ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICTS AND OTHER SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE

TAKING STOCK. MAPPING TRENDS. LOOKING AHEAD.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND DONORS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

REFERENCE

HARVARD HUMANITARIAN INITIATIVE

ICRC

Cover photo: A man looks out the window as he talks with an ICRC employee evaluating the damage done to a civilian building by fighting in Sana'a, Yemen, in April 2015. As of January 2018, more than 80 per cent of Yemen's population is in need of aid; some are located in areas that the ICRC cannot physically reach.

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ACRONYMS

ALNAP: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action.

CDAC: Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network.

CHS: Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

GHD: Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative.

HAP: Humanitarian Accountability Partnership.

IASC: Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

IOM: International Organization for Migration.

IRC: International Rescue Committee.

OCHA: see UNOCHA.

UNICEF: United Nations Children’s Fund.

UNOCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

UNOPS: United Nations Office for Project Services.

WFP: World Food Programme.

M. Mortvedt/ICRC

In Wau, South Sudan, Red Cross volunteers use dance and drama to promote the protection of health-care workers and facilities in times of conflict. Part of the ICRC Health Care in Danger project, the drama initiative tries to circumvent the country's low levels of literacy, mobile penetration and access to radio networks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXAMPLES

FOREWORD

You are stranded in the middle of conflict or violence in Syria, the Central African Republic or South Sudan. You might have a phone; you might have a radio; you might have nothing at all. And there is no guarantee that humanitarian organizations have physical access to you.

Who can you turn to for help? How do you reach them? How can we, humanitarian organizations, engage with you? Be accountable to you? And do all of this… without exposing you – or ourselves – to additional dangers?

In recent years, there has been no shortage of literature on the systemic issues that prevent humanitarian organizations from meaningfully engaging with, and being accountable to, individuals affected by war and disaster. Institutional resistance to change, operational constraints, technical difficulties, the fear of devolving power and decision-making, the complex integration of localization processes and private sector partnerships… the list is, or should be, familiar to all.

What is lacking, however – and what this discussion paper hopes to contribute to – is how these systemic issues can be compounded in armed conflict or other situations of violence. Unlike natural disasters, situations of conflict or other violence bring with them particular characteristics that can both create and exacerbate challenges around engagement with, and accountability to, affected people.

Consider, for instance, the use of geo-localized tweets to inform a hurricane response: how comfortable are we using similar geo-location tactics amidst the violence in Afghanistan? Somalia? Iraq? When being contacted on WhatsApp by individuals in Yemen or Ukraine? Bearing in mind issues around data privacy and hacking, how much more urgent is it for us to prevent digital harm, and sensitize tech companies? And how do we ensure that those who are – or abruptly find themselves – offline, are not forgotten, as we are tempted to conflate innovation with high tech products?

The aim of this discussion paper is to provide, with an added focus on conflict and other violent settings, an updated “state of play” on where the humanitarian sector stands on community engagement and accountability. The frequent overlap – and impossible dissociation – between systemic and conflict-specific issues means that a number of the findings in this discussion paper, and ensuing recommendations, echo the existing literature and research.

The ICRC and the larger Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement work in some of the world’s most complex and forgotten crises. Putting people at the centre of our action is not only something that we are committed to, but also, something that we want to lead on by example, no matter the intricacies of our operating environment. We know that we can – and we must – do better.

Meanwhile, we must also anticipate – and further research – future trends, notably on the evolving concept of trust, and the forced resort to virtual or digital proximity.

And so, you are stranded, once more, amidst conflict and violence. You might have a phone, you might have a radio, but how do you know if the information you're receiving isn't being instrumentalized? How can we reach out, not just to you, but also, to your family and peers, in an increasingly fragmented audience? And how can we be digitally prepared enough to gather and generate data without putting any of you at risk?

To be continued…

Yves Daccord
Director-General, ICRC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Engagement with, and accountability to, people affected by crises remains one of the areas in the humanitarian system that has seen the least progress in recent years.

Despite many commitments and much research, mechanisms to promote accountability and participation continue to be rarely conceived as goals integral to humanitarian operations. Rather, they are often implemented as optional "add-ons", rushed and restricted to the later stages of a response.

Even where more detailed dialogue does occur, not enough consideration is given to the possible replication, through existing or newly created decision-making bodies supported by humanitarian organizations, of pre-existing power structures that may prolong and/or create new forms of discrimination within the community. This means that, as willing as they may be, affected people remain unable to systematically, and meaningfully, hold humanitarians to account for aid provided or aid not received.

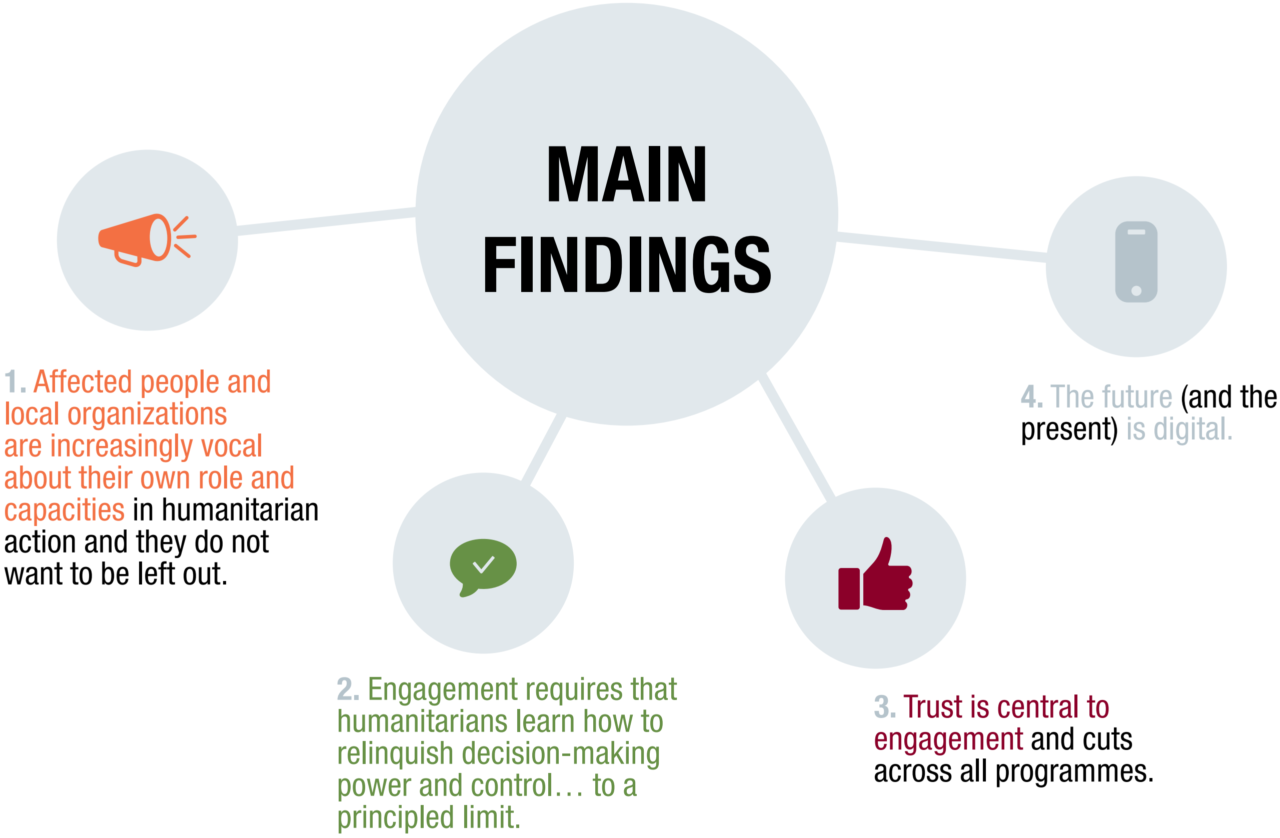
This is further exacerbated in armed conflicts and other situations of violence, which are intrinsically characterized by highly politicized, sensitive, insecure and contested environments, both physically and digitally. Biases and power imbalances exist within and between communities affected by conflict; rumours, misinformation and propaganda are rife. There is constant change and disruption; unique sets of expectations from those affected by the violence and those party to it; and an erosion of trust and proximity.

These problems are compounded by the asymmetrical relationships between affected people and humanitarian organizations. Often, these relationships are further embittered by access restrictions and security constraints.

Not only do these factors complicate engagement and accountability processes, but they also render irrelevant – if not, downright dangerous – some of the solutions or opportunities that the humanitarian sector has rolled out in natural disaster situations.

This discussion paper details some of the systemic and context-specific issues that humanitarian organizations face when trying to engage with, and be accountable to, people affected by conflict and violence (see *Main findings*). It finds that addressing these additional and often overlapping layers of complexity requires a number of fundamental changes, both at an organizational level (see *Recommendations for humanitarian organizations*) and at a humanitarian system level (see *Recommendations for donors*).

All of the findings and recommendations are based on interviews with humanitarian staff, representatives of donor agencies and representatives of community-based organizations, which include people affected by crises. They also draw from a wider review of the extensive literature that feeds the longstanding debates about accountability and participation in humanitarian operations (see *Methodology*).



MAIN FINDINGS

1. **Affected people and local organizations are increasingly vocal about their own role and capacities in humanitarian action and do not want to be left out:** Although this is not new, technology has increased affected people's ability to voice their concerns, ideas and criticisms. To meet these growing expectations, the collaboration between international organizations and local groups, including affected and at-risk communities, as well as the private sector, must be clarified and the terms of engagement redefined.

   Here, however, it is crucial for international humanitarian organizations to improve their ability to understand affected people's existing and potential capacities. This process must look beyond community-based groups that might not be that representative. These capacities should then be strengthened and complemented, rather than substituted. It is also critical that humanitarian organizations improve affected people's points of access to humanitarian decision-making processes, throughout all phases of the programme management cycle.

   This approach should be at the core of ongoing initiatives aimed at greater localization and better accountability to people affected by crises. Here, humanitarian organizations should explicitly acknowledge the diversity of capacities, needs and vulnerabilities based on gender, age, disability or other diversity factors, while recognizing that these may change over time. In principle, this should foster greater participation from different segments in communities and not just those who tend to dominate the conversation. It should also allow for more equitable and effective access to services. Moreover, understanding the diversity of communities can help identify the extent to which individuals are, or can be, either excluded from or harmed by humanitarian activities or staff.

To date, however, efforts at establishing meaningful engagement between affected people and the humanitarian community have been largely defined and driven by international humanitarian organizations themselves. Changing this means restating the importance of effective participation from national staff and local partners, who understand and are close to affected people.

2. **Engagement requires that humanitarians learn how to relinquish decision-making power and control… to a principled limit:**
   The increasing levels of competence and assertiveness of some – but not all – local groups, combined with increasingly articulated frustration and disappointment at existing aid delivery, have increased pressure on the humanitarian system to devolve more responsibility and decision-making to the local level.

   Some argue that donors and humanitarian organizations are simply unwilling to concede any power. Until this changes, nothing will allow the sector to make real progress in this area. Beyond a new set of reforms, better evidence, or new tools (critical factors both at systemic and institutional levels), progress also requires a change in mindset that research alone cannot provide.

   Nonetheless, power should still be shared responsibly. Giving people affected by crises too much influence can, some argue, undermine humanitarian quality standards (e.g. conflict-affected homes being rebuilt with shoddy materials) and humanitarian principles (e.g. local decision-making bodies can *de facto* exclude or further marginalize vulnerable groups).

   To strike an appropriate balance, a system is needed in which donors and aid agencies can incorporate the legitimate concerns and preferences of affected communities, but remain the guardians of humanitarian principles and quality standards.

3. **Trust is central to engagement and cuts across all programmes:**
   Trust may be largely transactional, based both on what people physically get from humanitarian organizations and on how affected people expect humanitarians to behave.

   Moreover, people’s trust does not take into account the sectoral or programmatic differentiations that humanitarians make. Largely speaking, to them, humanitarians are “all in the same bag”. This means that putting in place participation and accountability mechanisms for each programme or sector (i.e. a siloed approach), instead of a single transversal mechanism is irrelevant and, arguably, counterproductive.

   Individuals’ ability to trust in general can be severely undermined in times of conflict and violence by “unmet expectations”. People affected by crises may feel that humanitarians are unable to meet their physical and protection needs, or cannot deliver the “change” (i.e. end to the conflict) that they need and want to see. Conflict can also create tensions between levels of trust and localization processes. For example, when a conflict or other violent situation is highly politicized, affected people may trust international staff more than local staff, who they assume to have an inherent bias or agenda.

   Where physical trust and interaction between affected people and humanitarian organizations become impossible (e.g. because of access restrictions), or grow too complicated (e.g. because the ability to trust is undermined), the resort to “virtual proximity”, including the development of “digital trust”, is going to become a critical issue.

4. **The future (and the present) is digital:**
   Humanitarian organizations are progressively becoming more digitally present, and able to leverage larger amounts of data from both offline and online groups of affected people. The intelligent gathering, handling, storage and use of data, including the efficient breakdown of data silos, are going to become increasingly important challenges.

   While technology will not be a silver bullet, "digitally prepared" humanitarian organizations will be able to deliver better quality and more accountable services to people affected by crises. This includes deploying relevant technological solutions as a means to an end, rather than an end in its own right – something that is still often the case.

   Yet, the greatest challenge might be the enormous legal and ethical responsibilities relating to data gathering and handling, for which most organizations are currently ill-equipped. Part of the challenge lies in the low level of data literacy; how this problem is tackled, both in the humanitarian sector and among affected and at-risk populations, will be key.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

1. Both executive and operational leadership in humanitarian organizations must provide robust, concrete policy and operational support to further integrate engagement with, and accountability to, affected people at the core of operations.

2. Humanitarian organizations need to consider a wider adoption of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in line with the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Accountability to Affected People (AAP) commitments.

3. Humanitarian organizations need to improve their capacity not only to assess needs, but also analyze them together with local capacities, the local environment and information ecosystem.

4. Humanitarian organizations must demonstrate how decisions are guided – or not – by local feedback mechanisms that, when possible, involve local, representative decision-making bodies.

5. Humanitarian organizations must learn how they can build and develop trust with affected people, including in the digital space.

6. Humanitarian organizations need to invest in new functions and areas of expertise in order to become more "accessible" and "digitally prepared".

7. Humanitarian organizations must embrace new forms of collaboration with and seek positive influence over the private sector.

8. There is a need for more systematic inter-agency coordination.

9. Humanitarian organizations must support innovation that improves accountability to affected people and enables the testing, scaling up, documentation and sharing of good practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

1. **Both executive and operational leadership in humanitarian organizations must provide robust, concrete policy and operational support to further integrate engagement with, and accountability to, affected people at the core of operations:**
   Relying on individual motivation, be it by senior managers, coordinators and/or national or international staff, is neither a viable nor a sustainable approach to ensure that people are at the centre of humanitarian action.

   Leadership commitment has to start by:

   - Clearly defining and articulating engagement and accountability within institutional strategies, frameworks and policies. Humanitarian organizations need to hold themselves to account based on their internal and external policies, as well as existing and new commitments towards becoming more accountable to people affected by crises. This involves a set of key actions accompanied by organizational systems (including, critically, human resources policies), as well as processes and resources that enable (and expect) staff to behave in accordance with the organization's values and strategy.

   - Addressing core issues intimately connected to institutional culture, behaviour and funding. From a more operational perspective, community engagement and accountability need to be adequately considered in work plans and budgets, and extracted from a siloed sector-by-sector and project-to-project approach. Critically, engagement and accountability need to be included in staff codes of conduct, staff core competencies, capacity and career development paths and performance appraisal systems. In terms of capacity development for international and national staff, soft skills such as communication, interviewing, negotiation and mediation skills should be a priority.

   In order to implement this type of leadership, each organization needs to identify its own incentives, enablers and spoilers for action.

2. **Humanitarian organizations need to consider a wider adoption of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) Accountability to Affected People commitments:**
   While each organization may have its own path to putting people at the centre of their work, including through tailored policy and operational plans, standardized indicators, such as those developed by the CHS, aim to create a blueprint for humanitarian organizations. These indicators enable people affected by crises to be key stakeholders and allow them to assess the success and impact – or lack thereof – of a humanitarian programme, throughout the management cycle.

