**An overview of main findings of the SCHR Participation review**

Kate Halff, Oct 2017

This document proposes an overview of the main enablers and disenablers of effective participation identified by the SCHR desk review published in July 2017 and peer review in northern Uganda and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in October 2017.

**Main enablers of effective participation:**

***Commitment and capacities***

The organisations reviewed demonstrated significant commitment at the programme level and investments in participation. For programmes which have seen the roll out of the Core Humanitarian Standard, training and support from headquarters have been consistent and significant, resulting in a programme-wide common understanding of quality and accountability priorities and objectives.

***Participation in the context of localisation***

All interviewees concurred on the importance for effective participation of national staff and partners who have knowledge and access to affected people, including to different groups within the affected community. The ability to have direct communication with affected people in their local language and based on in-depth understanding of their cultural and social norms is essential.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq review indicated that national / local organisations do not necessarily value and invest in participation as a matter of course. It appears that grassroots organisation may not all value participation as such, believing that they already know what affected people need and want, as they come from the community that they serve. National organisations which have more experience of working with international partners, appear to be more geared to participation, but may see it as a requirement imposed by their international partners and their donors. They often also struggle with the multiple overlapping participation related requirements passed on to them by their different INGO partners.

In situations of partnership between international, national and local organisations, a strategic partnership is central to effective participation, as all parties negotiate and agree together on participation outcomes, approaches and follow up, and own the result jointly. In the case of transactional relationships, international organisations pass on participation requirements to their national or local partners, who are then more likely to approach these as a tick box exercise.

***Needs analysis instead of needs assessments***

The siloed approach described below is reflected at the initial stage of the programme cycle, as organisations carry out their own largely sectoral needs assessments, often using different methodologies from one organisation to another, which makes it a challenge to compare and analyse data consistently. This sectorisation of data and information is further reinforced by limited exchange of information between organisations working in different population settlements, further limiting the ability to rank or compare needs from one geographic area to another.

The review teams question whether the focus at the onset of the response on assessments (sectoral) rather than on analysis (situational and contextual and includes cross-cutting issues, such as protection, inclusion / exclusion, gender, etc.) is one of the main challenges in progressing from a project-by-project sectoral approach to participation to a people-centred one.

***Cash transfer programming (CTP)***

There seems to be a consensus among those interviewed that cash transfer programming, when it is appropriate in terms of proximity to functioning markets, and provided it is based on a proper analysis of vulnerabilities, capacities and threats, can enable participation, as affected people are able to choose what assistance to access. Nevertheless, CTP responses considered as part of this review were voucher-based rather than cash-based, and very little thought seemed to have gone into opportunities and challenges of moving towards unconditional cash transfers. Part of the reason for this, at least in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, has been that unconditional cash has not been supported by government policies; other reasons include the challenge that such an approach poses to existing humanitarian approaches and coordination structures and the outstanding questions around how to measure its impact and outcomes.

It may be helpful to consider whether such discussions at country level, initiated from a participation perspective, could contribute new perspectives and ideas.

**Main disenablers of effective participation:**

***Lack of a common understanding of participation and its purpose within and across stakeholders***

When SCHR organisations report on participation, they tend to focus on the feedback and complaints mechanisms developed and their usage by affected people, not on what they’ve heard from affected people and how this has impacted on their understanding of needs and capacities and on their decision-making and programming.

There is no a shared vision of what participation is supposed to achieve within and among all the stakeholders (authorities, donors, UN agencies, NGOs ...) intervening in the same context. The fundamental questions of what participation can aim to achieve in that context, from “information sharing” all the way to “joint decision - making”, or of how success is going to be measured, are neither systematically discussed within organisations, nor across organisations’ in-country leadership, nor in coordination mechanisms, nor with people affected by crisis themselves.

Effectively each organisation decides on what participation is going to entail within the framework of its own activities, which often translates into a project-by-project approach.

***Reports of affected people’s views come from within the implementing organisation***

The views of affected people and communities are collected and transmitted by organisations’ own staff, without necessarily any recognition that this involves certain biases. Apart from the third-party CHS verification audits, there is no report of attempts at complementing and verifying an organisation ‘s understanding of affected people’s views and perspectives by collecting these independently.

***Siloed approach to participation: sectoral and project-based resources and practices***

Participation is broken down by sectors of activity and by project. This reflects the way that funding is channelled through the international aid system from the donor all the way to the implementer, as well as global coordination structures and mechanisms. Each project has its own participation resources, in support of specific project objectives. The only examples of participation cutting across sectors and specific projects came when organisations had either allocated resources to participation mechanisms independently from project earmarking, or adopted a community-based approach to protection.

This siloed approach to engagement with affected people is further re-enforced by the fact that there is limited interaction across sectors and projects and therefore few attempts to pool existing information together to gather a more comprehensive understanding of affected people’s needs, capacities and suggestions.

In short-term projects, it is often a challenge to dedicate sufficient human resources and time to consultation with affected people at the onset of the project cycle, and then to adjust the response to input received from affected people during the implementation and monitoring phases of the project. In addition, frequent significant time lags in the grant allocation process, between the initial assessment of needs and the start of implementation, impact negatively on the trust affected people may have had in the organisation providing assistance, and therefore their willingness to engagement constructively in participation outcomes.

In addition to challenges to effectiveness, this siloed project-by-project approach to participation raises a fundamental question of efficiency, namely whether organisations could rationalise participation resources better with less of a sectoral focus and more of a people-centred approach

***Centralised decision-making***

Organisations reviewed generally described their institutional donors as flexible in terms of adapting funding to best respond to needs articulated by affected people. The closer the decision-making authority related to grant management and allocation of resources to project or programme management, the easier it is for organisations to request course correctors from their donors. Generally, it was felt that donors with a representation close to operations were even more sympathetic to adapting grants to input from affected people.

Nevertheless, the review teams found that certain fundamental programming decisions were taken by the UN agency resourcing the programme, without the NGO in charge of implementation feeling that it had the power to influence such decisions, i.e. decisions related to targeting criteria and in certain cases, actual list of beneficiaries, or to the type of item distributed. This effectively leaves organisations in direct contact with affected people in no position to carry out meaningful engagement with them on issues related to vulnerability and needs, only on issues related to the organisation and the monitoring of the distribution.

While prioritisation is necessary considering limited resources to cover all needs, centralisation of decision making undermines frontline organisations’ ability to carry out meaningful consultation with the affected people it is attempting to serve. The discussion on how to find the balance between deciding on the allocation of limited resources and giving space to operational organisations to carry out meaningful participation, is one which needs to take place at the Cluster and Inter-Cluster level, with referral to the Humanitarian Country Team as necessary. This requires substantive engagement by NGOs in these coordination mechanisms, as well as their ability to raise their concerns to a higher level when necessary, through global coordination or policy-making fora (such as for example the IASC Emergency Director’s Group or the IASC Task Team on Accountability to Affected People) or directly to relevant UN agencies headquarters.