Policy Brief

The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action

The Problem

There is broad agreement in the humanitarian sector that communication and community engagement contributes to greater effectiveness and value for money. Despite many organisations and governments committing to this, action to make this happen as part of preparedness and response is not undertaken systematically. With each sudden onset disaster, many agencies scramble to access resources and bring into line their communication and community engagement strategies, leaving a gap at a critical time.

In protracted crises, the issues become more complex due to funding and access constraints. Mid-disaster, agencies often struggle to reach consensus on the approach and coordination of communication and community engagement efforts in a given context. As a result, this critical area of work is often ad hoc, underfunded, uncoordinated and risks being ineffective.

Findings and Conclusions

An independent review commissioned by CDAC Network confirms that the establishment of collective approaches to communication and community engagement – at national and global levels – is required to be more systematic and effective and has significant support across the humanitarian sector[1].

At national level the shape and functions of collective platforms, services and tools ('the mechanism') will vary according to context, needs and capacities. They should at a minimum:

- Undertake preparedness actions to ensure that response actors are well-placed to integrate communication and community engagement in a response.
- Ensure the coordination of information to the people affected and the collection and analysis of overall feedback data, including data collected and shared by individual organisations or clusters, in order to highlight trends to inform activities.
- Act as a service to existing and emerging humanitarian architecture, particularly those that support government-led and localised responses.

The global collective service and national mechanism should never be considered a stand-alone sector or cluster, but instead be an essential cross-sector working approach integrated within the humanitarian architecture in a given context.

The global service would support national mechanisms in gathering and disseminating good practice, developing tools and providing guidance.

Dedicated seed funding is required for the initial global set-up[2]. Funding for the longer term should be integrated into operational budgets to ensure it is fully embedded in the humanitarian architecture.

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[1] In January 2017, CDAC Network commissioned a review of the "The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement". The review was undertaken by independent consultant, Lois Austin. See the detailed Policy Paper: www.cdacnetwork.org

[2] Members of the CDAC Network, with partners, are in the process of developing a Concept and Multi-Year Workplan on Collective Service for Communication and Community Engagement in an initiative led by UNICEF, UNOCHA, IFRC and the CDAC Network. See Concept Note, "The Communication & Community Engagement Initiative: Towards a collective service for more effective humanitarian responses", March 2017

Background

A lengthy process took place in the run up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to examine the humanitarian system and make clear recommendations for reform. But the resulting Agenda for Humanity and Grand Bargain, which call for a 'participation revolution', will amount to little unless there are intentional, collective efforts to better engage communities before, during and after disasters.

It is time for the international humanitarian architecture to redefine its role. It should exist to augment national humanitarian capacities, fully engaging affected communities by providing them the right information at the right time, consulting them on decisions that affect them and enabling people to stay connected or reconnect to each other.

For this to occur, leaders and policymakers urgently need to undertake policy and operational changes.

Opportunities to engage with people in crisis abound, as do potential ways to improve communications capacities among affected communities. However, rarely is this work well-coordinated, nor is its impact assessed. Frameworks and commitments exist, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability, but are not consistently adhered to.

The Grand Bargain underlined the necessity to establish a 'common' or 'collective' service for community engagement so that affected people can directly influence decision-making during any response[3].

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[3] **The Grand Bargain** is an agreement between more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers, which aims to get more means into the hands of people in need.

Benefits of collective action

Various collective approaches to communication and community engagement have been implemented both during and in preparation for crises. Some have been established in sudden onset disasters (e.g. Haiti earthquake/hurricane; the Philippines in Typhoon Bopha and Haiyan; Nepal earthquake); others in conflict (e.g. Yemen; Iraq; and South Sudan); and, still others in readiness for smaller scale cyclical disasters (e.g. 'Shongjog', the Multi-Stakeholder Platform for Communicating with Communities in Bangladesh). Each mechanism has different contextually-relevant goals and objectives.

Clear benefits to collective models of collaborative action are emerging both for the affected people and the sector, ranging from the potential for collective development and standardisation of tools to improved coordination and efficiencies. More specifically, collective approaches:

- Contribute to greater understanding of trends and issues due to increased data collection and analysis outreach;
- Have the potential to reduce confusion, tensions and conflict with and between communities through consistency of messaging;
- Enable more consistent and stronger advocacy messaging as a result of collective community and humanitarian voices;

- Have the potential to shield affected communities from being overburdened and over-questioned;
- Improve cost-effectiveness due to shared use of resources;
- Include and value diverse views and greater expertise in response analysis and implementation design through the inclusion of media development, technology and private sector capability and know-how;
- Increase the likelihood of consistency of language and cultural interpretation;
- Broaden ownership;
- Enhance the likelihood of more innovative and appropriate tools being created.