   These community-driven indicators should be better integrated into monitoring and evaluation functions within humanitarian organizations.

3. **Humanitarian organizations need to improve their capacity not only to assess needs, but also analyse them together with local capacities, the local environment and information ecosystem:**
   In conflicts and other situations of violence, this means understanding the roots of the violence; the factors that shape it; the perspectives, concerns and self-protection and coping strategies of those affected by it; and how all of these may change over time. This highlights the need to continuously consult people affected by crises, in order to understand not only how their needs evolve, but also how their ability to address them changes, and how humanitarians should accordingly adapt their action.

   The above could be achieved by regularly conducting situational and contextual analyses, including conflict and stakeholder analyses, as well as community-based consultations. A regular assessment of the local information ecosystem is critical to understand what information and communication channels people affected by crises actually use and trust. It is important to disaggregate data obtained with respect to sex, age and disability, to achieve a more granular and nuanced understanding of people's strengths, vulnerabilities, needs and level of satisfaction about humanitarian services.

   Engaging in this way will allow humanitarian organizations to transition from "doers" to "enablers" of humanitarian action, putting their expertise at the service of affected people. This transition must start by humanitarians abandoning the derogatory and loaded term "beneficiary" and adopting language which reflects people's role as first responders and active agents in their own preparedness, relief and recovery.

4. **Humanitarian organizations must demonstrate how decisions are guided – or not – by local feedback mechanisms that, when possible, involve local, representative decision-making bodies:**
   Engagement is meaningful when it becomes the basis for action and true accountability. This requires responsiveness, rather than listening for its own sake. Where there is no action (i.e. programming has not been adapted following people's feedback), and the reasons for inaction are not adequately communicated and/or understood by the affected people and/or local representative bodies, accountability is absent and the trust and credibility of humanitarian organizations are eroded.

   This lack of action may result from a lack of capacity and, occasionally, from institutional unwillingness and bias against recognizing and/or acting on input received from affected people. Either way, the erosion of trust and credibility, be it real or perceived, can complicate access to affected people and threaten the security of humanitarian staff.

5. **Humanitarian organizations must learn how to build and develop trust with affected people, including in the digital space:**
   Arguably, trust can only be achieved with some level of delivery, a degree of openness, transparency and a predisposition to learn. This includes more willingness from humanitarian organizations to take criticism on board, reflect and act on it. Indeed, trust and openness to feedback are only as valuable as the changes they bring about. In this respect, the humanitarian community and donors must demonstrate their ability to incorporate community feedback and adapt to rapidly changing contexts, especially in conflict or other violent situations.

However, what trust really means in the context of relationships between affected people and humanitarians, particularly in conflicts and situations of violence, remains poorly understood. Similarly, how it is to be built and developed, including in the digital space, is lacking.

Humanitarian organizations therefore need to examine and consider how to build "virtual proximity" and "digital trust" to complement their physical proximity. This is particularly relevant for affected people who might find themselves out of humanitarian organizations' direct, physical reach; caught up in the mists of misinformation and propaganda wars; while remaining, nonetheless, available online, or through local responders and intermediaries working in the "last mile". How international humanitarian organizations can draw more strongly on the information, connection and trust those "last mile" providers have, is another big challenge for the sector.

6. **Humanitarian organizations need to invest in new functions and areas of expertise in order to become more "accessible" and "digitally prepared":**
As humanitarian organizations become more present online, affected people increasingly demand and expect to get in touch with them virtually. Consequently, the narrative in the sector needs to evolve from "having access to people" to also "being accessible by people". This is all the more relevant given the growing number and nature of armed conflicts or other situations of violence in which humanitarian access is restricted and/or intermittent, and the humanitarian presence and footprint will never be large enough.

   While the core of humanitarian action is still predominantly physical, humanitarian organizations are starting to handle increasingly large amounts of data. Here, they need to learn how to responsibly handle and leverage data as an asset for their operations, while respecting individuals' rights and ethical considerations, and ensuring the digital protection of already vulnerable people.

   New technological realities and innovations, such as mobile phones and messaging apps, also create "new realities" and "new threats" for humanitarian organizations. These require institution-wide consideration of questions relating to cyber security, data protection and data literacy among staff, and among affected people. Tackling these issues requires that organizations attract and hire new talent (i.e. cyber security experts) to ensure that they are better "digitally prepared".

7. **Humanitarian organizations must embrace new forms of collaboration with and seek positive influence over the private sector:**
Despite its significant operational differences, objectives and the purely transactional nature of engagement, the private sector, notably big technology companies, have largely untapped expertise, knowledge and know-how that could offer key insights and capabilities to humanitarian organizations. Relevant topics that could significantly contribute to meeting affected people's participation and accountability needs include information management, customer relationship management, and the building of client trust and satisfaction, including in remote contexts.

   Meanwhile, humanitarian organizations are just beginning to fully understand how some of these companies, notably social media, are being instrumentalized to undermine transparency, accountability and trust in our societies. This is worrying for humanitarian organizations, as it can make them, and affected people, digital targets for ill-intentioned parties. As they continue to engage with global corporations, humanitarian organizations need to consider how they, together with donors, can positively influence them in the interest of the public, particularly on questions of data protection, digital literacy and internet governance.

8. **There is a need for more systematic inter-agency coordination:**
   At a time when coordinated approaches to crisis response have become the norm, humanitarian organizations must more systematically include community engagement and accountability actions in their inter-agency coordination efforts. Endorsing a common approach to community engagement and accountability, based, for example, on the CHS, would allow organizations to speak a common language and harmonize approaches across sectors and regions.

   This would also allow for a more objective and measurable assessment of performance and progress, and contribute towards removing the sectoral or project focus (i.e. silos) that so often hamper participation processes. These segmented approaches reflect traditional funding and coordination mechanisms that, in turn, still funnel funding into sectoral pockets. This needs to change.

   Overall, greater inter-agency coordination and donor support will enable more effective and efficient operational coordination. This means greater data and information sharing, and avoiding the creation of multiple or competing feedback mechanisms that can be confusing for affected people, if not counterproductive. At best, and as piloted in a number of recent responses, such cooperation could even lead to the pooling of funds to support multi-stakeholder engagement spaces and encourage a "one sector" approach from aid agencies.

9. **Humanitarian organizations must support innovation that improves accountability to affected people, and enable the testing, scaling-up, documentation and sharing of good practices:**
   Innovation should not simply become an umbrella under which institutional culture, behaviour and funding issues are parked and expected to be solved, especially when it comes to "putting people at the centre".

   In order to support sector-wide learning, humanitarian organizations and donors need to support the testing, scaling-up, and learning from, initiatives which have had a demonstrable impact on engagement and accountability, both in the physical and digital spheres.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

1. **Make engagement with and accountability to affected people a compliance issue:** There is no accountability to donors without accountability to affected people. Here, donors should follow the US and UK government's lead. The latter made funding conditional on agencies' ability to demonstrate that their programmes have systems in place that not only elicit participation and feedback from affected communities, but also act (or not) on the issues raised in this two-way dialogue.

   Just as they do for monitoring and evaluation activities, donors can also require individual agencies – many of whom act *de facto* as "donors" themselves, as they work through other national and international "implementing partners" and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) – to allocate funds specifically for engagement and accountability activities, and coordinated participation mechanisms.

At the individual level, donors may need to support agencies as they build their capacity to elicit and act on feedback. From a system-wide perspective, they should also enable the implementation of collective service approaches for community engagement.

Very importantly, donors should provide greater support for the adoption of the CHS across the sector. This also includes reviewing their own compliance processes and grant requirements, in light of the CHS.

2. **Support external, third party mechanisms, in a coordinated manner:**
   When an organization collects feedback on its own performance, institutional stubbornness can create biases on the complaints gathered, and a subsequent unwillingness, at times, to act on feedback. In other instances, affected people may not feel confident enough to give feedback and/or criticize the very organization that provides them with something, fearing they will be penalized and left out (i.e. "courtesy bias").

   Where needed, and to mitigate these issues, donors should directly fund locally-led consultations and evaluations, and/or support independent third parties that regularly collect and analyse data on the needs, priorities and satisfaction of people affected by crises.

   Here, however, collaboration and coordination to define the scope of these third party control systems will become increasingly critical, in order to avoid different layers within a same crisis (donors and third party monitors, sectors/clusters, UN, large INGOs, local NGOs, etc.) all doing similar work. This will also prevent further "survey fatigue" among affected people.

3. **Let go of power and control – and become more adaptable and flexible:**
   Donors must ensure that funding allocation, contracting and operations are adaptive and flexible in response to changes in needs and context; feedback from affected people; and/or inputs from external, third party mechanisms (see previous recommendation). This will enable donors to adopt a wider-reaching, hands-off approach.

   In this respect, it is worth mentioning that donors with representation in or close to operations are already generally more understanding and sympathetic to adapting funding according to affected people's input and the changing situation.

4. **Support the digital transformation of humanitarian organizations:**
   Donors, along with the private sector, have an increasingly important role to play when it comes to helping humanitarian organizations to become better "digitally prepared".

   On the other hand, donors and humanitarian organizations must consider how they, in the interest of the public, can positively influence the private sector on the previously-mentioned issues of data protection, digital literacy or internet governance.

5. **Strengthen the humanitarian-academic nexus:**
   In recent years, there has been more research into humanitarian engagement with communities affected by violence. However, there are still gaps between research and practice, as practitioners often feel that research generally focuses on *what* should change and *why*, without giving practical help as to *how*. As such, research and its findings often do not reach or resonate with practitioners.

Some argue that this is, in part, because of a lack of common understanding of "participation" and its purpose among stakeholders. There is also a lack of evidence-based guidance, with clearly identifiable operational factors and expected outcomes or benefits, to explain the desirability of engagement. Donors can support humanitarian and academic institutions to bridge these gaps, specifically by funding research that is attached to actual programme implementation.

T. Toure/ICRC

Castaway in Hodeidah, Yemen, a young man uses an ICRC phone to speak to his family, back home. The spread of mobile phones has revolutionized the way people can restore and maintain contact with their families after being separated by conflict or violence.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The study

This discussion paper was written by Patrick Vinck and Anne Bennett, of the HHI, together with Jacobo Quintanilla of the ICRC. It was commissioned by the ICRC and is the product of a collaboration between the authors and an advisory group.

The ICRC recognizes the changing nature of armed conflicts around the world, the impact that "digital disruption"[1] is having and will continue to have on the humanitarian sector, and the challenge of delivering assistance while prioritizing close proximity and accountability – both physically and digitally – to people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.

Over the last decade, progress has been made in setting up more systematic, predictable and evidence-based two-way communication initiatives to better engage with and be accountable to people affected by natural disasters. However, the implications and opportunities of engaging with people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence are not as well-known or documented.

This knowledge gap is due to a number of factors, including operational complexities in situations of conflict; limited resources; insecurity and limited physical access to local communities; disrupted energy, media and communication infrastructure; limited access to telecommunications; and data protection challenges. These may result from violence, deliberate or unintentional damage, or restrictions put in place by parties to the conflict.

This discussion paper attempts to fill this gap. It offers an overview to understand how the humanitarian community engages with people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, as well as a progressive review of the opportunities and challenges for meaningful engagement.

Specifically, this discussion paper has four objectives:

1. **Review the main developments and emerging trends** in this area of humanitarian practice ("state of play"), using examples from the field to illustrate current practices, lessons learned, limitations and trends.

2. **Analyse gaps in current knowledge, understanding and practice,** both within humanitarian organizations and sector-wide.

3. **Provide a series of recommendations** on what humanitarian organizations and the larger humanitarian sector can do, now, both offline and online, to improve engagement with communities in armed conflict and other violence, and what trends need to be further explored.

4. **Inform the *futures* thinking** on this area of humanitarian practice within the ICRC, the wider humanitarian sector and the donor community.

Methodology

The discussion paper is based on a review of the relevant literature and 66 interviews with representatives of the humanitarian sector, including headquarters and field staff from non-governmental agencies, multilateral and United Nations agencies, the ICRC, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), National

1 Digital disruption is an effect that changes the fundamental expectations and behaviours in a culture, market, industry or process that is caused by, or expressed through, digital capabilities, channels or assets: www.gartner.com/it-glossary/digital-disruption. All internet references accessed in October 2017.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, donors, and community-based organizations, which included affected people. These individuals were identified by the authors, the advisory group and contributors.

Limitations

The above-mentioned individuals interviewed for this study neither represent the views of "affected people" nor all humanitarians. However, they were carefully selected from within the humanitarian sector to provide a range of opinions and experiences relating to engagement and accountability, particularly on what does and does not work, and what can be improved.

Furthermore, direct contact was made with a number of individuals in the field to gather examples, short case studies, and lessons learned, all complementing the authors' own field-based experiences. However, these case studies turned out not to provide as holistic, in-depth and regionally diverse a critique as initially desired.

Generally, this discussion paper does not, and did not intend to, delve into the complexities and practicalities of implementing accountability and engagement activities in programmes (i.e. the *how*).

Rather, it provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic; lists a number of recommendations for humanitarian organizations and donors; and more broadly maps out issues specific to conflicts and other situations of violence, while recognizing that this analysis is hindered by the frequent overlap – and impossible dissociation – between systemic and context-specific issues.

GLOSSARY

This section is based on the terminology and language used by the ICRC and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS).

- **Accountability:** The process of acting responsibly when in a position of power, taking account of, and being held to account by, all interested parties, especially those who are most affected by the exercise of such power.

  For the ICRC, Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is a principled approach, and an attitude to programming that ensures that responses are adapted to the differentiated needs and capacities of people affected by crises (including their need for information), and to the specificities of the situation, while respecting fundamental humanitarian principles, and guaranteeing personal data protection.

  This is achieved by means of: *two-way communication* with people affected and other relevant stakeholders; optimal integration of local and individual capacities *(participatory approaches)*; *decision-making mechanisms* that take affected people's points of view into account, as much as possible; and relevant and trusted *feedback mechanisms* throughout all phases of the management cycle.

- **Communities and people affected by crises:** Taking into account, as much as possible, the dynamics of gender, class and race that are experienced and play out within communities, as well as the importance of identity and communal ties, the phrase "Communities and people affected by crises" refers to the totality of women, men, girls and boys with different needs, vulnerabilities and capacities, who are affected by disasters, conflict, poverty or other crises and complex emergencies at a specific location.

  For the ICRC, people affected by crises refers mainly to individuals affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. It includes civilians, people deprived of their liberty, the wounded and the sick.

- **Community engagement:** For the ICRC, community engagement is closely linked to its desire to work in close proximity to the local community. It is the process of, and commitment to, providing life-saving, useful and actionable information to communities (information-as-aid). It is also the process of using or establishing two-way communication channels to listen to people's needs, concerns, capacities, solutions, feedback and complaints, partnering with the community to ensure that it can actively participate and guide the ICRC's humanitarian action.

Community engagement is the act of communicating with and for communities – not about them or on their behalf (an activity that falls under public communication), or about the ICRC's remit and mandate (an activity that falls under operational communication). Community engagement is the approach and methodology developed by the ICRC Public Communication Division to contribute to the larger AAP institutional framework, as set out in the ICRC's external communication policy.[2]

- **Engagement:** The processes via which organizations communicate, consult, enable or provide for the participation of interested parties, ensuring that their concerns, desires, expectations, needs, rights and opportunities are considered in the establishment, implementation and review of the programmes assisting them. Effective engagement must always fully take into account and respect local culture, customs and traditions.

- **Other situations of violence:** Situations of violence refer to situations below the threshold of armed conflict. These cover "situations in which acts of violence are perpetrated collectively", but "are below the threshold of armed conflict. This excludes notably international and non-international armed conflict, situations of interpersonal or self-directed violence, or non-violent situations." The ICRC will not automatically act in all such situations: only where there are significant humanitarian consequences, and where the humanitarian action proposed by the ICRC constitutes a relevant response to such consequences.[3] The term "other violence" is also used in the present report as a short form for "other situations of violence."

- **Quality:** All the features and characteristics of humanitarian assistance that support the ability to satisfy the stated or implied needs and expectations, and to respect the dignity, of the people that humanitarians are seeking to help.

