**Enablers and dis-enablers of effective “participation” of people affected by crisis or disaster: an overview of SCHR organisations’ CHS and other relevant assessments/studies**

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1. **Background and objectives**

Building on the conclusions and momentum from its Conferences, [*Humanitarian Action in 2025*](https://ifrcorg-my.sharepoint.com/personal/kate_halff_ifrc_org/Documents/SCHR%20from%201%20May%202013/SCHR%20Principals/2015/2015%20SCHR%20Conference/Final%20Presentations%20and%20record%20shared%20with%20all%20participants/Humanitarian%20Action%202025%20Final%20Record%20of%20Conference.pdf) and [*Humanitarian Leadership in 2025*](https://ifrcorg-my.sharepoint.com/personal/kate_halff_ifrc_org/Documents/SCHR%20from%201%20May%202013/SCHR%20Principals/2016/20160118%20SCHR%20Conference/Sent%20to%20participants/Summary%20-%20SCHR%20Conference%2018%20Jan%202016.pdf), the [World Humanitarian Summit](https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/) and [the Grand Bargain](https://ifrcorg-my.sharepoint.com/personal/kate_halff_ifrc_org/Documents/SCHR%20from%201%20May%202013/SCHR%20Website/website%20content%20as%20of%2012%202016/Docs%20on%20website/20161209%20GB%20FAQ.pdf), SCHR Principals decided in May 2016 that their work together for the next four years would focus essentially on finding ways to help people affected by crisis use their power to influence and drive humanitarian response so that it is most effective to meet their needs. They want to work together on an agenda to meet the following goal:

**In 5 years-time, participation of people affected by crisis in humanitarian response decisions that concern them has become a concrete reality. SCHR will make this happen by demonstrating and communicating best practice, strategies and approaches.**

SCHR has decided that the starting point in the development of its agenda is to try and answer the following questions

* How can we increase the effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action (as defined by the Core Humanitarian Standard) by really putting affected people at the centre of the response?
* What does this mean for our organisations and the way the wider humanitarian system works, including in terms of participation and power?

To achieve this, SCHR organisations have agreed on a three-phase approach:

**Phase ONE (by end July 2017):** A desk overview of participation practices, based on SCHR organisations’ CHS assessments, specific relevant studies and / or RTE and MEAL reports, to get an understanding of current approaches and of actual enablers and dis-enablers of effective participation.

**Phase TWO (by end September 2017)**: A peer review of participation practices of SCHR organisations in one or two contexts, to test a narrative bringing together participation, cash based programming and needs analysis as enablers of participation by affected people.

The objective of the peer review is primarily about SCHR WG members’ own learning. It does not aim to be statistically significant. Its objectives are the following:

* An understanding of enablers and dis-enablers of effective participation and the inter-play between participation, needs analysis and cash based programming;
* An understanding of SCHR organisations’ achievements and constraints in terms of effective “participation” in a given context, and with a specific focus on needs analysis and cash based programming, and the rationale for these where possible and relevant,

It is anticipated that the peer review will:

* Inform each of SCHR’s organisations’ own work towards effective participation of affected people in decisions and actions which affect them;
* Provide the basis from which to move forward on their participation agenda, as they understand critical questions and issues better.

**Phase THREE (by end January 2018)**: SCHR Principals host a High-Level Conference, *Participation is Power: Keep it, Share it or Give it away?* to share their organisations’ learning, progress, challenges and struggles and learn from and influence others’ work on this issue. The ultimate objective of the Conference is an agenda to plan together how to make the commitment to greater participation and local ownership a reality.

**This document presents the finding from the overview of participation practices, as described in Phase ONE.**

1. **Scope of this overview**

In this overview, SCHR’s Executive Secretary is proposing some enablers and dis-enablers of effective “participation” drawn both from the assessments and evaluations provided by SCHR organisations (see Annex) and the work of the Grand Bargain “Participation Revolution” stream which SCHR co-convenes together with the USA (see final recommendations to deliver the Grand Bargain Participation Revolution work stream on [www.schr.info](http://www.schr.info)).

This overview is not grounded in any specific methodology, but in the author’s experience and approach. Its aim is to identify common issues of relevance to SCHR organisations in terms of their participation practices and, from these, propose specific enablers / dis-enablers of effective participation.

