to quickly adapt communications and response efforts so they are relevant for the evolving crisis.

While an organization cannot, and likely should not, make every change that is expressed in a community meeting or through a call centre, it should be prepared to make some adaptations and alterations based on overall community perspective and local need or to show how input helped to inform the approach that was eventually taken. It is possible to find ways to be more agile and dynamic by changing organizational policies and practices, but sometimes it requires donors and partners to provide more flexible conditions for project design and implementation. One [report notes](#), the challenge remains that often the development of programmes is rigid and linear, which is further embedded in the coordination process, and this is based on the mistaken assumption that “good quality assessments at the outset of a project will ensure the relevance and effectiveness... throughout its lifespan.”¹² Leaders play a key role in advocating for the flexibility they need to truly be responsive to the communities they serve. Documenting and highlighting cases when donors and programmes are more flexible and the impact this had on the outcomes can also be used to advocate for improved ways of working.

¹¹. For more see: 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 Projects.

Cechvala, Sarah. 2015. *“‘Accountability starts with me.’ Opening Inclusive Feedback Channels in Pakistan.”* CDA-World Vision Pakistan Feedback Loops Case Study. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

¹². Swithern, S. 2019. *More Relevant? 10 ways to approach what people really need.* ALNAP Paper. London: ODI/ALNAP.

COMMITMENT #5: All Movement members commit to greater transparency in our communications and relationships with people and communities we aim to serve.

Fostering greater transparency in communications with communities requires organization's to adapt to what works locally and to garner institutional buy-in based on contextual and organizational priorities.

- **Adapt the message for the audience** – Making the case for improved accountability is most successful when framed around issues that are relevant and important in the context and to the organization. Arguments for improved accountability that demonstrate a direct impact on concerns for National Society leadership, it leads to stronger ownership and faster integration of the approach.¹³ In some cases, staff exposed how increased accountability to communities enhances transparency within the National Society. In other cases, staff highlighted how more systematic and meaningful community engagement increases trust and improves the image of the National Society.

- **Build on what works** – The idea of listening to communities is not new for many Movement members. Yet, it is just rarely done in a systematic or holistic way. Establishing practices and policies provides institutions with a solid foundation upon which to build even greater accountability to local people. In Burundi, for example, the legacy of Beneficiary Communications means that many staff are already familiar with activities such as mobile cinema, radio shows, and other information-provision approaches. Building upon these existing well-known practices under the banner of 'Community Engagement and Accountability' helps to systematize and formalize what was previously happening organically.

COMMITMENT #6: All Movement members commit to strengthening knowledge, skills and competencies in community engagement and accountability at all levels, and systematically incorporate this learning into our work.

Evidence highlights that institutional learning requires intentionally creating learning opportunities and the resourcing to match.

- **Creating opportunities** – It takes creativity to capture and communicate what effective participation actually looks like – it is not like a food distribution

or emergency shelter. That makes it especially important to be intentional about how information is collected, analyzed, stored, and shared. Improving how information is captured, shared, and managed can create opportunities for enhanced peer learning. An IFRC staff member in Latin America noted, "We need to document this [evidence of impact for learning] in a compelling way. For example, we brought evidence that 99% of our Cash Transfer Programme funding was going to buy school books. This type of information is power, and helps us learn and build better programmes." Such practices can help the Movement to have stronger evidence about best practices and the positive impact of community-led programming can have on the quality of the work.

- **Appropriate resourcing** – Strengthening accountability to communities requires an investment in time to develop relationships and build trust. Activities focused on ensuring community engagement and participation cannot simply be tied to one activity, project, or emergency. By providing more stable institutional resources – specified time as well as dedicated budgets – that support activities to engage the community, Movement members can positively shift how they work, so that community engagement does not end when the project ends. Working with and for the community is fundamental to working successfully, funding standalone activities like a mobile cinema or a call center is important, but insufficient. Ultimately, community accountability is about people, so there need to be enough staff and volunteers who feel equipped and empowered to engage with and respond to the people the Movement serves.

"Community engagement and accountability is perceived as "soft" and is qualitative versus quantitative which makes it harder to present facts. We need to find a way to have evidence to advocate for shifting the power. This can be done by showing how much money we have saved by using this approach."

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¹³ For example see: Bonino, Francesca, with Isabella Jean, and Paul Knox Clarke. 2014. *Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts, Practitioner Guidance*. London: ALNAP-CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

COMMITMENT 7: All Movement members commit to coordinating their approaches to community engagement and accountability when working in the same context, including with relevant external partners, in order to increase coherence and consistency, avoid duplication and improve effectiveness and efficiency.

Communication and coordination within an organization on issues of community engagement is as important as external coordination. Factors that enable greater coordination broadly fall into the categories of inclusivity, connectivity, and coordination.

- **Inclusivity & connectivity** – Community engagement is not simply a discrete sensitization campaign, or a communications department responsibility, or an emergency-only activity. **It is a part of everything that everyone in the Movement does every day, a way of working that reflects values and mission.** From the way that front-line volunteers speak to communities to the way procurement evaluates what bids to accept, everyone working for the Movement needs to be engaging with and accountable to communities. For instance, it is no use running a call center unless leadership and procurement are willing to listen to what communities are saying about the quality of goods and services they are receiving, and the themes and implications of feedback collectively. It may be unrealistic to expect frontline field staff to be good at listening and facilitating community engagement if human resources did not put those skills in the job description or offer opportunities for existing staff to build their skills.¹⁴ **Organizations are like webs, and one person’s ability to be accountable to communities depends on the actions of others.** This is why having an inclusive, holistic, and system-wide approach to community engagement matters.

- **Improved Movement coordination and with the wider humanitarian sector** – Every organization has its own processes, protocols, and priorities, and the sheer number of organizations within the Movement creates a lot of complexity. As part of the joint-research, staff noted the importance of platforms to communicate across organizations and between levels to learn about best practices among National Societies and thoughtful ways to coordinate on important issues. Enhanced coordination among partners is essential to ensure that they are aligning initiatives with their institutional priorities and strategies to create an all of

Movement approach, as opposed to ad hoc funding from partners. Having strong internal coherence and coordination can also make it easier for all National Societies to coordinate with external actors, such as governments and humanitarian partners.

As the development and humanitarian divide increasingly shrinks and organizations work in more complex environments, it has become crucial for National Societies to take part in coordination structures outside the Movement, within the wider humanitarian sector. Otherwise there is not only a risk of duplication, but also of exacerbating confusion and mistrust within communities by using conflicted approaches, as seen in the most recent Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

¹⁴. For more see: Seris, Nicolas and Chloë Whitley. 2017. “Designing for a Change in Perspective Embracing Client Perspectives in Humanitarian Project Design.” International Rescue Committee.