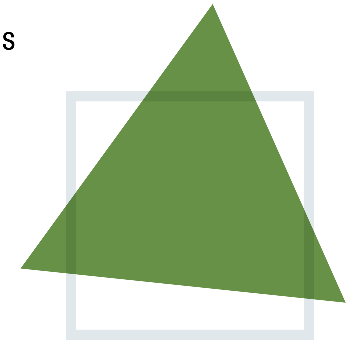
- **Relevant stakeholders:** All interested parties, service providers, professional or community associations, the private sector, or others who are in direct contact with affected people and who play a relevant role in the ICRC and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's involvement and acceptance (e.g. water boards, prison administrators, health committees, hospitals, National Societies, weapon bearers, lawmakers, local media, etc.). Relevant stakeholders can provide information on, and to, people affected by crises, improve access and services or prevent future violations that would give rise to more people being affected. Relevant stakeholders can also include people affected by crises themselves: for example, local government officials or health workers. When this is the case, their dual role should be considered.

2 Principle four of the ICRC's external communication policy, 2016, is to "Empower people through information. Engage with communities about aid services and basic rights and entitlements, thereby boosting their resilience by making them more knowledgeable and connected. Provide information that is of direct use to people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, so they can play an active role in their own preparedness, relief and recovery. Ensure two-way communication to help manage expectations and increase accountability." Principle four has been further developed into a Guiding Principle on Community Engagement for the Public Communication Division, which outlines the role of the Communications department within the larger AAP institutional framework: www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-external-communication-doctrine.

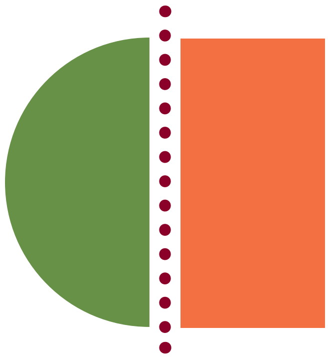
3 See "ICRC's role in situations of violence below the threshold of armed conflict", Policy Document, *International Review of the Red Cross,* Vol. 893, February 2014, pp. 275–304.

1. Contested spaces

2. Unmet Expectations



3. Asymmetrical relationships undermined by operational conditions



CHAPTER 1

THE CONTEXT

Reviews of recent humanitarian responses to natural disasters and conflicts find that mechanisms to ensure engagement with, and accountability to, affected communities are not often embedded into the response. When they are, the response is rarely altered according to the feedback collected, especially in complex emergencies.[4]

This can be attributed to several factors. First, the architecture of humanitarian action seems to prioritize information flows and accountability to donors, rather than to people receiving aid. The sort of reporting that is involved in this upward communication and accountability seemingly facilitates transparency and helps donors justify funding decisions. However, it does little to engage with, or hold either donors or humanitarian organizations accountable to, people affected by crises.[5]

Many humanitarian operations and emergency responses are hampered by a lack of staffing, poor or non-existent communication channels, inadequate technology and incomplete data coupled with inadequate information management.

At the same time, needs assessments, working groups and humanitarian situation reports rarely discuss the opportunities for or the means of community engagement and accountability, or how affected people experience or rate the humanitarian sector and the assistance that it delivers.[6] Information is often extracted through assessment processes and relayed by humanitarian organizations with little in the way of two-way exchanges and limited knowledge of how collective approaches can work.[7]

Moreover, international humanitarian organizations increasingly work remotely, implementing programmes through local partners. As a result, they might have limited contact with the people directly affected.

Engaging with communities can challenge existing assumptions and change the focus from indicators that assess the speed and logistical efficiency of delivery of goods, to indicators that measure people's satisfaction with the services received and their participation in the process.

The conceptual and operational challenges that seem to prevent humanitarians from more effectively engaging with communities are arguably more acute in armed conflict and other situations of violence compared to natural disasters.[8] The individuals interviewed for this research, who are referred to hereafter as the "respondents", pointed to three core challenges that were exacerbated in armed conflict and other violence:

1. **Contested spaces.** In conflicts and other situations of violence, humanitarians are operating in divided and politically charged environments. Propaganda, rumours

4 F. Bonino, "Closing the Loop–Practitioner Guidance on Effective Feedback Mechanisms in Humanitarian Contexts", London, ALNAP-CDA, 2014: http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/closing-the-loop-effective-feedback-in-humanitarian-contexts-practitioner-guidance/.

5 J. Steets *et al.* "Drivers and Inhibitors of Change in the Humanitarian System", Global Public Policy Institute, 2016: www.gppi.net/publications/humanitarian-action/article/drivers-and-inhibitors-of-change-in-the-humanitarian-system/?L=0%27%22.

6 D. Dijkzeul and C.I. Wakenge, "Doing good, but looking bad? Local perceptions of two humanitarian organizations in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo." Disasters, 34(4), 2010, pp.1139-1170: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20618382.

7 L. Austin, "The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action", CDAC Network Policy Paper, 2017: www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20170531072915-3fs0r.

8 Some also argue that because natural disasters attract more attention from the media and raise large amounts of money in a short time, more attention is focussed on how aid agencies spend those funds and how they treat the people affected. Natural disasters also create situations in which humanitarians come into closer interaction with development and disaster risk-reduction agents, and stronger host governments, all of which combine to raise the stakes on how humanitarians approach local structures and engage with them.

and hate speech may dominate public discourse, which can mean that actions might be interpreted from a partisan perspective. Actions as simple as renting facilities or cars, hiring staff, purchasing supplies or engaging with specific socioeconomic groups can be perceived as inherently political or biased.[9]

Here, the principles of neutrality and independence can help pave the way for impartial humanitarian action, even in politically polarized situations such as armed conflicts.[10] These principles were derived from operational practice, with the specific objective of facilitating dialogue with the parties to a conflict, and gaining their trust, in order to access people in need and help them.

Indeed, the humanitarian community seems to make definite efforts to earn the trust and support of armed groups. Whether these efforts subsequently affect the trust the community has in humanitarians has not been sufficiently considered. Perhaps, at times, the people directly affected are inadvertently left out of the conversation. Yet, building trust with local people, although not necessarily key towards building relationships with the parties to a conflict, is vital for the delivery of protection and assistance programs. This realization has led, in recent years, to a clear interest in putting the people affected by crises back at the centre of humanitarian action and prioritizing trust-building with communities.

However, this might prove difficult, as humanitarian action now occurs in contested spaces that extend to the virtual and digital worlds of social media and messaging apps. For example, violent extremist groups or people traffickers are successfully leveraging relatively unimpeded access through new media, increasing vulnerabilities and exercising forms of threats and violence in ways not envisaged previously.

2. **Unmet expectations.** In situations of conflict and other violence, people generally want to see an end to the violence as soon as possible and a return to normality once the root causes of the conflict have been addressed.

   Communities affected by violence may also have high expectations about what humanitarian assistance can achieve, both in the short term (e.g. immediate and life-saving needs) and the medium term (e.g. support for the return to a sustainable peace).

   Respondents argued, however, that these broad peace-building goals are not within the competence or mandate of humanitarian organizations. Rather, humanitarians generally focus their action on addressing immediate humanitarian needs, seeking to alleviate suffering, often with known constraints and limited means. This can lead to important needs, such as the need for information and participation, being left unaddressed.

9 C. Magone, M. Neuman and F. Weissman (eds), *Humanitarian negotiations revealed*: The MSF experience, Oxford University Press, 2012: www.msf-crash.org/en/publications/humanitarian-negotiations-revealed-msf-experience.

10 Neutrality demonstrates that humanitarian work is not about favouring one party to a conflict over another, or about backing a particular ideology; independence means determining needs and making operational decisions autonomously. J. Labbé and P. Daudin, "Applying the humanitarian principles: Reflecting on the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 897–898, 2015, pp. 183–210. www.icrc.org/en/international-review/article/applying-humanitarian-principles-reflecting-experience-international.

The consequences of unmet expectations, both physical and informational, are serious, as they undermine the trust and overall relationship between humanitarians and communities experiencing the consequences of conflict.

3. **Asymmetrical relationships undermined by operational conditions.** The power dynamics between humanitarian organizations, local bodies and community members are mostly unbalanced, hampering trust and collaboration. As perceived "doers", humanitarian organizations are largely in a position to drive the agenda and impose their views, ways of working and solutions, often based on assumptions, a "business as usual" approach and "known knowns".

   Such asymmetry is not specific to armed conflict and other violence, but is exacerbated in these settings by the fact that security measures can further restrict the movement of aid workers and their ability to effectively engage with the people who need help.

Indeed, restricted access and safety measures, intentional and collateral damage to communication infrastructure, and restrictions on communication networks can increase the physical distance between communities and humanitarians (especially international humanitarian organizations). This might translate into military style protocols and processes to deliver assistance, restricting both the humanitarians' and communities' ability to engage in any credible or meaningful manner.

When military and security restrictions are placed on humanitarian aid, these also undermine the desired impartiality and neutrality of aid workers.[11] This imbalance can also be manifested in the way aid workers are sheltered from the most insecure areas and can be quickly evacuated from them, unlike the people affected, who are left behind. All of the above are real challenges. For instance, in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the relationship between humanitarians and the population is undermined by two factors: first, by rumours about hidden agendas, collusion with armed groups, trafficking and sorcery; second, by negative perceptions of humanitarians' contributions to improving living conditions, their inability to target those in need, and their lack of engagement and respect for local customs and culture. This makes for a poor relationship which, in turn, has negative outcomes for overall security and efficiency (see Box 1).[12]

Humanitarians are only beginning to tackle these types of challenges in a more formal way, having accumulated decades of field experience and anecdotal evidence on what works and what does not in specific situations.

There is much to be learned from these experiences, as well as from the growing number of projects that endeavour to put community engagement at their core.

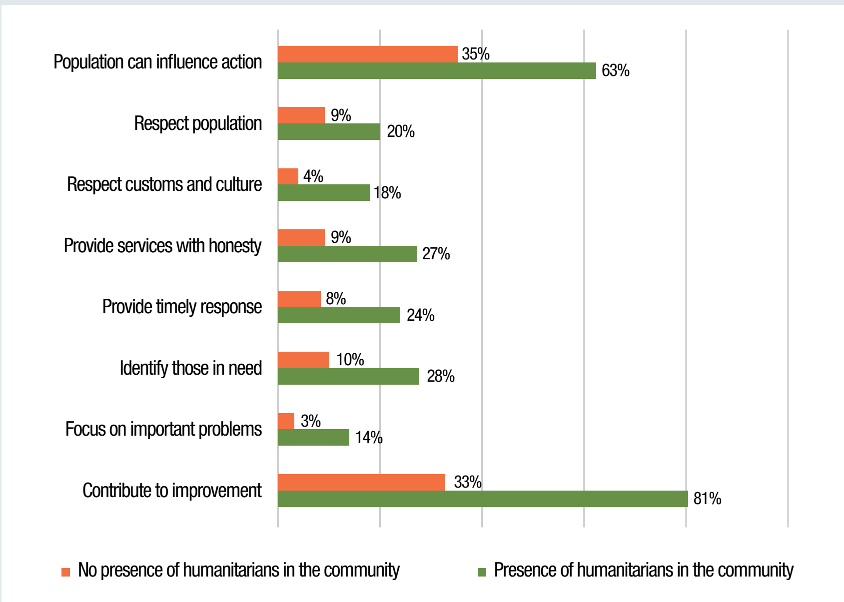
11 R. Kent *et al.* "Planning from the Future: Is the Humanitarian System Fit for Purpose?" Policy Institute, King's College London, the Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute; Feinstein International Centre, Tufts University, 2016: www.odi.org/publications/10694-planning-future-humanitarian-system-fit-purpose.

12 P. Vinck, P.N. Pham and A. Makoond, "Peace and Reconstruction Polls #11", Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, UNDP, 2017: http://hhi.harvard.edu/resources/peace-and-human-rights-data.

A duo sings in South Kivu, DRC, during a concert to combat the rejection and stigmatization of victims of sexual violence. In 2017, a poll in eastern DRC showed that only a quarter of respondents thought that humanitarians knew how to target those most in need and deliver aid in an honest and timely manner.

BOX 1. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: POLLS IN EASTERN DRC REVEAL POOR REPORT CARDS FOR HUMANITARIANS

A poll in eastern DRC points towards aid inefficiency and humanitarians' perceived lack of respect for local communities, customs and culture.



For this discussion paper, the research team conducted a poll in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri, eastern DRC. A total of 7,650 adults were randomly selected and interviewed face-to-face by trained interviewers in December 2016 and March 2017.

Questions on the perception of humanitarians were added to a quarterly poll, implemented by the lead author of the present report. The results show that local perceptions of humanitarian aid are complex and diverse.

Predictably, notable differences exist between respondents in assisted communities versus non-assisted communities. Among respondents in assisted communities, a majority of those interviewed judged that humanitarian action made at least some positive contribution towards community improvement (81%). Few, however, thought that humanitarian actors focused on the problems that were important to them (14%).

Moreover, only one in four judged positively (good or very good) the ability of humanitarians to target those most in need (28%), to deliver assistance on time (24%) and to provide aid in an honest manner (27%). These negative results may reflect a sense of frustration arising from the significant needs, high expectations and the ultimately limited ability of humanitarians to solve all problems.

However, they also reflect a deeper issue with meaningful engagement, including a lack of communication (as confirmed by key informants). Indeed, in communities where humanitarians were present, two out of three respondents judged they had at least some ways of influencing humanitarian action, but only a minority of respondents (20%) judged that humanitarians had at least some level of respect for the population; an even smaller percentage judged that humanitarians respected local customs and culture (18%). These percentages were lower among respondents in non-assisted communities.

Significantly undermining the relationships between humanitarians and the population is the spread of rumours about hidden agendas, collusion with armed groups, trafficking and even sorcery – all factors that had been noted in a previous study in the region, and which underline the importance of dialogue and communication to improve the perception and facilitate the work of humanitarian actors.

Box content author: Patrick Vinck.


A. Gonzalez Farran/ICRC

Members of a community in Jonglei State, South Sudan, gather to meet with an ICRC team in August 2017. Meaningful engagement requires that humanitarians move beyond one-way streams of communication, and engage in consistent and inclusive two-way dialogue with those affected by crises.

CHAPTER 2

STATE OF PLAY

Engaging with and being accountable to people affected by crises is not a new proposition. Rather, it is rooted in the proposition is rooted in the participatory methods that emerged in the 1980s, and that were formalized as engagement and participation through system-wide initiatives such as Sphere,[13] the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People in Aid, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)[14] and, most recently, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability.

The importance of engaging directly with people affected by conflicts and disasters is also recognized in the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief,[15] and in the Good Humanitarian Donorship agreement calling for the involvement of communities in all aspects of disaster response.[16]

In 2011, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agreed to incorporate the Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) into its policies and operational guidelines and to promote them with operational partners in humanitarian country teams and among cluster members.[17]

More recently, the Grand Bargain[18], a package of reforms to humanitarian funding, was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. It aims, inter alia, to transform the sector through a "Participation Revolution" and make emergency aid finance more transparent and targeted towards local actors.[19]

However, there is also widespread agreement that humanitarians' efforts in this regard have been limited, and that not everyone believes engagement to be possible in every situation. While the importance of engagement and proximity is commonly accepted, there are often operational and conceptual challenges that prevent humanitarians from effectively engaging with affected people.[20]

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13 "The Sphere Project is a voluntary initiative that brings a wide range of humanitarian agencies together around a common aim - to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance and the accountability of humanitarian actors to their constituents, donors and affected populations", Sphere Project website: www.sphereproject.org/about.

14 "The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) was established in 1997, as a mechanism to provide a forum on learning, accountability and performance issues for the humanitarian sector", ALNAP website: www.alnap.org.

15 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief", 1994. See Principle 7: Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid; and Principle 9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources: https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf.

16 "The Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative is an informal donor forum and network which facilitates collective advancement of GHD principles and good practices". The GHD website: www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/home-page.html.

17 IASC Task Team on Accountability to Affected Populations and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, AAP/PSEA website: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-affected-populations-including-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.