1. **Definition and scope of participation**

**Definition**

The definition of participation used as basis for this overview is the one which has been agreed upon by the Grand Bargain “Participation Revolution” work stream:

*Effective “participation” of people affected by humanitarian crises puts the needs and interests of those people at the core of humanitarian decision making, by actively engaging them throughout decision-making processes. This requires an ongoing dialogue about the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian responses with people, local actors and communities who are vulnerable or at risk, including those who often tend to be disproportionately disadvantaged, such as women, girls, and older persons.*

*Such a dialogue includes the provision of information to affected communities about i) lifesaving information, including protection services, ii) humanitarian agencies’ activities and ways of working, and iii) opportunities, risks and threats.*

* *It also includes proactively and regularly seeking communities’ perspectives and feedback[[1]](#footnote-1) on the humanitarian response and key aspects of humanitarian agencies’ performance, including service quality and relevance and responsiveness to beneficiary concerns. This dialogue should entail understanding of communities’ practices, capacities and coping strategies.*

*This ongoing dialogue is about managing the performance of humanitarian programming, and seeking to ensure effective action is taken in response to inputs received. It implies clear and consistent communication to inform people affected by crises what has been learned from them and how follow-up action will address their concerns, where this is feasible. To be effective this ongoing dialogue requires action by senior decision makers based on information received. Action may be required at an agency or country response level. Decisions made and action taken must be clearly and consistently communicated to affected people.*

**Framework**

While recognising that effective participation looks very different from one humanitarian context to another, SCHR organisations agree on **the following parameters** for an overarching framework for participation of affected people in humanitarian response decisions:

* [**The Core Humanitarian Standard**](https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard) **(CHS)**

The CHS describes the essential elements of principled, accountable and high-quality humanitarian action that puts affected people at its centre. It is an essential element of effective participation.

* **The Programme Cycle**

Participation should take place throughout the programme cycle, grounded in on-going dialogue between people affected by crisis and humanitarian aid providers. This can be illustrated as follows:

When participation is limited at the onset of the programme cycle, because of pressure for rapid action or access and proximity challenges or a focus on fundraising, it is still possible to engage in two-way dialogue with affected people at the next stages of the cycle**. Lack of initial investment in participation cannot be a reason for not engaging in dialogue with affected people as the programme develops.**

* **A common aspiration for what effective participation is meant to achieve.**

If we imagine a “Participation continuum”, which starts with information sharing and progresses towards shared control and decision – making, as follows:

**Information sharing ► Consultation ► Collaboration ► Shared control and decision – making ►**

**SCHR organisations come together around a common aspiration for collaboration at the very least, and shared control and decision-making between humanitarian organisations and people affected by crisis when the humanitarian response context permits**.

1. **Findings**

Initially the study was going to attempt to review SCHR organisations’ assessments and evaluations through the lens of selected indicators for effective participation, developed based on the CHS. This attempt was rapidly abandoned, recognising that either this work had already taken place when organisations had undergone CHS assessments, or that meaningful findings against specific indicators couldn’t be drawn out because of insufficient contextual or specific information.

Instead the decision was taken to draw out common participation practices with a focus on issues related to leadership, decision making, institutional set up and coordination. Based on these, enablers and dis-enablers of “effective participation” are then proposed[[2]](#footnote-2).

The choice was deliberately made not to put time into issues related to the “how” of participation, including how to engage most vulnerable groups and ensure inclusivity, as there already is a lot of work carried out and guidance available. In addition, the reports consulted for this overview gave limited information on how SCHR organisations were identifying and addressing issues related to inclusive community engagement.

**Common participation practices - Broad findings**

***CHS verification***

The CHS third party verification reports are the only reports which bring a consistent perspective on how an organisation is doing in terms of participation. As these are grounded in a systematic methodology and approach, which includes the independent verification of affected people’s views on an organisations’ performance, they provide specific information on what an organisation is doing well or very well in terms of participation and where it needs to improve. If all SCHR organisations had gone through CHS third party verification, they would already know where they’re facing gaps and areas that need improvement, and the compilation and analysis of that information across organisations would have given us an idea of likely sector-wide trends and issues.

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

In most of the reports reviewed, the views of affected people and communities, when they are referred to, are collected and transmitted by organisations’ own staff, without any recognition that this in itself 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[[3]](#footnote-3).

***Reporting on mechanisms***

As a matter of course, 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. They do not show that they know what affected people think of their overall work and whether they are meeting needs that affected people have prioritised. In the same vein, there is no reporting on organisations’ abilities and achievements to keep affected people informed of how and why their views and suggestions have informed or not action, indicating that SCHR organisations are not taking consistent approaches to “closing the feedback loop”.