Whilst there is agreement that collective action and collaborative approaches make better use of partners' resources, improve coordination and build local capacity, they are rarely systematically implemented through existing humanitarian coordination structures. Ad hoc attempts at accessing funding and defining strategies post-disaster have frequently resulted in a lack of collective accountability and poor coordination, leaving gaps and creating duplication.

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Barriers to collective approaches

There is an identified need for continued efforts to address a number of critical challenges to collective approaches which largely relate to: difficulty in ensuring consistent support from humanitarian leadership; individual agency desire for ownership; insufficient commitment at the operational level leading to lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities; and lack of coordination, preparedness, prepositioned tools and stocks.

Coupled with this:

- Agencies continue to focus more on the response (the 'what') than community engagement (the 'how').
- There is a lack of willingness to share feedback data, for protection or other concerns, leading to lack of available aggregated data to inform programming. Where data is available, there is limited donor flexibility to allow for programme change based on feedback.
- Engaging the right people throughout the process is challenging as organisations often task those who are responsible for public communications to be responsible for communicating with communities rather than those who are directly involved with programming.
- The use of different terminology further creates misunderstanding and confusion within the humanitarian community (and between agencies) and with affected populations[4].
- There is limited knowledge of how shared responsibility in collective approaches works in practice and how different organisations hold each other to account and who takes responsibility when things go wrong.
- Achieving inter-sector focus remains difficult with some clusters/sectors adopting their own approaches, resulting in each sector then asking the same communities different (or even similar) questions about responses. There is a lack of cross-sector/cluster harmonisation of messaging and approaches.
- In situations of violence and armed conflict there are often political sensitivities coupled with a lack of predictability regarding humanitarian access which hinders individual and collective approaches to communication and community engagement. This is compounded by the often-present mistrust of international actors and/or those from outside of the affected communities.
- Competition for funds and lack of funding sustainability for smaller crises remains an issue.

" There is limited knowledge of how shared responsibility in collective approaches works in practice "

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[4] Key phrases used are accountability to affected populations (AAP); communicating with communities (CwC); community engagement and accountability (CEA); and communication and community engagement. This points to the need for more consistent language to ensure the engagement of diverse entities.

Towards a sustainable, collective service

The CDAC Network review outlines the potential goals and functions of a collective service. The overarching goal of a collective global service and national mechanisms is to improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response by systematically engaging communities.

National Level Mechanism

The national level mechanism could have the following strategic aims, features and functions:

1. To ensure that affected communities are provided with timely, relevant and actionable life-saving and life-enhancing information in preparedness for and in the event of a disaster;
2. To ensure that humanitarian actions are informed by constructive participation of communities throughout the humanitarian programme cycle, including regular feedback solicited from communities on key aspects of humanitarian performance to the strategic decision-making level;
3. To use the most appropriate approaches to listen to communities' needs, feedback and complaints including sensitive ones;
4. To ensure that the collective service augments local capacities so that national responders are better prepared in future responses; and
5. To ensure that humanitarian responders are held to account by affected people through visible and predictable means.

The following key pre-conditions and features of a national level collective mechanism were elicited from a review of research and feedback from interviews with key informants:

Links to existing structures: The mechanism needs to be linked to existing humanitarian architecture and coordination structures as part of preparedness measures, such as, the National Disasters Management Authority. There are different options for where the mechanism should be placed in the event of an international response:

- If the Cluster System is activated, the collective mechanism should sit at the inter-cluster level.
- A Communication and Community Engagement Coordinator position is created to lead a cross-sector

Technical Working Group (TWG) in support of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and Inter-Cluster Coordination (ICC) on a needs basis. With a clear terms of reference (ToR), the TWG would seek to bring together actors working in communication and community engagement and provide technical guidance to clusters, agency partners, and Government, where feasible. This is an inclusive approach that ensures those who would not normally engage through clusters actively participate in coordination.