18 The Grand Bargain: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc.

19 A. Derzsi-Horváth, J. Steets and L. Ruppert, "Independent Grand Bargain Report", Global Public Policy Institute, Inspire Consortium, 2017: www.gppi.net/publications/humanitarian-action/article/independent-grand-bargain-report/; and Grand Bargain (Hosted by the IASC), "Final Participation Revolution work-stream recommendations", 2017: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc/documents/final-participation-revolution-work-stream-recommendations.

20 D. Brown and A. Donini, "Rhetoric or reality? Putting affected people at the centre of humanitarian action," ALNAP Study. London, 2014: www.alnap.org/help-library/rhetoric-or-reality-putting-affected-people-at-the-centre-of-humanitarian-action-0.

Views also diverge significantly when it comes to what constitutes meaningful engagement.

Figure 1. Levels and types of engagement[21]

For some respondents, engagement remains a one-way street, either from humanitarians towards affected people (i.e. information provision) or from affected people to humanitarians (i.e. consultation). These are arguably the most fundamental levels of engagement.

Over the past few years, humanitarian organizations and donors have given greater recognition to timely, actionable and trusted information, as well as safe communication, as forms of aid in their own right (see Box 2).[22]

This approach has been made more feasible by the opportunities provided by increased connectivity, and the exponential growth of mobile and broadband communications around the world.

21 Based on D. Brown, A. Donini and P. Knox Clarke, "Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action: Background Paper of ALNAP's 29th Annual Meeting", ALNAP/ODI, 2014: www.alnap.org/help-library/29th-alnap-annual-meeting-engagement-of-crisis-affected-people-in-humanitarian-action.

22 For example, *infoasaid* was a DFID-funded project, implemented by a consortium of two media development organizations, Internews and BBC Media Action. Both are founding members of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network (www.cdacnetwork.org). The two main goals of *infoasaid* were: (1) to strengthen the capacity and preparedness of aid agencies to respond to the information and communication needs of crisis-affected populations; and (2) to support a number of humanitarian agencies in their communications response across a variety of emergency contexts. Another interesting initiative is "The Signal Code: A Human Rights Approach to Information During Crisis": https://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/signal-code-human-rights-approach-information-during-crisis. The Signal Code asserts that all people have fundamental rights: to access, transmit and benefit from information as a basic humanitarian need; to be protected from harm that may result from the provision of information during a crisis; to have a reasonable expectation of privacy and data security; to have agency over how their data are collected and used; and to seek redress and rectification when data pertaining to them causes harm or are inaccurate.

At a migrant shelter in Tlaxcala State, Mexico, a young man reads a leaflet containing a map and practical advice for migrants in April 2017. Increasingly, humanitarian organizations have recognized the provision of timely, actionable and trusted information as a form of aid in its own right.

BOX 2. CENTRAL AMERICA: HELPING MIGRANTS TRAVEL MORE SAFELY

Information leaflets, posters and radio spots give migrants access to practical, life-saving information throughout their journey.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of migrants flee Central America's violence and poverty and head to Mexico and the United States. Many of them are illiterate, and primarily speak Spanish or Maya languages. They are joined by thousands who have travelled from places as far away as Bangladesh, Nepal, Somalia and the DRC or as close by as Haiti. Very few of these migrants speak Spanish (rather, it is an eclectic mix of Urdu, Hindi, French, English, Lingala and Somali). This creates a challenge for governmental and humanitarian agencies looking to help.

In response, over the past two years, the ICRC regional delegation for Mexico, in cooperation with National Societies from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, has produced and distributed over 30,000 copies of a pocket-size, self-help leaflet[1] to migrants travelling through the region. The leaflets contain practical, life-saving information and are printed on synthetic, foldable, waterproof paper for durability.

On one side, the leaflet offers advice on how to stay hydrated and lists important phone numbers and key items to have at all times, like flashlights. The text gives targeted advice: check in with relatives along the route, do not jump from moving trains, and remember that Mexico's emergency health-care system is free for anyone who needs it, including migrants. This side also includes legal advice, for instance what to do if a migrant is stopped by the authorities.

On the other side, a map pinpoints key locations along the various regional migration routes (e.g. the names and addresses of places specifically providing shelter, food, free phone calls, health assistance and Red Cross offices). The map also shows the different regions and climate zones and is popular among migrants, as it covers the area from Panama all the way to the Mexico–US border.

Posters providing the same information as given in the leaflet are displayed in shelters and mobile clinics, together with information about the ICRC Restoring Family Links service. These posters also include information on how to call ICRC/Red Cross assistance posts, free of charge. They are shared on Facebook, as well as through other organizations working with migrants in the region. The ICRC delegation also produced radio spots in Spanish and local indigenous languages, as part of an ICRC-sponsored award project for university students.

This is a "prevention information project," said Maria Puy Serra, the ICRC's then Regional Communication Coordinator. "The fact is that people migrate, and when they do, we just want to help reduce their vulnerability as much as possible."

The goal was to create a centralized information source which, in line with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's humanitarian policy, would not advocate migration, but rather, help people to mitigate their vulnerabilities once the difficult decision to leave home had been made.

Box content author: Tina Bouffet.

1 "Mexico and Central America: Practical advice for migrants", ICRC, 2016: www.icrc.org/en/document/mexico-and-central-america-migrants-advices.

Respondents explained, however, that even at this basic level of engagement, gaps and challenges exist:

- **Communication channels are still often used with a narrow public relations objective to broadcast messages in one direction only.** In other words, efforts to communicate with affected people revolve, at the most basic level, around broadcasting "messages" predefined by humanitarians to, for example, promote healthy behaviours, rather than responding to broad information needs defined by the community itself, and creating a real dialogue. The frequent use of press releases, Facebook and Twitter posts, and printed materials with pre-formulated information for affected people encourages a top-down approach, rather than one that responds to questions from the community, and gives them the knowledge that they need to make humanitarian action effective for them.[23]

- **There is limited understanding of local information ecosystems[24], including what channels different segments of the affected population access, how they access them, and which they prefer or trust.** It is well-known that various socioeconomic and cultural groups rely on different means of communication (see Box 3).

- **Information landscapes[25] can be highly contentious and politically divisive, rendering the use of mass communication channels difficult or counterproductive, and creating a loop of deep mistrust in the media among humanitarians and affected communities.** Humanitarians must better understand how to navigate a potentially contentious and divided media ecosystem, and take steps to build trust with local journalists. Low journalistic standards can fuel mistrust. However, there are abundant examples of mainstream and local media being very effective at establishing two-way communication between people affected by crises and humanitarians.[26]

23 I. Wall and L. Robinson, "Left in the Dark: The unmet need for information in humanitarian responses", *Policy Briefing #2*, BBC World Service Trust, 2008: www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/left-in-the-dark-the-unmet-need-for-information-in-humanitarian-responses-policy-briefing-no-2.

24 Information ecosystems are complex, adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships, through which information moves and transforms in flows. Through information ecosystems, information appears as a master resource, like energy, the lack of which makes everything more difficult. See T. Susman-Peña, "Why Information Matters: a foundation for resilience", Internews, 2015. For an example, see "Afghan Information Ecosystems" Internews and Sayara Research, 2016: www.internews.org/resource/afghan-information-ecosystems.

25 "The physical and institutional infrastructure that support information production and flow, including media outlets, distributions systems, production units, etc." T. Susman-Peña, *op. cit.* note 24.

26 See, for example, Internews work in Chad: www.internews.org/updates/report-documents-seven-years-humanitarian-media-assistance-darfur-refugee-crisis-chad. Starting in 2005 and until 2012, Internews built and supported three humanitarian radio stations. These helped those fleeing the violence in Darfur receive the critical news and information they needed to survive.

A man wheels his luggage through the snow at Stanitsya Luhanska checkpoint in Ukraine's Lugansk region. According to a 2016 Internews assessment, citizens in the country's most affected areas increasingly distrust traditional media, preferring information obtained through word of mouth or social media.

BOX 3. UKRAINE: MAPPING INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS

Mapping information ecosystems can help humanitarians share practical information and receive feedback to counter the effects of rumours and misinformation.

Since 2014, the conflict in Ukraine's eastern provinces has triggered a parallel war of words between Moscow and Kyiv, with a devastating impact on the country's media landscape. A 2016 Internews assessment[1] showed that citizens in the country's most affected areas increasingly distrusted traditional media and largely dismissed Ukrainian TV as a credible source of information. Rather, information spread through word of mouth and social media, meaning that rumours and misinformation were rife.

For internally displaced people, this trend wedded poorly with the lack of clarity in the Ukrainian government's IDP legislation and assistance mechanisms. Access to relief was further hindered by the proliferation of "red tape",[2] creating a growing sense of confusion, frustration and isolation among vulnerable individuals stranded in an ideological battlefield.

In their quest to communicate information that was practical, accurate, reliable and up-to-date, international humanitarian organizations had to learn to navigate the complex and polarized media ecosystem. Lack of information was the main barrier to effectively accessing humanitarian assistance, as echoed by a majority (64%) of women interviewed for the Community Consultation of Humanitarian Aid, conducted in advance of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.[3] Yet, a delicate balance had to be struck between openly sharing information and safeguarding operations linked to major security and protection issues.

The first step was to understand how people accessed information. Some organizations hired local media or social media consultants who understood the situation and revealed the existence of city-based groups on Vkontakte (a popular platform similar to Facebook). These groups shared practical information such as where to get WFP vouchers; organizations like UNICEF used them to communicate directly with young people and their parents.[4]

Meanwhile, the ICRC set up an SMS service to notify cash assistance recipients of their payments, bypassing potential internet access issues. Individuals could reply with feedback via text or by using one of the topic-specific hotlines and see their comments translate into concrete action. For instance, in the food parcel programme, complaints about the quality of canned fish led to a change in provider.

Box content author: Tina Bouffet.

1 J. Quintanilla, O. Parafeniuk, and V. Moroz, "Ukraine: Trapped in a Propaganda War. Abandoned. Frustrated. Stigmatized", Internews, 2016: www.internews.org/resource/ukraine-trapped-propaganda-war-abandoned-frustrated-stigmatized.

2 "Ukraine: Civilians need protection and access to humanitarian aid", Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017: www.nrc.no/news/2017/january/ukraine-civilians-need-protection-and-access-to-humanitarian-aid/.

3 "Community Consultation of Humanitarian Aid: Findings from Ukraine", World Humanitarian Summit, Istanbul, Ipsos, 2016: www.ipsos.com/en-us/knowledge/society/community-consultations-humanitarian-aid.

4 "UNICEF Ukraine appeals to youth and parents via Vkontakte network". UNICEF, 2016: www.unicef.org/ukraine/media_21522.html.

- **Initial consultations such as needs assessments are widely, if not automatically, conducted. Yet, they tend to be a one-off snapshot that does not focus on analysing needs alongside local capacities, existing coping mechanisms or the local context. Assessments often do not consider people's information and communication needs.** Linkages to decision-making are frequently unclear, as power remains with humanitarian organizations. Communities are rarely informed of the outcome of consultations, and are unlikely to have been informed about the methodologies, or to have received any raw data or analysis.

  Moreover, these kinds of consultations tend to take place only at the beginning of a given project's implementation, i.e. after the initial project design, when the most significant decisions about the aid to be delivered have already been taken. Furthermore, most consultations, such as surveys and many extractive research methods, involve little or no dialogue. Often, they fail to capture and reflect nuanced information about community members' views, which could have been used to improve decision-making. Even in situations where accountability procedures are systematically applied, community preferences and cultural norms tend only to result in minor tweaks to aid delivery, and not substantial programme changes.[27]

- **Remote management is required, as physical access is not possible due to the lack of security, infrastructure and/or political will.** Despite the desire to help conflict-affected communities, insecurity often limits humanitarians' ability to deliver aid safely to those in need. This has forced many organizations to develop and depend on remote programme management, which in turn, potentially inhibits accountability and reduces the quality of aid.[28]

Beyond one-way information provision and consultation, meaningful engagement is achieved when humanitarians ensure that public concerns are consistently understood, considered and addressed through ongoing dialogue or two-way communication.

While humanitarian managers may still retain decision-making power, the level of involvement of affected people is more significant than in consultative approaches, as methods are put in place to work directly with stakeholders, enabling them ultimately to hold humanitarians accountable for their action. However, respondents noted that identifying the appropriate methods and institutions for such dialogue and accountability is a key challenge.

One line of practice has been to set up committees and structures to foster the involvement of community members through various representative models. However, these exogenous structures may not always be sustainable or truly inclusive (although

27 For example, see J.C. Ong, M. Buchanan Smith and S. Routley, "Who's listening? Accountability to affected people in the Haiyan response, ALNAP, 2015: www.alnap.org/help-library/whos-listening-accountability-to-affected-people-in-the-haiyan-response-0; J.C. Ong, J. Flores and P. Combinido, "Obliged to Be Grateful: How Local Communities Experienced Humanitarian Actors in Typhoon Haiyan", ALNAP, 2015: www.alnap.org/help-library/obliged-to-be-grateful-how-local-communities-experienced-humanitarian-actors-in-the; or the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) programme that explored, over a three year period, how to deliver humanitarian aid in some of the most challenging conflict environments - Afghanistan, south central Somalia, South Sudan and Syria: www.saveresearch.net/.

28 A. Jackson and S.A. Zyck, *Presence and Proximity - To Stay and Deliver, Five Years On,* OCHA, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and the Jindal School of International Affairs (JSIA), 2017: www.nrc.no/presence-and-proximity-to-stay-and-deliver-five-years-on.

a recent study suggests that community protection structures can be sustainable).[29] Other studies have found that having a combination of local intermediaries and embedded aid workers within the community helps voice local preferences.[30]

In situations of armed conflict, however, security issues are likely to render such structures unsustainable. More frequently, humanitarians end up having to navigate formal and informal governance structures and norms that order social relations within the community, as well as the power dynamics between groups. In armed conflicts, especially when they are protracted, communities are often polarized and harbour longstanding rivalries.

This can lead to a situation in which some groups are marginalized and excluded from formal structures for engagement. Moreover, humanitarian organizations generally engage through intermediaries, whether local organizations, community leaders or pre-identified contacts. The choice of contact people can exacerbate existing exclusionary patterns, and indeed feed into the conflict. Although this might be inevitable to a certain extent, humanitarians' awareness of this issue is key to mitigating adverse effects and maintaining impartiality, both real and perceived.

Addressing protection issues also requires meaningful engagement, to better understand the perspectives, capacities, concerns and self-protection and coping strategies of affected people.

The perceptions of these communities ultimately influence their decision-making and actions, including decisions to work with or against peacekeepers, to flee, to openly denounce violence or to seek retribution.[31] Thus, engaging communities, either directly or through an intermediary, to understand perceptions and their influence on conflict dynamics, remains vital to developing, implementing and evaluating effective protection strategies, protocols and mechanisms.[32]

Beyond dialogue and involvement, engagement requires that humanitarians relinquish control over the information space and some level of decision-making.

Engagement requires that humanitarians relinquish control over the information space and some level of decision-making.

This new partnership may be based on a shared decision-making process, or one that sees the community as sole decision-maker. This engagement is reflected in the evolving role and responsibilities of local groups in crisis response, and the changing relationship with international agencies, including humanitarians.

29 H. Lindley-Jones "If we don't do it, who will? A study into the sustainability of Community Protection Structures supported by Oxfam in the Democratic Republic of the Congo", Oxfam, 2016: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/if-we-dont-do-it-who-will-a-study-into-the-sustainability-of-community-protecti-620149.

30 J.C. Ong, *op. cit.*, note 27.

31 A Gorur, *Civilians in Conflict Issue Brief No. 1:* "Community Self-Protection Strategies", Stimson Centre, 2013; A. Giffen, *Civilians in Conflict Issue Brief No. 2:* "Community Perceptions as a Priority in Protection and Peacekeeping", Stimson Centre, 2013: www.stimson.org.