***A sectoral approach to participation***

Part of the reason for this could be that organisations take a sectoral approach to participation. Participation appears to be the responsibility either of MEAL colleagues in charge of feedback and complaints mechanisms, or of sectoral staff, or of both. It does not appear to be consistently considered in strategic decision-making at programme and country levels. In most cases, organisations report focussing their dialogue with affected people on specific sectoral or operational questions, such as for example the location of water points, the list of beneficiaries for a food distribution or the type of agricultural tools most suited to the area, not on project and programme design. One notable exception is protection programming which is reported as grounded in dialogue with affected people.

***A means to effective project implementation***

This would indicate that SCHR organisations do not generally institutionalise participation as an objective throughout the programme cycle, but more as a means to effective implementation of a given project.

One of the results of this, is they either don’t identify needs that communities may have but that their organisation cannot respond to, or are not attempting to mobilise others who might have the capacity to respond.

***Risks***

This focus on participation at the project level can in part be correlated to organisations’ concerns, which transpire in some of the reports, about the risks related to opening too broad channels for participation with affected people, when they know that their capacity to respond may be limited and their funding short term and unpredictable, and that they may be inadvertently reinforcing negative power dynamics and structures within the community or putting certain individuals at risk.

***Context and length of presence***

Generally, organisations seem more confident about participation in development and in natural hazard induced disaster contexts than in conflict contexts. This is the result of investment in disaster preparedness, easier access and proximity with affected people and, in the case of development programmes, less pressure for rapid response. Several reports suggest that humanitarian participation practices could learn from development ones, while recognising that the institutional incentives to invest in participation are different. Generally, it appears that the longer an organisation has been working in a given context, the more likely it is to have invested in participation.

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

When considering the issue of participation in the context of the localisation agenda, it is a finding in itself to note that only a small number of the reports reviewed[[4]](#footnote-4) include a partnership component. For those that do, with one exception which relates to disaster preparedness activities in collaboration with local government, participation of affected people is not prioritised under the terms of the partnership. This may reflect the difficulty to translate participation into reality when organisations have limited direct proximity with affected people, or the difficulty in prioritising participation when organisations do not have direct control over implementation and delivery and when upward accountability is perceived as riskier. It may also come from the assumption that local and national actors do participation as a matter of course because of their physical and cultural proximity to affected people. It also likely reflects organisational cultures which do not internalise participation as a core component of high quality, accountable and principled humanitarian action, but more as a good-to-have somewhat “politically correct” addition.

**Enablers / dis-enablers of effective participation**

Building from these common participation findings and the work of the Grand Bargain work stream, we suggest the following areas as main effective participation enablers or dis-enablers, depending on how they are considered and addressed by SCHR organisations.

***Leadership***

Consistent leadership commitment and drive is required to achieve participation. Effective participation, as demonstrated by the CHS, is grounded in an organisation-wide systematic approach.

Progress will only be achieved if the responsibility to deliver on participation commitments is taken on at all levels and across all departments of organisations.

***Clear and consistent understanding of participation and the rationale for it***

A clear and consistent understanding of what participation entails[[5]](#footnote-5) and why an organisation is investing in it, is required to ensure that 1/ / ambition and objectives are coherent and understood across the organisation and 2/ participation is integral to the Programme Cycle and prioritised from the onset of the Cycle.

This does not preclude recognising and understanding that participation approaches and outcomes will look very different in different response contexts.

***Institutional set up***

Effective participation requires flexibility in programming approvals and budgets to ensure adaptability to shifts in needs.

An organisation is more likely to invest in participation and see positive outcomes if its response design and planning is close to affected people.

***Funding including flexible terms and conditions***

The Grand Bargain Participation Revolution work stream recommendations for action demonstrate the importance of funding and flexible associated terms and conditions to enable and incentivise participation throughout the Programme Cycle.

Where organisations do not have direct contact and interaction with their donors (when funding is channelled through a “fund-intermediate” for example), it is likely that effective participation will be dis-enabled as the organisation may be discouraged from negotiating approval for changes in implementation plans to adapt programmes to affected people’s input.

***Culture and clarity of expectations for staff***

Promoting an organisation culture of acceptance of failure and of negative feedback from affected people and including responsiveness to feedback as a criterion in recruitment and performance management systems are essential to progress effective participation.

The Grand Bargain, with its overarching focus on collaboration and transparency is an attempt to get donors and aid organisations to work together to address humanitarian sector-wide negative practices and culture.

***Commitment to coordination and collaboration with other stakeholders***

The more an organisation is committed to collaboration and coordination, the more likely it is to be open to hearing that affected people have humanitarian needs that it cannot address and seek to collaborate with those who have the mandate and capacity to act.