Tool flexibility: Tools developed at a global level should remain sufficiently flexible for contextual adaptation. Good practice examples are required of how these tools have been used to better support country programmes.

Diverse skills and capacities: There is no one set of skills applicable for all contexts. Different disasters will call for different skill sets and capacities and these will need to be adequately reflected and involved in collective services.

Adjusting to the evolving response: Moving from preparedness to response mode will require adapting the specific objectives and activities to the evolving context. This should be acknowledged in the mechanism's ToR and endorsed by its members.

Activation: In non-HCT or cluster situations, the collective mechanism should be activated by the national mechanism on communication and community engagement. When clusters are activated, the collective mechanism should be activated by the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator, and the HCT.

Leadership: While overall leadership of the collective mechanism should come from the Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator/HCT, the mechanism can be established by any humanitarian organisation depending on the emergency, context and capacity. Leadership roles should be pre-agreed as part of operational readiness.

Minimum and potential activities: At national level, a key role of the mechanism should be the accountability that it provides to ensure that communication and community engagement is an integral part of the overall humanitarian response. Activities will differ depending on context. A

"Listening and ensuring communities have access to the information they need to make decisions about their lives"

collective national mechanism should however, at minimum be able to: Undertake preparedness actions; coordinate information for people affected; collect or facilitate the collection and analysis of a breadth of data and provide clear information on trends which operational agencies can use to inform their programming. Areas of action are likely to include:

- Two-way communication: listening and ensuring communities have access to the information they need to make decisions about their lives.
- Feedback: Consolidated feedback data and dialogue, linking individual organizations/clusters feedback mechanisms when they exist, to inform response-wide decision making. This links to the broader accountability agenda.
- Regular and broad information sharing so that even those which have not been directly involved in the mechanism can still benefit.

The mechanism should facilitate joint outreach to avoid communities being repeatedly surveyed.

Collective or individual activities: The national mechanism in collaboration with the HCT needs to agree on which activities are part of individual agency responsibility or mandate and which would most benefit from being addressed collectively.

Representation: Operational agencies should be represented in the mechanism as well as government bodies, UN bodies, the Red Cross Movement, civil society organisations and private sector bodies, as appropriate to the context.

Systematisation: In situations where there is a Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator, HCT and/or Inter-Cluster Coordination Group, communication and community engagement should be a standing item on meeting agendas.

Global Service

The global level objective would be to ensure more timely, predictable and coordinated approaches to communication and community engagement through system-level changes and the provision of the necessary technical support to country programmes.

The collective service at global level should link to existing and emerging humanitarian architecture, remaining flexible and agile enough to adapt over time. It is proposed that the key functions and features of the collective service will include:

- Undertaking complementary activities that will support the establishment or effectiveness of existing national and local collective mechanisms;
- Advocating for the benefits of collective and systematic communication and engagement with communities;
- Assessing whether communication and community engagement efforts in a response have been adequate and whether responses were adapted to the expressed needs of affected populations;
- Providing technical support to national collective mechanisms such as advice on appropriate options for what form country level collective mechanisms might take, and the provision of guidance, adaptable tools, templates and training to help build national and local capacity;
- Making accessible a minimum set of tools that can be used at national level and adapted as contextually appropriate; providing an overview of what each tool should be used for and, where relevant, how the tool links into existing communication and community engagement commitments and frameworks such as the CHS and the Grand Bargain;
- Maintaining standby capacity with trained specialists; and
- Documenting best practices, lessons learned and evidence from different initiatives, and ensuring these are appropriately shared from context to context.

Funding

In the short term the global level service would require temporary seed funding for set-up, needing dedicated human and financial resources. In the medium term there would be a need for the reallocation of funding within existing operational funding streams.

Securing this funding would require evidence of effectiveness and advocacy. In the longer term, to ensure that the mechanism is fully integrated into the humanitarian architecture, all funding for the mechanism could be sourced through reallocation from operations across the system.

Recommendations

" *A stronger and more visible commitment from humanitarian response leadership is required* "

Recommendation 1

International humanitarian organisations should recognise and use existing local and national mechanisms for collective communication and community engagement mechanisms.

The starting point for communication and community engagement is within the communities and countries impacted by, or vulnerable to, disaster. Existing mechanisms need to be supported pre-disaster to ensure that they can be used and strengthened during and following a disaster. The central role of the Government at all levels must be recognised, as it holds the primary responsibility for the protection of populations during disasters.