32 *Ibid.*

Specifically, the increasing levels of competence and assertiveness of local groups, combined with frustration and disappointment at the existing delivery of humanitarian aid, have increased pressure on the humanitarian system to devolve more responsibility and decision-making to the local level. Across the board, communities affected by crises complain about the lack of direct engagement and involvement, and the absence of follow-up once feedback has been provided. They also note the lack of a neutral space to hold humanitarians accountable for their actions.[33]

Meanwhile, practical concerns about field deployment and increasingly difficult access on the ground have forced organizations to rethink their deployment models, and rely more heavily on local organizations.[34]

And yet, the humanitarian sector's extreme lack of progress in engaging with people affected by conflict is not due to a lack of good evidence or the tools required. Fundamentally, it is about power interests: donors and agencies are simply unwilling to relinquish their power; until this changes, no amount of research can create progress.

2.1 A PARADIGM SHIFT?

The result of this rethinking of humanitarian action is captured in the Grand Bargain, which clearly outlines the need for a paradigm shift to bring about a "Participation Revolution" and adequate funding for local groups in order to transform international organizations from "doers" into enablers and facilitators of humanitarian action.

Calls for increased accountability have almost become a staple of humanitarian policy reviews and evaluations. Numerous organization-specific and inter-agency initiatives have aimed at improving accountability. Agencies have even come together in alliances and networks to "push the accountability agenda"; no longer is there a shortage of guidance on how to design and conduct specific accountability initiatives. Yet, all of this appears to have achieved "rhetorical, rather than real, results".[35]

Indeed, for now, the response has predominantly focused on new and innovative ways of investing in community resilience and community level response to emergencies, including through the increased localization of aid and more effective partnerships.

More problematic is the paradigm shift that calls for communities to hold humanitarian bodies accountable for their actions, ostensibly carried out for the benefit of people affected by conflicts. When accountability becomes an intrinsic feature of engagement, it is distinguished from lower levels of communication, because it transforms the humanitarian–community relationship from a situation of perceived dominance (by humanitarians) to a situation of equal consideration, or even leadership, by the community.

At the same time, insofar as accountability strives to invert the typical hierarchical power structure, it remains, as a feature of engagement, constrained by the fact that local and international humanitarian bodies remain largely in charge of decision-making and implementation.

33 L. Ruppert, E. Sagmeister and J. Steets, "Listening to communities in insecure environments: Lessons from community feedback mechanisms in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria", Secure Access in Volatile Environments. Humanitarian Outcomes, Global Public Policy Institute, UKAid, 2016: www.gppi.net/publications/humanitarian-action/article/listening-to-communities-in-insecure-environments/?L=0%2525252527%2525252522%2527.

34 Ed Schenkenberg, "The challenges of localised humanitarian aid", *Emergency gap series 03*, MSF, November 2016: https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap-papers-aid-environment/emergency-gap-challenges-localised-humanitarian-aid.

35 "Changing humanitarian action?" Background paper, 31st ALNAP Annual Meeting, 2017, page 22: www.alnap.org/help-library/background-paper-31st-alnap-annual-meeting.

Dissenting opinions about the need for a paradigm shift exist and need to be included in this discussion.

Some narrowly define engagement as a tool focused on technological mechanisms, or as a "second class" department without the influence or budget of programme management. Some cite the necessity for humanitarian action to be underpinned by a management style that is akin to military operations and precision, and which does not concern itself with transparency and disclosure.

Some humanitarians argue that confidentiality, discretion and, more especially, restrictions on the public dissemination of information, are fundamental to ensuring the security of their staff, as well as the effectiveness of their work.

Many humanitarians are also careful to differentiate themselves from development workers and peace-builders and argue that meaningful engagement, accountability, partnerships and ownership can only happen once an emergency has passed. During the emergency, they argue, the time and resources required, within humanitarian mandates, are simply not available.[36]

Moreover, some argue that it is not within their mandate, and perhaps even prejudicial to their work, to encourage engagement that may be confused with social change. Doing so may waste precious time that could cost lives and be perceived as political interference.

Others mention situations in which the delivery of aid was easier, faster and safer as a result of engagement, which enabled positive long-term outcomes. Here, a lack of rigorous evaluation, beyond selected case studies, leaves unresolved questions about ideas based on assumption and ideology rather than hard facts.

In any case, the paradigm shift is happening and organically so. As communities become increasingly aware about humanitarian action, and connected through social media and new technologies, they are also becoming more vocal about their rights and about the duty of humanitarians to operate in an effective, participative and respectful manner.

> *Silence is also a form of communication that can jeopardize trust and credibility.*

Indeed, communities now expect humanitarians to interact with them,[37] and have organized relatively large demonstrations against humanitarian organizations in places as diverse as Liberia and Sri Lanka; these probably reflected dissatisfaction with both what had been done and how it was done. Elsewhere, community protests and even violence against humanitarians remain rare, but not unheard of. Some see this trend as humanitarian action entering a new phase.[38]

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36 M. K. Rossier, "Linking Humanitarian Action and Peacebuilding". The Graduate Institute, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2011: http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/ccdp/shared/Docs/Publications/WP7_WEB-1.pdf.

37 I. Wall and L. Robinson, *op. cit.*, note 23.

38 C. Bennett, "Time to let go. Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era", Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group, 2016: www.odi.org/publications/10381-time-let-go-remaking-humanitarian-action-modern-era.

What is clear, once more, is that the practical challenges are considerable: communities are far from homogeneous, especially in situations of conflict and other forms of violence. This forces humanitarians to operate in contentious spaces, where they struggle to identify partners and existing institutional arrangements that will not create further divisions. In some cases, this may end up upsetting the existing balance of power which, in turn, can compromise an organization's standing and its approach to impartiality and neutrality.

Silence is also a form of communication that can jeopardize trust and credibility. Saying or doing nothing may be just as dangerous or politically divisive as doing something.

2.2 ENGAGEMENT CHOICES

The last two decades have seen a growth in research into the challenges of improving humanitarian performance. Many in the humanitarian system have suggested that the quality of programme and aid delivery would be improved by the more active, accountable and meaningful engagement of affected people.[39]

However, even those most supportive of accountability as an integral aspect of engagement recognize the inherent limitations and challenges. They argue that donors and agencies are simply unwilling to give up their power and that until this changes, nothing can truly allow the sector to achieve progress in this area. "From a perspective of self-interest, most donors stand to lose from the accountability reform. They are in a position of strength either to promote or hinder its implementation."[40]

Others argue that this idea of a paradigm shift, and the notion that humanitarians may be held accountable by communities who are themselves parties to the conflict, is problematic in that it undermines the neutral and impartial status of humanitarian efforts. Overall, there is general agreement among aid practitioners that the term "engagement" lacks methodological rigour and common definitions. Definitions exist, but they are either not well-known, poorly articulated or inconsistent.

Indeed, despite a growing body of evidence on the importance of engagement – a body largely based on case studies – what is actually gained by systematically integrating and prioritizing engagement and increased participation remains poorly or erratically documented.[41] Thus, evidence-based guidance, relating the desirable features of engagement with clearly identifiable operational factors and expected outcomes or benefits, is still lacking.

More work is needed to identify the specific factors that shape the feasibility and desirability of various levels of engagement in different types of humanitarian situation. In other words, different forms and types of engagement should be expected in conducive environments, compared to highly constrained environments. Yet, when it comes to developing an engagement strategy, the particular characteristics of a conducive or constrained environment, including internal organizational factors, still need to be determined.

Another more sensitive issue, which may explain the relatively slow progress that engagement and accountability have made in the aid community over the last twenty or so years, relates to the following questions. Are donors and humanitarian organizations doing enough to share leadership and "power" with the people carrying out

39 F. Bonino with I. Jean and P. Knox Clarke, "Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance", *ALNAP Study*, ALNAP/ODI, London, 2014: www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-feedback-mechanisms-research-evidence-and-guidance.

40 J. Steets *et al.* *op.cit.* note 5, page 40.

41 D. Brown, A. Donini and P. Knox Clarke, *op.cit.* note 21.

humanitarian operations on the ground? Is enough being done to ensure that aid agencies are suited to partner with local communities? Of course, grassroots partnerships can be challenging, especially in situations in which civil society is strongly divided along conflict lines; this can result in biased perceptions.

For instance, in places where the media have been targeted or co-opted by warring parties to spread propaganda, using such channels to provide communities with basic information can backfire. In other words, the media, in such situations, can become a source of discord and not of trust.[42] In one study, BBC Media Action found that media sources may be easily co-opted by those funding them, or pandering to their bases, furthering ethnic and religious divisions, despite communities expressing strong demand for objective media sources.[43]

Unfortunately, it is often the case that humanitarian organizations are also perceived as being politically driven. This happens because humanitarian organizations often fail to take into account the political dynamics of the countries in which they operate, or of the donors who fund them.


A. Chuklanov

Donors can promote accountability by being more hands-off about programming, and more hands-on about making participation and feedback processes mandatory. They can also fund independent satisfaction surveys to inform holistic views of community preferences.

42 Y. Bajraktari and C. Parajon, "The Role of the Media in Conflict", USIP, 2007: www.usip.org/publications/2007/06/role-media-conflict.
43 J. Deane, "Fragile states: the role of media and communication." *Policy Briefing # 10*, BBC Media Action, 2013: www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/fragile-states-the-role-of-media-and-communication-policy-briefing-no-10.

2.3 WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR BEING ACCOUNTABLE: THE ROLE OF DONORS

Time and again humanitarian agencies have promised to "put people at the centre" and be more accountable to affected populations. Yet, accountability remains one of the reform areas that has seen the least progress in recent years.[44]

Any accountability or participation mechanism – be it interactive radio programmes in South Sudan, SMS feedback systems in Somalia, or programmes to involve local committees in decision-making in Madagascar – is voluntarily put in place by aid agencies. Communities that receive aid typically do not have the power to hold humanitarians to account for the aid provided. If people affected by crises cannot hold aid organizations to account, then who can? Donors can, in three different ways.

First, they can work directly with their partners to improve their approach to community engagement, providing dedicated funding for feedback channels and participation processes. They can also decide to fund only partners who demonstrate that they have feedback mechanisms in place and who incorporate feedback into their programmes. Many donors, such as the US and UK governments, already ask partners to report on their feedback mechanisms. To give those mechanisms more teeth, donors should analyse the feedback received and use the data to rate the performance of their partners.

Second, alongside regular, community-wide surveys,[45] donors can fund independent channels that regularly collect and analyse data on the needs, priorities and satisfaction of the people affected (consider, for instance, "Rate My Aid"[46]).

While it can be challenging to ensure that aid agencies react promptly to the feedback received, this approach provides a more holistic view of communities' preferences. It also provides an independent assessment and avoids the conflict of interest that can occur when an agency collects feedback on its own performance.

Finally, there is a slightly less intuitive way in which donors can ensure that agencies become more accountable to people affected by crises: let go of control. Aid organizations regularly raise concerns about excessive, time-consuming donor reporting and monitoring requirements that feel like micro-management.

Meaningful engagement with people affected by crises requires time, flexibility and full independence from the political interests of government donors. Adapting programmes in response to feedback from the people affected by crises is a first step. However, donors could also adopt a wider-reaching, hands-off attitude, particularly if they select and assess their partners based on independent satisfaction data.

Any of these three approaches would help people affected by crises to be heard more clearly in the design and implementation of humanitarian assistance. At the same time, these approaches would still leave the last word to donors and aid agencies, rather than create a truly accountable system in which the people affected by crises gain direct, immediate power. This is necessary, because giving people affected by crises too much

44 "State of the Humanitarian System", ALNAP, 2015: http://sohs.alnap.org/.
45 Developed, for example, by Ground Truth Solutions: http://groundtruthsolutions.org/. See Box 4.
46 Duncan Green, "Rate My Aid' and Other Ways that TripAdvisor Could Revolutionise Development Work", 2015: www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/apr/10/rate-my-aid-and-other-ways-that-tripadvisor-could-revolutionise-development-work.

influence over humanitarian programmes can lead to contradictions with humanitarian principles. For example, this can be the case when local communities discriminate against ethnic minorities or women.[47]

Giving people affected by crises too much influence can also undermine humanitarian quality standards (e.g. if people affected by earthquakes prefer cheaper building materials over those that can withstand the next shock). A system in which donors and aid agencies incorporate the legitimate concerns and preferences of affected communities, but remain the guardians of humanitarian principles and quality standards, may therefore be needed to strike an appropriate balance.

This section was written by Julia Steets and Lotte Ruppert.

Treating people affected by crisis as "clients", whose feedback must be proactively sought, can help humanitarian organizations serve them more effectively. Here, Amer serves one of his clients in the pastry shop he opened in Homs, Syria, in March 2016 with the support of an ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent microeconomic initiative programme.

47 To read more about the potential conflicts between accountability to affected populations and humanitarian principles, see: "Drivers and Inhibitors of Change in the Humanitarian System" GPPi, 2016: www.gppi.net/pea.

BOX 4. FROM FEEDBACK TO ACTION: ENABLING HUMANITARIAN CLIENTS TO INFLUENCE THE DECISIONS WHICH AFFECT THEM

Drawing on the Ground Truth Constituent Voice Methodology, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is becoming more systematic and deliberate about bringing client voices into programme decision-making.

In line with its 2020 Strategy, the IRC is committed to becoming more systematic in its collection and use of feedback from the people it seeks to help in order to improve input into key programming decisions. Inspired by the Ground Truth Solutions Constituent Voice methodology, the IRC implemented a series of pilot initiatives in 2015 and 2016 in South Sudan, Syria, Kenya and Greece. The objective was to learn whether this methodology would strengthen the IRC's capacity to listen and more importantly, its ability to respond to feedback.

In all of the pilot countries, IRC field teams reported that the use of surveys, coupled with focus group discussions, strengthened the relevance and actionable quality of feedback. By introducing the teams to common themes of enquiry (such as safe access, respectful and dignified treatment, and whether people feel that they have an influence over aid decisions), they were able to design surveys which addressed a range of issues of importance to the recipients of aid and to the IRC.

Although reactive channels – such as suggestion boxes and hotlines – are a necessary safeguard and provide an opportunity for clients to give feedback at any time and on any topic, the IRC's experience demonstrated the preferred use of proactive feedback channels. These provide teams with control over what feedback they ask for, and allow for data aggregation and tracking, enabling them to channel feedback more effectively into the programme decision-making process.

However, the IRC / Ground Truth pilots were not all plain sailing. Field teams were resistant to the extra work involved in designing and implementing the pilot's new feedback mechanism. Bi-monthly data schedules in South Sudan were stretched out to three; the one-monthly schedule planned for the emergency in Greece ended up taking place every two months. In Syria, the final rounds of feedback collection were cancelled altogether.

This showed that for a feedback mechanism to be sustainable, it needs to be embedded in an organization's programme budgets, work plans and staffing strategies. In addition, teams need to consider feedback to be as important as delivering on their grant commitments, spending their budgets and delivering aid.

Very often, the situations in which the IRC works do not lend themselves to collecting feedback. Programming the gathering of protection-related information in the camps around Juba was not regarded by aid clients as being as important as other, more tangible services. This was difficult feedback for the team, especially as it endangered continued funding.

In the meantime, specific circumstances can prevent teams from acting on feedback, even with the best will in the world. In the camps in northern Greece, cases of injuries from burning had prompted the local government to prevent aid agencies from providing electric heaters, despite repeated demands from the people in the camps. This inability to address people's frustrations affected staff morale and, in some cases, willingness to ask for feedback.

Finally, the IRC found that feedback mechanisms need to reflect the organization's unique culture, capacity and priorities if they are to be sustainable and taken seriously by its field teams. In Greece, for instance, the greater responsiveness of the feedback mechanism was the result of individual determination and prioritization. In Syria, less enthusiasm from individual staff members hindered the delivery of results.

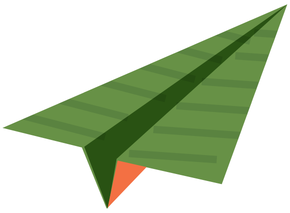
Relying on individual motivation is not a viable or sustainable approach to delivering on a commitment. Rather, commitment to responsiveness and accountability can only be delivered when the incentives to see that commitment through are embedded in organizational processes and structures and are present throughout the organizational hierarchy.

Box content author: Chloë Whitley.

For more on this initiative, see C. Whitley, "16 key lessons on collecting and using client feedback: highlights from the IRC Client Voice and Choice / Ground Truth Solutions pilots", www.rescue.org/report/16-key-lessons-collecting-and-using-client-feedback-highlights-irc-client-voice-and-choice, IRC, 2017.