***In-country coordinated participation mechanism(s)***

This SCHR overview of participation practices may indicate that organisations find it easier to invest in participation in contexts with already existing coordinated participation initiatives (such as in Nepal, Haiti or The Philippines for example).

This begs the question of whether the establishment of a coordinated initiative in support of participation incentivizes greater consideration and investment in participation for individual organisations. If so, why and how?

1. **Conclusion**

This overview has shown the limits of the SCHR organisations’ current reporting focus in relation to participation. The fact though, that so little of what is being reported on refers to what organisations are hearing from affected people and how this is impacting on their decision – making, doesn’t mean that organisations are not proactively seeking, processing, analysing and acting on views and perspectives from affected people. It only means that they are not prioritising this in their reporting[[6]](#footnote-6). CHS third -party verification reports confirm that SCHR organisations are doing a lot more than what they are reporting. Nevertheless, the limited reporting does indicate that SCHR organisations are not taking a consistent approach to participation, it also indicates that they are not prioritising it. This overview proposes dis-enablers of effective participation which require organisation-wide focus to become enablers for SCHR organisations to progress in their ambition to share control and decision-making with people affected by crisis.

The next phase of SCHR’s agenda, the peer review, will focus on testing these enablers / dis-enablers in two different contexts, northern Uganda and northern Iraq. It will also attempt to bring in questions related to needs analyses, which underpin the Programme Cycle, and cash-based programming, generally considered as a potential “game changer” in terms of participation, to better understand how they can reinforce effective participation.

**ANNEX**

**Documents consulted for the overview of SCHR organisations’ CHS and other relevant assessment / studies**

ACT Alliance Secretariat, independent CHS verification report and detailed findings, 23.12.2016

ACT Alliance response to observations and non-compliances in the draft CHS Verification Report

CARE International UK, CHS self-assessment report and annexes, January 2017

CARE, Independent accountability review, emergency response to Hurricane Matthew, Haiti, 27.04.2017

CARITAS, CAFOD input based on CHS external certification report, September 2015.

CARITAS, input from TROCAIRE, based on CHS self-assessment in Zimbabwe, May 2017

ICRC and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, draft review, Engaging with Communities in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence, Taking stock, Understanding trends. Looking ahead, June 2017

ICRC, DRAFT Field Consultation Report, Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Institutional Framework [DRAFT ZERO], June 2017

LWF, LWF CHS-SA, Enablers and Dis-enablers Analysis, Narrative Report, 19 March 2017

LWF, Report summary, Analysis of enablers and dis-enablers, 06.04.2016

Oxfam, Reporting on Participation Indicators for SCHR, data extracted from Oxfam’s CHS Self-assessment in Dec 2016 and Real Time Evaluations on accountability during 2016 – 2017

Oxfam, Humanitarian Quality Assurance: Nepal, Evaluation of Oxfam’s response to the 2015 earthquake, Effectiveness Review Series, 2015/16

Oxfam, If We Don’t Do It, Who Will? A study into the sustainability of Community Protection Structures supported by Oxfam in the DRC, Summary Report, Nov 2016

Oxfam, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Minimum Standards in Oxfam Humanitarian Programs

Oxfam, Learning from Philippines Haiyan Response, May 2014

WVI, Raw data from RTE, PDM reports and Learning events (compilation)

1. Feedback includes affected people’s perspective on the relevance and quality of services, the adequacy of engagement, trust in aid workers, and their sense of ‘agency’ or empowerment. Providing relevant information to affected people on the organisation’s mandate or mission, competencies, capacities and commitments goes hand in hand with feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Enablers and dis-enablers of effective participation proposed were discussed in the SCHR WG and Principals meetings in June 2017. The proposals in this report take into account the feedback and recommendations from these meetings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) resource paper dated Oct 2016, “*Listening to Communities in Insecure Environments – Lessons from Community Feedback Mechanisms in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria”* references affected communities as wishing they had regular face-to-face communication with aid organisation representatives as well as with independent actors, not necessarily associated with programme implementation, to talk freely about sensitive issues and about general concerns that are not related to specific agencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Those that do include the three third party CHS verification reports. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One of the assessments reviewed for this study asked the question “are we focusing on “customer satisfaction” or on responding to needs?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Grand Bargain participation work streams recommends that donors require and enable aid organizations to provide evidence that their programming takes feedback from affected people into consideration at all stages of the programme cycle. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)