Recommendation 2

All humanitarian actors should understand and analyse local communications contexts and stakeholders to prepare for or pre-position context-specific platforms at the national level with support through a global service until fully integrated into the humanitarian architecture.

In moving towards a model of collaborative efficiency through processes such as the Agenda for Humanity and the Grand Bargain, humanitarian leaders and policymakers urgently need to undertake changes to ensure collective efforts, both globally and at country level, provide systematic guidance for communication and community engagement. Collective approaches – at national and global levels – are required and should occur as a preparedness activity supported by necessary resource mobilisation.

Recommendation 3

All NGO, UN and Red Cross entities should integrate communication and community engagement throughout their organisational humanitarian programme cycle as well as in collaborative processes such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) and Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) Plans.

Communication and community engagement must be more effectively integrated into each stage of the programme cycle. At a minimum, it must be systematically included in assessments, communication and information materials and collective and individual planning and appeal documents.

Decision-making processes should incorporate community feedback and planning/adjustment processes should be supported by inputs gathered from affected communities and highlighted to donors. The global service and national mechanisms should provide guidance on how to effectively achieve this.

A stronger and more visible commitment from humanitarian response leadership is required. The IASC Emergency Director's Group Preliminary Guidance Note on Protection and Accountability to Affected Populations in the Humanitarian Cycle highlights several areas where there is potential for collective approaches and accountability to affected populations throughout the HPC. These actions need to be acted on and extended beyond the IASC Commitments and on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) to include the broader aspects of communication and community engagement.

Recommendation 4

All humanitarian actors should promote, operationalise and strictly adhere to organisational and system-wide commitments and principles on quality and accountability.

Organisations must promote, operationalise, monitor and report openly and honestly on their adherence to their respective frameworks, including the collective standards such as the CHS and IASC AAP.

All organisations involved in communication and community engagement need their senior leadership to

> *" The need for aid organisations to have a strong understanding of high and low technology communication channels, and their enabling environments, is critical "*

be explicit about their commitments to this area of work and how these will be put into practice. This could, for example, include the drafting of policy documents linked to operational strategies which contain measurable indicators to monitor performance and the need for change.

Staff members, including those at senior level and technical staff, should have communication and community engagement included in their job descriptions.

Recommendation 5

Donor agencies need to meet their commitment to improved communication and community engagement through increased and flexible humanitarian financing.

Donors need to provide clear incentives and requirements for humanitarian partners to adhere to standards and commitments on communication and community engagement; and, to undertake relevant monitoring and programme adaptation. This involves increased funding flexibility to allow for programme changes based on feedback from disaster affected communities.

Recommendation 6

All humanitarian organisations should integrate collective actions on communication and community engagement into emergency preparedness.

Specific collective actions should be part of an agencies' operational readiness to ensure that when a disaster occurs, humanitarian actors have a common understanding of how best to engage with affected populations and have the requisite tools and agreed approaches in place to do so in a timely, effective manner.

At a minimum this should include mapping the communications landscapes and engaging all relevant actors on preparedness planning so that roles and responsibilities can be defined. This must involve

diverse groups including community members, media, telecommunications providers, local authorities and humanitarian agencies.

Recommendation 7

The CDAC Network should consolidate and disseminate good practice on communication and community engagement.

The CDAC Network, in collaboration with the 'collective service' steering group should undertake a comprehensive review and consolidation of good practices. Agencies should commit to sharing relevant findings, collective analysis and reports based on feedback collection with affected populations.

Recommendation 8

Humanitarian organisations should include communications technologies and media actors in communication and community engagement fora both nationally and globally, including in key coordination or inter-agency initiatives in a response.

Communications landscapes are complex. Models for communication and community engagement in disasters need to include all relevant actors if they are to be effective. They need to expand far beyond humanitarian organisations. Local telecommunications and internet providers, media actors, regulatory bodies and other relevant influencers need to be active in communication and community engagement fora both nationally and globally.

The need for aid organisations to have a strong understanding of high and low technology communication channels, and their enabling environments, is critical.

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This **Policy Brief** is drawn from a detailed CDAC Network Policy Paper by the same author on "The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement" http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/

CDAC Network is a growing platform of more than 30 humanitarian, media development, social innovation, technology, and telecommunication organisations, dedicated to saving lives and making aid more effective through communication and information exchange.

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