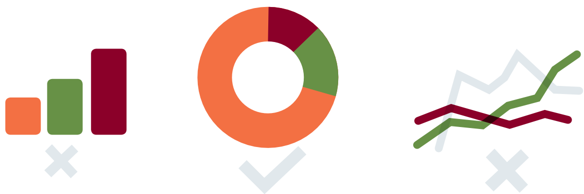
A DATA REVOLUTION, A DATA PROBLEM

1. Most learning is never formalized.



3. Listening must translate into action. Input from communities and insight from local staff must be fed into the decisionmaking process.

2. Self-serving narratives about crises insulate agencies and donors from reality.



4. Data protection.

2.4 A DATA REVOLUTION, A DATA PROBLEM

Traditionally, engagement with communities happens offline, through day-to-day interactions and dedicated activities. However, respondents acknowledge that technological advances and the exponential growth of ICTs, especially mobile devices, are catalysing and multiplying community engagement through "virtual proximity", the ability to leverage ICT to build and maintain relationships.[48]

One feature of digital proximity is that it generates massive amounts of data, including information about the nature and frequency of each digital interaction. This has resulted in an increased focus on "big data", the drive for better evidence and the need to leverage the rapid growth in the number and types of sensors generating data (e.g. social media, credit cards, etc.). However, digital proximity, overall connectivity and data traceability also create new risks, potentially putting already vulnerable people in even more danger.[49]

48 T. Coughlan, "Enhancing innovation through virtual proximity", Technology Innovation Management Review, February 2014: https://timreview.ca/article/765.

49 A. Rhoades, "Complex Emergencies 2.0: Dumb Phones, Smart People and the Art of Humanitarian Communications", Global Policy, 2016: www.globalpolicyjournal.com/articles/science-and-technology/complex-emergencies-20-dumb-phones-smart-people-and-art-humanitarian.

The rapid rise of feedback mechanisms,[50] perception surveys, citizen reporting, digital humanitarianism and crisis mapping are all possible because of new technologies. Here we review the current state of play with a focus on four issues, identified by the literature review and discussions with respondents:

1. **Most learning is never formalized:** Despite the increased focus on "measurable interactions" as a means and outcome of engagement, most feedback remains informal and unstructured, often as the result of field-based activities. Field knowledge accumulated by staff is rarely formalized and transformed into actionable information.[51] In part, this reflects a lack of focus on, or appreciation of, the importance of learning.

   Generally speaking, data acquisition is not the problem; the question is how to interpret and use the data gathered. Breaking down data silos and making sense of all the data are the main challenges.[52]

Breaking down data silos and making sense of all the data are the main challenges.

   Efforts to make the CHS verifiable through self-assessments or independent verification, as well as providing performance indicators based on the perception of people and communities affected by crisis, should help bridge these gaps. Yet, these standard indicators will, almost by definition, fail to capture the local nuances and realities. Rather, these are best measured through in-depth quantitative and qualitative interaction with affected people and humanitarian staff.

2. **Self-serving narratives about crises insulate agencies and donors from reality:** Making sense of rapidly growing amounts of data is not simple and data visualization may over-simplify reality. There is a sense, among respondents, that when faced with vast amounts of data, humanitarians tend to pick and choose the information that fits their views and decisions, rather than engage in an in-depth analysis that may challenge their assumptions. Part of the challenge is the low level of data literacy, both in the sector and in communities.[53]

   Another issue associated with interpreting data, and data literacy in general, is the relatively narrow understanding of the limitations of the various methods and data sources, and the inherent biases associated with specific approaches to engagement and data collection. There is a strong need to develop capacity with

50 A feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received, thus forming a closed feedback loop. Where the feedback loop is left open, the mechanism is not fully effective. F. Bonino, I. Jean and P. Knox Clarke, *op.cit.* note 4.

51 For an innovative project aimed at addressing this issue, see: C. Sheehan, "Humanitarian Informal Feedback Project: Za'atari Refugee Camp", *Evaluation report,* HIF, ELRHA, Oxfam, 2016: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/humanitarian-informal-feedback-project-zaatari-refugee-camp-jordan-evaluation-r-620164.

52 For a brief explanation of data silos, see: E. Wilder-James Breaking Down Data Silos, Harvard Business Review, December 2015: https://hbr.org/2016/12/breaking-down-data-silos.

53 Rahul Bhargava *et al.*, "Beyond Data Literacy: Reinventing Community Engagement and Empowerment in the Age of Data", 2015: http://datapopalliance.org/item/beyond-data-literacy-reinventing-community-engagement-and-empowerment-in-the-age-of-data/.

respect to checking, validating and verifying the credibility of data. At the same time, humanitarians in the field must be willing to investigate and sometimes act on anecdotal data, especially given the largely informal and unstructured mechanisms through which feedback is often gathered.

3. **Listening must translate into action:** Engagement is meaningful when it becomes the basis for action. It requires responsiveness, rather than listening for its own sake. One of the biggest problems, however, is the capacity, and occasionally the willingness, according to some respondents, to act on input received from communities.

   When humanitarian organizations design and implement activities aimed at listening to communities (including the deployment of dedicated staff), but then fail to return to communities with answers to their suggestions or complaints, trust and credibility are eroded.

   Respondents also observed that local staff tasked with accountability activities are often on more precarious or shorter-term contracts, with little or no say in how the overall operation is being directed or adapted. In the 2013 response to Typhoon Haiyan, it was the quick turnover of staff that disrupted and ended discussions about significant community problems, the main proponents of these initiatives having left for other posts. "Accountability and communications [with people affected by crises] are seen as peripheral, low-status work, an add-on to vital priorities such as food and shelter."[54]

> *Accountability and communications [with people affected by crises] are seen as peripheral, low-status work, an add-on to vital priorities such as food and shelter.*

   Furthermore, people show symptoms of "survey fatigue", and come to see consultations as token gestures, becoming sceptical of such initiatives.[55] This may discourage community members from participating in future consultations, further undermining engagement.

   Admittedly, humanitarians cannot be expected to systematically enact every single suggestion made during a community consultation, or to take action on each complaint received. However, more agile and hyper-targeted assistance is possible; where suggestions are not enacted, explanations should be provided, as failing to respond to feedback is damaging in that communities may become so frustrated with humanitarian organizations that they prevent them from working.

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54 For example, Jonathan Corpus Ong, "Digital Sweatshops in the Disaster Zone: Who Pays the Real Price for Innovation?", The Guardian, 11 October 2016: www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/oct/11/digital-sweatshops-in-disaster-zones-who-pays-the-real-price-for-innovation.

55 "People do not get survey fatigue or feedback fatigue as a result of being asked questions or providing feedback. They get survey fatigue as a result of their questions not being answered", J. Quintanilla, "Ten lessons on communicating with communities in complex emergencies", Overseas Development Institute Blog, Humanitarian Practice Network, 2015: https://odihpn.org/blog/ten-lessons-on-communicating-with-communities-in-complex-emergencies/.

This is especially relevant in conflicts, where the marginalization of groups from elites, the government and/or other groups is entrenched, and often a root cause of violence. The continued lack of consideration given to people's views may provoke anger and retaliation.

4. **Data Protection by design needs to be effectively adopted:** As humanitarian organizations increasingly become driven by information,[56] their roles and responsibilities with respect to the protection, sharing and usage of the data that they collect are evolving. The identification of ethical principles, dilemmas and the risks involved in collecting and sharing humanitarian data must draw on existing knowledge and research into data protection. While humanitarian organizations are not research institutions per se, lessons can be learned and modelled from existing ethical frameworks.

   More concretely, the ICRC has led efforts to rethink "data protection by design", and recently published a handbook on the vital issue of data protection in humanitarian action.[57] At the same time, humanitarian protection activities are beginning to recognize the potential value of humanitarian data, which can be leveraged through responsible and secure sharing within organizations and with trusted partners.[58] Finally, the Humanitarian Data Exchange is another positive step, and an illustrative example of progressive efforts to improve data sharing and transparency.[59]

56 A. Kaspersen and C. Lindsey-Curtet, "The digital transformation of the humanitarian sector", ICRC, December, 2016: http://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2016/12/05/digital-transformation-humanitarian-sector/.

57 C. Kuner and M. Marelli M. (eds), "Handbook on data protection in humanitarian action", ICRC, 2017, in particular, section 11.9 Data protection by design, pg. 146: www.icrc.org/en/publication/handbook-data-protection-humanitarian-action. For more information on the ICRC's Data Protection Office, see www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-data-protection-office. For privacy by design, see: https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/data-protection/privacy-by-design.

58 J. Chan, L. Bateman and G. Olafsson, "A People & Purpose Approach to Humanitarian Data Information Security and Privacy", Procedia Engineering (159) 3-5, 2016: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877705816321981.

59 The Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) is an open platform for sharing data, launched in July 2014. The goal of HDX is to make humanitarian data easy to find and use for analysis: https://data.humdata.org/.

An ICRC staff member with local women and children in a community in Norte de Santander, Colombia, in November 2016. While technology can complement physical proximity and help humanitarians better engage with affected people, it can also perpetuate or create new inequalities along age, gender and digital divides.

CHAPTER 3

GAPS IN CURRENT KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE

3.1 LEARNING, ADAPTING AND WINNING TRUST

In recent years, there has been more research into humanitarian engagement with communities affected by violence. However there are still gaps between research and practice, as findings do not always reach practitioners.

Implementation of new ideas is hindered by the lack of an evidence-based framework to guide decisions about how best to engage with communities. Furthermore, the drive to innovate has led to a focus on technology and the introduction of new tools instead of incremental improvements, which are based on humanitarians' actual experience.

In this regard, the consultation highlighted four key questions:

3.1.1 What do digitally connected communities look like, and what does it mean for humanitarian action?

> *In the humanitarian operation of the future, beneficiaries of emergency aid will use technology to tell us what they need — cash, food or education — find out from us what to expect, and track its arrival, just as we can track an order from Amazon.com now.*[60]

This description of digitally connected communities is a decade old, but has yet to be fully realized, and there is little discussion of what locally-led responses by affected people should look like in the future. Around the world, people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence have very differing access to connectivity, different levels of digital literacy and skills, and their own ideas about how they want to engage.

How, then, will humanitarians be able to engage with these different communities? Should the roles and responsibilities of the humanitarian community change in the future? Will new types of engagement alter fundamental humanitarian principles? Will humanitarian organizations develop the skills and preparedness needed to implement effective responses? Will communities continue to allow humanitarian organizations to operate largely unchecked? Will humanitarians be able to work with communities so that the most vulnerable – i.e. those least likely to be connected – can have a voice and be represented without imposing a vision of what "representation" is? There is a need to develop a clearer understanding of community representation and include it as a global objective alongside other commitments.

3.1.2 From access to accessibility: what does an "accessible", open and learning humanitarian organization look like?

There exists a broader issue of transforming humanitarian organizations mostly concerned with having physical access to people affected by crises, to bodies that are equally concerned with being "accessible" to people through the channels that are most locally relevant, safe and trusted by those people themselves.

60 "Flood, Famine and Mobile Phones", The Economist, 26 July 2007: www.economist.com/node/9546242.

Respondents also highlighted the lack of connection between engagement and decision-making, but had identified environments in which humanitarians can learn through ongoing adaptation to improve their responsiveness to communities affected by crises.

There are too few team learning exercises focused on adaptation, improvement and accountability. Similarly, there is too little sharing of knowledge and expertise, both within organizations and across the sector.

Respondents reported that local staff, who are the most attuned to community perceptions, are not sufficiently listened to, as their relatively precarious status undermines their ability to speak openly about negative outcomes and issues. These staff are the key intermediaries communicating about the work and ideally feeding information back to the community, but they are not properly briefed or trained in this role.

Indeed, all too often, no special investment is made in ensuring that local staff understand and communicate the humanitarian organization's values and what it is trying to achieve. In some cases, most notably conflicts and other situations of violence, national staff are products of a very closed or divided society. They may not share the organization's humanitarian values and their own habits and culture may hinder the free flow of information and criticism.

This also applies to international staff who may have their own biases, lack cultural sensitivity or represent the worst part of what has been described as the "white saviour" complex – a self-serving, sometimes naïve and arrogant attitude towards solving humanitarian crises. Overall, not enough effort is made in mentoring these key staff professionally, to ensure that they are fully on board with humanitarian ideals and values.

Individuals in transit to Europe queuing at the Austrian border, in November 2015. During the UNHCR's December 2015 consultation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, people on the move manifested their preference for face-to-face interaction with humanitarians, closely followed by the use of messaging apps.

International and local staff also face significant language and cultural barriers. Given high staff turnover and compensatory leave, especially in conflict operations, there are few international staffers who adequately understand the history, language and culture of their operational environment. Translation is often poor, which is an especially acute problem for local languages.

BOX 5. FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA: AT THE BORDER, TRANSLATION CARDS TRUMP LANGUAGE BARRIERS

To overcome language barriers among refugees, the UNHCR teamed up with the private sector to design customizable decks of "Translation Cards".

In November 2015, at the media peak of the European refugee crisis, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia saw over 10,000 refugees cross its borders as they fled war and poverty in the Middle East.[1] The wide range of languages spoken by these people from different countries prompted Mercy Corps, UNHCR, Google.org and Thoughtworks to seek practical solutions for communication.

Given the lack of internet access and poor mobile connectivity, the first low-tech solution was a loudspeaker, used to broadcast key messages in several languages. However, the changing political situation and large number of daily arrivals meant that messages had to be updated constantly. In addition, this mono-directional solution did not enable the UNHCR and its partners to listen to the refugees.

During a second brainstorming session, the UNHCR reached out to designers and engineers outside of the humanitarian sector. Their solution was simple and flexible: Translation Cards. Enabling real-time communication between refugees and staff, the cards came in different decks, specific to different kinds of conversations (e.g. a "health" deck, to be used with medical staff). The cards were also made accessible on phones or tablets, where they offered pre-translated answers to common questions.

The political situation eventually led to the borders being closed. Now that the area faces fewer new arrivals, but longer stays, the Translation Cards team has started to collect feedback from end users, asking both refugees and staff how their information and communication needs have changed since the first project design. So far, findings have included people's manifested preference for face-to-face interaction, closely followed by the use of messaging apps like Viber and WhatsApp.

To find out more about this initiative, read the full story on the UNHCR's website.[2]

Box content author: Anne Bennett.

1 Patrick Kingsley and Helena Smith, "Hundreds of refugees make defiant journey on foot into Macedonia", The Guardian, 2016: www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/one-thousand-people-camp-macedonia.

2 "Increasing two-way communication with refugees on the move in Europe", UNHCR, 2016: www.unhcr.org/innovation/increasing-two-way-communication-with-refugees-on-the-move-in-europe/.

In the meantime, local staff are widely assumed to have other knowledge to compensate for what they do not know about a specific situation, even though they may be working in regions and/or with communities previously unknown to them.

More investment is needed in training all staff and ensuring that they understand fundamental humanitarian concepts and values. It is important to note that sensitive issues relating to sexual and gender-based violence are largely "lost in translation". At the same time, key documents on this topic are rarely translated and usually exclusively available in English.

Some technological solutions have been attempted, for instance, to provide multilingual information support to migrants (see Box 5).[61] However, in situations of conflict where protracted humanitarian intervention is required, there is still a striking inability to communicate directly with the people affected.

3.1.3 What does an "adaptive" humanitarian organization look like?

One of the main reasons for discussing community engagement is to ensure that humanitarian aid is aligned with the needs, expectations and views of people affected by crises. An adaptive structure is one in which demand and supply are matched and, in situations of conflict or violence, affected people's needs are met by humanitarian action.

Although this may not be how humanitarian organizations always operate, respondents agree that in many instances, organizations are not flexible enough to adapt their programmes following input from the communities they are seeking to help. This is especially acute in conflicts and other situations of violence, where the parameters of assistance and needs can change rapidly.

