Why focus on engagement?

The 2012 State of Humanitarian System (SOHS) suggested that engaging with crisis-affected populations is an area which requires improvement.

“beneficiary participation often achieve[s] rhetorical rather than real results” (SOHS 2010: 29)

Why should we engage crisis-affected people in disaster response?

Broadly speaking, the literature identifies three main rationales for engagement with crisis affected communities:

1. **Normative/value based**: Agencies should support engagement because this is the right thing to do: it is consistent with humanitarian values and with commitments agencies have made.

2. **Instrumental**: Agencies should support engagement because it makes humanitarian programmes more effective in fulfilling their objectives.

3. **Emancipatory**: Agencies should support engagement because it strengthens society, and addresses underlying vulnerabilities and/or inequalities.

While most humanitarian actors and aid providers agree that engagement is a worthwhile goal, they are often not clear on why they wish to engage, and what they hope to achieve by engaging with crisis-affected people.
To what degree are crisis-affected people currently engaged in humanitarian action?

Crisis-affected people already act as ‘first-responders’ and undertake relief activities – as individuals or through community-based organisations – often independent of governmental or international humanitarian assistance efforts.

International humanitarian actors are committed to engaging with crisis-affected people through a variety of agreed codes, standards, and principles.

There are very many examples, dating back over at least thirty years, of humanitarian organisations engaging with crisis-affected people in a variety of ways.

At the same time, numerous studies suggest that there is much more that humanitarian organisations could do to engage crisis-affected people at every stage of emergency response.

Trends

A variety of factors may lead to increased popular engagement in humanitarian responses in the near future:

- **Better informed populations** demanding their rights as citizens, and redefining their expectations of humanitarian actors
- **Improved information technology** enabling crisis-affected people to organise their own responses, and communicate needs and opinions more effectively.
- **An increase in the number and capacity of local civil society organisations** with an interest in and government bodies responsible for emergency response: increasingly, the role of international agencies may be to support these organisations.
- **An increase in cash programming**, giving disaster-affected people more control and more options in situations of crisis.
- **More ‘remote programming’**: although this may simultaneously increase the role of local organisations, while making the decision-making of international organisations more distant and hard to influence.

What do we mean by engagement?

There are a variety of terms frequently used by humanitarian actors related to intentional interactions between humanitarian organisations and crisis-affected people: *Participation; consultation; accountability; two way communication; engagement.*

The meanings of these terms are often not made explicit, and the terms sometimes seem interchangeable.

In the paper, we use the definitions in the orange bubbles on this page:

**Engagement** *(of crisis affected people in humanitarian response):* a general term to cover all instances of people in crisis-affected communities becoming involved in planning and implementing humanitarian response work: this can be work which is designed and implemented by humanitarian organisations, or by the community itself.

**Participation**

Involving crisis-affected people in the planning or implementation of humanitarian efforts in such a way as to give them some power over decisions (NB: In the literature, this term is often used more broadly to relate to any activity which involves crisis-affected people in a programme designed by an external organisation).

**Communications**

Methods for exchanging information between crisis-affected people, and between crisis-affected people and external agencies. Communications are an important element of many accountability and participation approaches.

**Accountability**

Approaches to engagement which ensure that external organisations use their power in a responsible way – by taking people’s views into account, and establishing systems that allow people to hold the organisation to account for the provision of good quality programmes and the behaviour of their staff.
### Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of engagement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td>Participation in Food for Work programmes</td>
<td>Complaints and response mechanisms</td>
<td>Village committees support design, targeting, distribution</td>
<td>Community-based programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who engages who?</strong></td>
<td>External agency – designs programme so that crisis affected people ‘take part’.</td>
<td>External agency provides information and enables crisis-affected people to provide input and feedback on on programmes</td>
<td>External agency engages crisis-affected people to provide input on and sometimes leadership of humanitarian efforts</td>
<td>Crisis-affected people engage directly in emergency response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of control crisis-affected people have over decisions</strong></td>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>Influence decisions - their views are ‘taken into account’</td>
<td>Control over some decisions (targeting; nature of activities) and influence over others</td>
<td>Control over decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ownership of the programme</strong></td>
<td>External agency</td>
<td>External agency</td>
<td>External agency and (to varying degrees) crisis-affected people</td>
<td>Community organisation – external agency may fund or facilitate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What are the constraints to engagement?

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

There are a variety of operational constraints to greater engagement of crisis-affected people. They include:

#### Constraints related to humanitarian contexts

- **Costs:** In both time and money.
- **Limited access:** Access to communities can make engagement difficult.
- **Limitations on sharing information:** Sharing information can bring unwanted attention or put staff and partners at risk.
- **Replicability:** Approaches which work in one context may not be replicable elsewhere.

#### Constraints related to humanitarian structures and procedures

- **Projectisation:** There can be a tendency to put technical solutions in place, rather than making more fundamental changes to organisational culture and behaviour.
- **Proceduralisation:** A trend to more centrally-managed organisations and standardised operations reduces the agency of staff on the ground, and makes them less able to act on the opinions and priorities of local communities.
- **Measurement and reporting:** It can be hard to measure the effects of engagement and this can make it harder to demonstrate the value of engagement approaches, and so build support for them.
- **A ‘supply led’ paradigm:** The current structure of the humanitarian system (top-down and supply driven) does not create incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people.

#### Constraints related to humanitarian staff

- **Skills:** Staff may not have the skills required to engage with crisis-affected people, particularly in the heat of an emergency.
- **Attitudes and behaviours:** Aid workers can in some cases be seen as arrogant and distant.
- **Rapid turnover:** Short-term assignments of staff do not enable them to interact and develop relationships with those affected by crises.
In addition, some critiques challenge the idea of engagement itself, and its relevance to humanitarian activities.

In particular, critics note that:

- In the first days of a rapid onset emergency, technical and command and control approaches often work better than more consensual, negotiated approaches.

- Practising engagement – and particularly supporting empowerment – turns humanitarian organisations into political actors, and threatens their ability to remain neutral and independent.

- International humanitarian action is marked by huge disparities of power: engagement approaches may hide this, but they are unlikely to change it, and should not pretend that they can.

**Key questions**

Some key questions, which may be discussed at the meeting, include:

1. What type of engagement do we wish to achieve, and why?
2. How do we deal with issues of power and politics?
3. Does an engagement agenda mean becoming more ‘developmental’?
4. To what degree are common standards and approaches to engagement useful?
5. How do the different cultures and languages of various stakeholders affect approaches to engaging crisis-affected people?
6. Where are examples of success?
7. How much can be transferred from one context to another?
8. How do we know what works?
9. How can we harness changes in our environment to improve engagement?
10. What changes are needed in the humanitarian system to enable more effective engagement?
11. What can we learn from development actors?