Part of the challenge relates to the nature of programme design and decision-making. Although many organizations regularly carry out context analysis, the results are not always fed back into the design of the response. Indeed, interventions often come pre-formulated, meaning that the context analysis is used to understand how to apply a pre-formulated intervention in a particular setting, rather than listening to the people affected by the crisis and designing the intervention accordingly. Moreover, feedback from the community is often disconnected, or significantly different from, the context analysis that organizations carry out. In part this is due to humanitarians' strong reliance on knowledge or conviction gained by intuition and previous experience.

However, structural challenges also hinder adaptability. For instance, supply chain processes may not be flexible enough to adapt programmes in rapidly-evolving crisis situations where it might be necessary to swap back and forth between cash-based and other types of assistance. Other structural challenges include the current funding architecture, which is also part of the Grand Bargain discussions. Funding mechanisms often mean that agencies must submit a fully designed intervention before they can even access the resources required to engage with communities in the first place. By the time funding is secured, there is very little margin to redesign programmes, in order to better align them with the expectations and needs of local people. Consultations therefore serve to endorse an existing mandate, rather than truly informing it.

In this respect, donors, who are arguably the predominant stakeholder group, must accept some of the responsibility by becoming more flexible in how and when they

61 "Increasing two-way communication with refugees on the move in Europe", UNHCR, 2016: www.unhcr.org/innovation/increasing-two-way-communication-with-refugees-on-the-move-in-europe/.

allocate resources.[62] This could include a greater allocation of non-earmarked funding, which is crucial for organizations aiming to operate rapidly, flexibly and independently, according to the most urgent needs and vulnerabilities of people affected by conflict.

It is also incumbent upon humanitarian agencies to foster open and transparent relationships with their donors. This entails open discussion about revisiting programme objectives and deliverables following input from the communities concerned.

Community engagement and accountability to people affected by crises is often added on to a programme as an afterthought or to satisfy donor requirements: it is rarely conceived as a goal integral to the overall operation. Yet meaningful engagement with and accountability to people affected by crises may be the cornerstone of sustainable solutions, well-executed exit strategies and may perhaps even help avoid future conflict.

3.1.4 What does a "trusted" humanitarian organization look like?

Engagement must be designed to be responsive to the needs of communities. At the same time, it must also seek to contribute to fostering trust and building relationships between communities and humanitarian organizations.

Trust is critical for humanitarians seeking to become better accepted by the communities they wish to help and other stakeholders. A trusting environment improves safety and security and broadens access to help those in need. However, what trust really means in the context of the relationships between communities and humanitarians, and how to gain trust, are not so well understood.

According to research into donor-agency relations,[63] trust is seen primarily through a transactional lens, where it relates to how communities expect humanitarians to behave. The behaviour of humanitarian organizations and how this matches community expectations is a key factor that determines trust, which has two main aspects with respect to community engagement.

- **Meeting expectations about engagement:** People affected by crises not only expect, but increasingly demand to be involved and seen as active partners, rather than passive "beneficiaries" of humanitarian assistance. While this is not a new phenomenon, access to technology has increased people's ability to voice their feedback and complaints, gaining not just the attention of humanitarian organizations, but also that of governments, media and the general public.

- **Managing expectations about what humanitarians can and cannot do:** this is the need to educate people about humanitarian organizations' decisions and behaviours. In other words, trust is informed by how well communities understand the efforts and limitations of what humanitarians can realistically achieve.

However, trust is not purely transactional. It is also influenced by individual outlooks and circumstances. In conflicts and other situations of violence, this is critical, as societal breakdown may undermine individuals and communities' ability to trust in general.

Respondents argue that humanitarians assume that they have the communities' trust, because their objective is to help them and because they pledge to follow well-established humanitarian principles, i.e. humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. This has to be challenged from within the humanitarian system.

62 See section 2.4, Who is accountable for being accountable: the role of donors.
63 C.D Burt, "The importance of trust to the funding of humanitarian work", in S.C. Carr, M. MacLachlan and A. Furnham (eds), *Humanitarian Work Psychology*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012, pp. 317-33: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137015228_14.

Yet, trust is often undermined by the behaviour of humanitarians themselves and the actions of non-traditional providers of aid, who may not necessarily know about, let alone abide by, humanitarian principles. In addition, there is the inability of the more traditional humanitarian organizations to establish relationships through engagement. While strict adherence to humanitarian principles can be impractical, the gap between words and actions nevertheless leaves humanitarian organizations open to accusations of double standards.[64]

What seems clear from experiences on the ground is that trust is built locally, through daily interactions, accessibility to organizations and their staff, the responsiveness shaped by community engagement and careful brand management, underpinned by good delivery. However, as explained previously, this is not always possible.

Staff values, professional conduct and commitment are therefore critical for building trust. Broader efforts to gain trust can be undermined by poor behaviour, as well as real or perceived failure to deliver assistance effectively. In this context, communication is essential in order to pre-empt rumours and participate in local narratives.

Important consideration should be given to the question of building "virtual proximity" and "digital trust", particularly with regard to people affected by crises who find themselves out of humanitarian organizations' physical reach, but still available online.

"Many experts say lack of trust will not be a barrier to increased public reliance on the internet. Those who are hopeful that trust will grow expect that technical and regulatory change will combat users' concerns about security and privacy. Those who have doubts about progress say people are inured to risk, addicted to convenience and will not be offered alternatives to online interaction. Some expect the very nature of trust will change".[65]

In short, the jury is out. Trust, and particularly digital trust, is something that humanitarian organizations will need to understand better as people around the world become increasingly dependent on mobile devices and online platforms and increasingly choose online interaction.

3.2 THE SPACE FOR INNOVATION

Efforts geared towards engaging communities offer new opportunities and challenges, although novel ideas and approaches applying the "Do No Harm" principle need to be tested. There are, however, some well-established, tried and tested engagement practices, ranging from participatory assessments and radio shows, to regular face-to-face interactions and meetings with groups of people affected by crises, to newer approaches such as interactive voice phone surveys or the use of messaging apps.[66]

Here, technology can play an important role in improving engagement strategies. However, it is clearly a means to an end. In practice, the drive and incentives to innovate have led humanitarian organizations to embrace various technological solutions and these alone, without clearly thinking through the overall community engagement strategy. However, ill-conceived engagement efforts may actually create or reinforce

64 J. Labbé, "How do humanitarian principles support humanitarian effectiveness?" Chapter 2, *CHS Alliance 2015 Humanitarian Accountability Report,* CHS, 2015: www.chsalliance.org/files/files/CHSAlliance-Humanitarian-Accountability-Report-2015-Chapter-2.pdf.

65 "The Fate of Online Trust in the Next Decade", Pew Research Centre, August 2017: www.pewinternet.org/2017/08/10/the-fate-of-online-trust-in-the-next-decade/.

66 T. Bouffet, "How messaging apps are changing the way people respond to humanitarian crises", ITU News, 2017: http://news.itu.int/how-messaging-apps-change-humanitarian-responses/.

divisions between or within communities. The lesson here is that technology-driven engagement should not be implemented in isolation, i.e. without broader thinking about the goals and anticipated outcomes of engagement.

Whether innovating and testing, or using established practices, humanitarian organizations should adhere to key conditions for meaningful engagement:

1. **Engagement is underpinned by a good understanding of the local situation and information ecosystem.** This includes an understanding of what people want to know about; what communication channels they use and trust; and how they use them. Understanding how information flows within affected areas, how the local media and telecommunications infrastructure have withstood events, how media ownership is changing or comprised, or how mainstream and social media are contributing to misinformation and propaganda, are key aspects of the context analysis and building blocks for any operational strategy. The trend has been to undertake a stakeholder analysis and understand the social dynamics in order to identify appropriate forums for engagement with specific groups. This, however, neglects a more thorough analysis of the local information ecosystem.

   There are specific limitations and challenges during conflicts. Monopolies, restrictive legislation or infrastructure may hinder the flexibility and availability of many communication channels. In short, what information providers (including mobile network operators) are willing or able to do is limited.

2. **Engagement and participation must be systematic and broadly inclusive.** Many commonly-used information practices, however, are largely exclusionary. For instance, in the case of information strategies, radio broadcasts are relied on to channel messages and it is widely assumed that they reach everyone in the target communities. Yet, repeated analyses have demonstrated that many, especially rural women, have limited access to radio and other media.[67] At the same time, other sectors of a target audience – urban youth, some refugee groups, etc. – rely on new media to obtain information or communicate among themselves. These include social platforms and messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Line or Telegram.[68] How people access and use information must be properly understood to develop effective, multi-platform information strategies as a pre-condition for meaningful engagement. Moreover, it is imperative that this information be disaggregated into distinct data sets for key socio-cultural groups.

   Common consultation strategies can also be designed to ensure that all groups are represented and to avoid, for example, over-sampling minorities during surveys and other field research. However, this also means that some technologies should be used with caution, especially where a digital divide (i.e. those who have access vs those who do not) exists along socioeconomic or cultural lines.

67 See, for example, J. Quintanilla, A. Sicotte-Levesque and M. Hettiarachchi. "Understanding the Information and Communication Needs Among IDPs in Northern Iraq", *Interagency Rapid Assessment Report* 2014: http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/understanding-information-and-communication-needs-among-idps-northern-iraq; P. Vinck, and P.N. Pham, "Outreach evaluation: The international criminal court in the Central African Republic", *International Journal of Transitional Justice,* Volume 4, Issue 3, 1 November 2010, pp. 421–442: https://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/outreach-evaluation-international-criminal-court-central-african-republic.

68 T. Walker et al. "Humanitarian Futures for Messaging Apps", ICRC, The Engine Room and Block Party, 2017: www.icrc.org/en/publication/humanitarian-futures-messaging-apps.

Indeed, in conflicts and other situations of violence, recognizing and adapting to the needs of particular groups, in order to ensure inclusive engagement, can be perceived as a political statement.

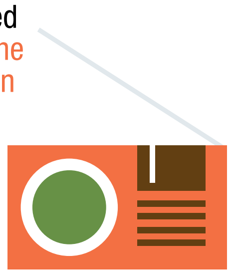
3. **Engagement must be transparent, sensitive and capable of allowing community members to speak freely and comfortably about their views.** When communities can speak freely, this shows respect and helps build trust with humanitarians. Yet, common community-based meetings, organized within the existing structures and norms that govern social structures, may not provide equal opportunities for all groups to speak freely.

   Furthermore, communities are rarely offered a neutral space for feedback. Rather, the agencies providing the services are those also collecting the feedback and informing communities of ensuing programme adjustments (if any are actually made). In other words, communities are asked to provide feedback to those very agencies that they might be unhappy with or that might have failed to give them the right information and decision-making power in the first place. The asymmetrical and transactional nature of this humanitarian action only further complicates the process of open and transparent dialogue.

4. **Engagement must lead to action:** Collecting feedback from people affected by crises can sometimes become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Respondents reported that the most difficult process to implement and standardize was the effective transition from listening to action, i.e. ensuring follow-up on what the people said and, ideally, in a timely and relevant fashion. This would also include explaining to those same people if and why appropriate follow-up is not possible.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT:

1. Engagement is underpinned by a good understanding of the local situation and information ecosystem.



2. Engagement and participation must be systematic and broadly inclusive.

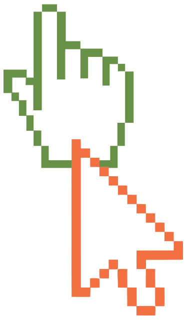
3. Engagement must be transparent, sensitive and capable of allowing community members to speak freely and comfortably about their views.

4. Engagement must lead to action.

The future ecosystem needs to be driven forward in a sustainable manner, not only by international organizations, but also by national governments and the private sector as key actors in service delivery.

This ecosystem must also be rooted in increasing abilities to customize and deliver services to communities.

Communities that increasingly use technologies and understand the power and potential impact of their online presence are most likely to hold humanitarians accountable for their actions.



Humanitarian organizations will increasingly become "data" companies, gathering and generating vast amounts of data. This increased responsibility to protect data will be especially challenging.

CHAPTER 4

ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES: *FUTURES*

Predicting what humanitarian action will look like in the next decade is a challenging proposition. However, the emerging trends identified by respondents and the existing literature provide some insights as to which areas and patterns merit further research and investment. This discussion paper identifies some of them.

4.1 HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Technological developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century have ushered in a new world in which the physical, digital and biological are merging.[69] In this new world, humanitarian action must be rethought in order to make room for new protagonists, including, first and foremost, the people at risk of and affected by conflicts and other situations of violence.

The private sector also needs to be engaged to take advantage of new opportunities, existing and new technologies and financial products in order to help put people affected by crises at the centre of humanitarian action.

4.2 DIGITAL IDENTITIES

Proof of identity has become a prerequisite to socio-economic development and is now essential to accessing basic services.[70] Similarly humanitarian organizations must be able to recognize and identify individuals in order to engage with them.

In the near future, the digital identity of people affected by crises will enable them to effectively and safely access a range of services, assistance and information,[71] something which cannot now be done if an individual lacks the basic paperwork needed to open a bank account, cash a cheque, rent an apartment or sign a mobile phone contract.[72]

The refugee crisis in Europe has demonstrated the extent to which the lack of basic paperwork, for example, prevented many refugees and migrants from opening a bank account. This effectively barred them from basic services and left them with little option but to turn to the black market.

However, digital identities can coalesce along ethnic, social or religious lines and could therefore contribute to divisions. Furthermore, digital identities can create new risks when digital patterns are used to profile and target individuals. It is also worth noting that recent efforts involving digital social credit, which rely on digital identity, have been equated to digital authoritarianism, due to the ubiquitous monitoring and tracking of individuals' behaviour.[73]

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69 K. Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond", World Economic Forum, 2016: www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/; J. Warnes and J. Wishnie, "10 defining principles of radically open partnerships", UNHCR, 2016: www.unhcr.org/innovation/radical-openness/.

70 See for example, GSMA Digital Identity Programme - Enabling digital identity through the power of mobile: www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/programmes/digital-identity.

71 A. Kaspersen and C. Lindsey "The digital transformation of the humanitarian sector", *Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog,* ICRC. 2016. See also the "2020 digital identity initiative": http://id2020.org/.

72 For example, at the time of writing, a start-up called Taqanu (www.taqanu.com) was designing an "ID card" alternative to help refugees in Germany open a bank account. Instead of asking for standard identification, Taqanu uses smartphones, something that almost all refugees have. A smartphone app can track an individual's digital data, including social networking, to prove their identity. Users can also create a "reputation network", asking friends and family to vouch for them being who they say they are. The app asks refugees to upload photos of any documents they have, such as papers from a refugee camp in Greece. Over time, the app continues to collect more evidence of someone's identity.

73 "China invents the digital totalitarian state", The Economist, 2016: www.economist.com/news/briefing/21711902-worrying-implications-its-social-credit-project-china-invents-digital-totalitarian.

4.3 RELATIONS AND TRUST WITH REDUCED PHYSICAL INTERACTION

Technology-driven humanitarian assistance is poised to spread rapidly. For the delivery of humanitarian aid and other related activities, this means the increasing use of artificial intelligence, chat bots, drones and other types of robot.

In many situations, insecurity, scarce resources or access constraints already make face-to-face interaction impossible. The current model of humanitarian action, largely dominated by western NGOs, risks becoming increasingly remote and impersonal. The challenge for international humanitarian organizations will be to establish and maintain relations with communities in conflicts and other situations of violence, by building trust remotely and virtually, despite affected people's requests – and sometimes, need – for face-to-face engagement.[74]

Here, the private sector can offer some insights. Without suggesting that humanitarians should transform into corporations, much can be learned from examining how the private sector earns trust from its customers. Alibaba, Apple, Amazon and other large online retailers with little or no physical interaction with customers nevertheless enjoy high levels of trust. Of course, these corporations operate in a very different environment, where customers can choose between different service providers – an option that people affected by conflict or other situations of violence rarely have.

The competitive, market-driven arena of online retailers offers strong incentive for companies to seek trust and satisfaction. They achieve this by building a strong brand, offering reliable and effective quality services, being transparent, and offering excellent customer support (see Box 6), much of it built on cutting-edge data analysis gleaned from user behaviour, relationships and preferences.

Humanitarians may not have the same means or incentives. Yet, their long-term reputation and effectiveness are at stake if they fail to be recognized and trusted by those they seek to serve. While a move towards business models and brand-building can have its detractors, there are certainly lessons worth learning from a trust-building perspective. These include, for instance, how customer relationship management systems, driven by data mining, can be adapted and used by humanitarian organizations.

74 A. Rhoades, *op. cit.* note 49.

A staff member speaks to one of the thousands of individuals who have called the inter-agency call centre in Iraq. The centre's provision of a single point of contact was key in clarifying which humanitarian organization did what and where. As of October 2017, the call centre had handled over 100,000 calls from displaced individuals.

BOX 6. MIDDLE EAST: INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK NOW AVAILABLE BY TELEPHONE

In the Middle East, call centres bring together the best of mobile operators and aid agencies' respective expertise in order to provide information and channel criticism.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of humanitarian hotlines and call centres around the world. These aim to improve the effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian work. Yet, the operational realities of doing so effectively are numerous and complex – and technology is not always the hardest part.

In Iraq, a 2014 inter-agency assessment on information needs among displaced communities[1] found that access to information on aid provision was a key priority in times of crisis. In response, a group of UN agencies and NGOs, including UNOPS, UNHCR, WFP, OCHA, IOM, the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision and Save the Children decided to establish a nationwide hotline for displaced people,[2] building on a similar UNHCR initiative for refugees in Jordan.

In late 2015, the UNHCR replicated this initiative in Yemen, partnering with AMIDEAST to set up a humanitarian call centre dubbed "Tawasul" ('dialogue' in Arabic).[3] The aim of these hotlines was twofold: to provide timely access to up-to-date information on humanitarian assistance and to function as a channel for complaints, criticism and feedback. Communities' past experiences with private sector customer service call centres meant that they were familiar with the hotline concept and viewed phones as a common and generally trusted channel.

In Yemen, toll-free numbers for women and men were shared on printed cards and social media. In Iraq, leaflets and posters advertised a single number, linked to software that identified callers through a ticketing system and gave them the choice of a male or female call handler and preferred dialect. These measures helped create an environment conducive to sharing sensitive information. Before its forced closure in June 2016, the call centre in Yemen was receiving 1,091 calls per month, with questions covering medical issues, food distribution and requests for individual protection.

In Iraq, the path to opening the centre was less smooth, as international sanctions translated into import delays on equipment that was unavailable in the country. However, once the hotline was operational, its provision of a single point of contact helped to reduce confusion about which humanitarian organization provided what and where. Efforts to increase the number of female callers in Iraq, a country where men are typically the users of mobile phones, resulted in a 5% increase in female callers in the first half of 2017, compared with the same period in 2016. In October 2017, the call centre handled more than 10,000 calls.

Through the cluster system and bilaterally with partners, the humanitarian country team provides the call centre with accurate and updated information for callers, as well as specific briefing on certain issues. In return, the centre provides regular reports on any trends in feedback raised by callers, helping to map data and analyse information needs, even in the most remote areas. The centre's interactive data sets, including details about the number of referrals and feedback loops closed per reporting period, are recorded on a dashboard and provide information for fortnightly reports.

Although these two-way information flows use considerable resources, they are key in countries where humanitarian agencies regularly set up, alter or shut down assistance programmes due to changes in funding or operational needs. Acting on feedback also boosts the level of trust callers place in the system. In Yemen, the information shared by callers became increasingly sensitive with each passing month. Unfortunately, different levels of partner engagement occasionally led to some feedback being lost and responses delayed: this underlines the importance of each stakeholder, including the authorities, having a clear understanding of their expected role.

Finally, following the closure of the call centre in Yemen, the rapid decrease in callers showed how quickly communities disengage from a given channel and lose trust in it. This may be detrimental to any similar, future initiatives; it is therefore crucial that other established communication channels remain open and contingency plans prepared if they have to be shut down.

Box content author: Tina Bouffet.

1 J. Quintanilla, A. Sicotte-Levesque and M. Hettiarachchi, "Understanding the Information and Communication Needs among IDPs in northern Iraq", 2014: http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/understanding-information-and-communication-needs-among-idps-northern-iraq.

2 Sarah Mace and Gemma Woods, "Connecting humanitarian actors and displaced communities: the IDP call centre in Iraq", Humanitarian Practice Network, 2015: http://odihpn.org/magazine/connecting-humanitarian-actors-and-displaced-communities-the-idp-call-centre-in-iraq/.

3 Katie Drew, "Tawasul: 5 lessons from the UNHCR humanitarian call centre in Yemen", UNHCR Innovation, 2016: www.unhcr.org/innovation/tawasul-5-lessons-unhcr-humanitarian-call-centre-yemen/.

4.4 NEW FORMS OF COOPERATION

New forms of cooperation must be initiated by rethinking the partnerships between international and local organizations, the people affected by conflict, at-risk communities and the private sector. Here, the increasing importance of local entrepreneurs should not be overlooked. Local entrepreneurs are often the best placed to partner with humanitarians and co-design or develop fit-for-purpose, affordable solutions, which can be tailored to local conditions.

In general, humanitarian partnerships remain largely transactional. A new understanding is needed as to how such partnerships might evolve. There is a need for open, inclusive discussions about expertise, funding and access in order to develop innovative ideas.[75]

Meanwhile, more systematic implementation is needed, through humanitarian coordination structures, of existing collaborative approaches for community engagement in armed conflict (e.g. Yemen, Iraq and South Sudan, see Box 7).[76]

> *More systematic implementation is needed of collaborative approaches for community engagement in armed conflict (e.g. Yemen, Iraq and South Sudan).*

Overall, the humanitarian sector, on a case by case basis, should consider working more closely with the private sector, as businesses may have untapped expertise, knowledge and know-how that could significantly help meet some of the needs of communities affected by conflict.[77]

Relationships need to be local, have in-built accountability mechanisms and should be capable of developing the capacity of the people involved, including those who receive aid. This will require long-term investment, forward thinking and action. Yet, the building of long-term relationships with the communities and people affected by crises is rarely a priority and is sometimes not even considered. Conflicts, however, may offer opportunities for long-term engagement if a crisis is protracted and an ongoing humanitarian presence is necessary.

The future architecture of humanitarian action might mean that affected people will not be supported by only one provider or humanitarian agency. Rather, they will be able to access information about available services, their rights (and obligations), and the various organizations best able to assist them according to their needs, preferences, choices and location. Service providers will be rated by service users on their performance, as is the case today with restaurants, hotels or other services, rated by their customers.

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75 J. Warnes and J. Wishnie *op. cit.*, note 68.

76 "The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action", *Policy Brief,* CDAC Network, 2017: www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20170531072915-3fs0r.

77 "Stepping up to the challenge of community engagement in a digital age: Creating dialogue and 'virtual safety nets'", CDAC Network, ICRC, DFID, September, 2016: http://dlefgphd12c51.cloudfront.net/tools-and-resources/i/20161109150009-pxqj4.

This future is not without its controversies and challenges.[78] The future ecosystem needs to be driven forward in a sustainable manner: not only by international organizations, but also by national governments, supported by the private sector, where needed, as key actors in preparedness, relief and recovery.

This ecosystem must increasingly develop the ability to customize and deliver services to communities. This can be achieved through mass customization[79] approaches, which require that humanitarians establish a dialogue with people in need and offer customizable products that can be locally adapted, ideally by the people themselves.[80]

78 P.G. Baiza, "Platforming – what can NGOs learn from AirBnB and Amazon?" WorldVision International Blog, 2017; and a response from T. Denskus, "Is platform capitalism really the future of the humanitarian sector?" Aidnography blog, 2017: http://aidnography.blogspot.co.uk/2017/06/is-platform-capitalism-really-future-of-humanitarian-sector.html.

79 For example, using the ideas of Joseph Pine, author of the pioneering book "Mass Customization: The New Frontier in Business Competition", Harvard, 1993.

80 See for example J. H., Gilmore and B. J. Pine, "The four faces of mass customization", Harvard Business Review 1997, Vol 75, pp. 91–101, https://hbr.org/1997/01/the-four-faces-of-mass-customization; K. Drew, "Communicating with Communities or Individuals?", UNHCR Innovation Service, 2017, www.unhcr.org/innovation/communicating-communities-individuals/.


K. al-Saeed/ICRC

A young girl carries empty water containers to an ICRC truck during a distribution in Taiz, Yemen, in December 2016. As the country's mobile, radio and internet services continue operate at a reduced capacity, the creation of a common feedback mechanism (see Box) helps agencies gather information about their response to the catastrophic situation in Yemen.

BOX 7. YEMEN: POOLING RESOURCES TO GET THE BEST FEEDBACK

Pressed for time and resources, humanitarian organizations band together and set up a "common service feedback mechanism" in Yemen.

Throughout 2017, conflict-induced famine and the resurgent spread of cholera continued to threaten large portions of the population in Yemen. Moreover, since the start of the conflict in 2015, Yemenis have seen their social networks and critical communication services – including mobile and radio networks and internet services – break down or operate at a reduced capacity.

In other words, at a time when people's need for information on how to access available services or seek protection had soared, it became increasingly difficulty to communicate directly with humanitarian organizations.

To resolve this problem, a coordinated "common service" approach was adopted.[1] With support from UNOCHA, UNICEF and Search for Common Ground jointly led a Community Engagement Working Group (CEWG) as part

of the 2017 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan[2]. In line with the Yemen 2017 YHRP Accountability Framework[3], the CEWG provided a one-stop shop for community feedback collection and analysis, helping clusters and their partners systematically integrate accountability as they provided communities with information, monitored and acted on feedback and complaints, and so increased community participation throughout the programme cycle.

Community engagement and accountability trainings in Aden and Sana'a were planned in July 2017, helping a core group of cluster partners become better AAP facilitators and advocates within each cluster. Designed as a cascade training, some participants were pre-selected to lead and replicate the training in all humanitarian coordination hubs across Yemen.

In addition, common cluster messages were developed and disseminated, including through WhatsApp, targeting people across the country. Messages were crafted and prioritized through community feedback, gathered from a common perception survey sent to over 1,150 key respondents across 18 of the 21 governorates and one municipality.

However, although cluster commitments exist, there are limited resources to ensure that actions are effectively undertaken. AAP has yet to be fully incorporated throughout the Humanitarian Response Plan, competing for resources and time with other priorities in major emergencies. Here, a cross-cutting response and quality framework should be adopted, including gender issues, protection and AAP commitments for clusters and partners. Organizations' partnership agreements should also ensure that implementing partners have robust AAP mechanisms in place, or use existing ones.

Box content author: Steward Davies.

1 "Common Service Feedback Mechanism: Improving system-wide accountability", UNOCHA, 2015: http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/common-service-feedback-mechanism-improving-system-wide-accountability.

2 "Yemen: Humanitarian Response Plan January – December 2017", UN Country Team in Yemen & UNOCHA, 2017: http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-january-december-2017-enar.

3 "Yemen 2017 YHRP Accountability Framework", UNOCHA, 2017: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%202017%20YHRP%20Accountability%20Commitments.pdf.

4.5 RESPONSIBLE DATA MANAGEMENT

People affected by conflict and other situations of violence are increasingly tech-savvy and live in both the physical and digital worlds. Although it is important to bear in mind that some people affected by crises may be invisible in the digital world and that digital inclusion is not yet a reality across the board, mobile phones and internet usage are on the rise everywhere and will ultimately become ubiquitous. A serious cause for concern is the way in which connectivity and mobile technology are revolutionizing the trafficking and smuggling industries, especially in conflict situations.

Nevertheless, the digital future holds much promise. For example, electronic cash transfers are no longer a faraway projection, but an increasingly common form of assistance. From these promises new challenges also emerge. For instance, "horizontal" communication, such as exchanges enabled by social media, appear to be more likely to foster violence, and form along segregated/divisional lines, than vertical communication (media, radio), despite the risk of mass media and radio being co-opted by the State.[81]

81 T. C. Warren, "Explosive connections? Mass media, social media, and the geography of collective violence in African states", *Journal of Peace Research*, 2015, Vol. 52(3), pp. 297-311: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343314558102.

Humanitarians need to acknowledge that the people and communities they serve increasingly use digital technologies and understand the power and potential impact of their online presence. They are therefore more likely to hold humanitarian organizations to account for their actions. At the same time, new digital platforms offer humanitarians a renewed opportunity to engage, modernize and transform the humanitarian system.

The implication is that humanitarian organizations will increasingly become data-driven enterprises, gathering and generating vast amounts of data. This level of data management comes with enormous legal and ethical responsibilities that most organizations are ill-equipped to handle, both in terms of systems and protocols, but also in terms of institutional culture and attitudes towards privacy.

At present, humanitarian organizations mainly hold data in private and locked modes, fearing the potential misuse of sensitive content. However, efforts aimed at making data and information management more transparent are successfully showing the benefits of data sharing and open data. Humanitarian organizations therefore need to learn how to handle and leverage data as an asset to unlock value for communities, while also respecting individuals' rights and ethical considerations, and ensuring the digital protection of already vulnerable people.

The increased responsibility to protect data will be especially challenging. Data held by humanitarians can be subsequently used to identify individuals, or make inferences about groups and communities. In conflicts or other situations of violence, this can be especially sensitive and result in adverse consequences for those whose data have been exposed.[82]

At the same time, rules governing data protection and data sharing are evolving rapidly. For instance, several countries now limit the ability of organizations to export data, requiring instead that they store data on local systems, especially where identifiable and sensitive data are involved.[83] However, this can increase risks, as data could be subpoenaed with little or no recourse for humanitarians. The challenges arising from data protection and principles are already receiving significant attention, not only in the humanitarian sector. However, due to the particularly high risks and stakes associated with data protection in conflicts and other situations of violence, humanitarians are acutely aware of the need to promote responsible data collection, storage and usage.

Less focus exists on other data and information challenges. These include the question of data ownership and informed consent, i.e. the limits of what can be done with information collected from affected people who have a limited ability to exercise their data protection rights. There is a need to devise and adopt protection and privacy standards. Furthermore, initiatives to establish a Digital Do No Harm or a Digital Geneva Convention need to be carefully considered.[84]

82 K.L. Jacobsen, "Humanitarian technology: revisiting the Do No Harm debate", ODI Humanitarian Practice Network, 2015: https://odihpn.org/blog/humanitarian-technology-revisiting-the-%C2%91do-no-harm%C2%92-debate/.

83 The EU Data Protection Directive, for example, prohibits personal data from being exported outside the EU or EEA unless appropriate protection is guaranteed: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/data-collection/data-transfer/index_en.htm.

84 B. Parker, "Bots and bombs: Does cyberspace need a "Digital Geneva Convention"? IRIN, 17 November 2017: www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/11/15/bots-and-bombs-does-cyberspace-need-digital-geneva-convention.

The idea of a Digital Geneva Convention was proposed by Microsoft,[85] among others. The firm's products have been the target of numerous nation-state attacks, prompting calls to ensure, in times of war and other violent situations, the protection of corporate assets and civilian data, all of which should be undertaken with the active involvement of technology companies.

The proposal recognizes the need to expand the Do No Harm framework to "critically assess how using new technologies can potentially expose already vulnerable populations to further risks and insecurities, even where intentions are at their best and conditions at their most challenging".[86]

Beyond protection, new approaches are needed to ensure data agency and ownership at the individual and community level, and individual and collective mechanisms for redress and restitution in cases of digital harm.

85 B. Smith, "The need for a Digital Geneva Convention", Microsoft Blog, 14 February 2017: https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2017/02/14/need-digital-geneva-convention/.
86 K.L. Jacobsen, *op.cit.* note 81.

J. Schneider/ICRC

Some stand, some queue and some sit on the grass, Walungu territory, DRC, during an ICRC food distribution in December 2016. Although technology can provide new platforms to engage with affected people, it is important to remember that the most vulnerable may remain, or abruptly find themselves, offline.

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The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their dignity and relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles. As the authority on international humanitarian law, it helps develop this body of law and works for its implementation.

People know they can rely on the ICRC to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones, including: supplying food, safe drinking water, sanitation and shelter; providing health care; and helping to reduce the danger of landmines and unexploded ordnance. It also reunites family members separated by conflict, and visits people who are detained to ensure they are treated properly. The organization works closely with communities to understand and meet their needs, using its experience and expertise to respond quickly, effectively and without taking sides.

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