CDAC Network Annual Global Forum

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Digital inclusion and community voices: Stepping over the humanitarian-development divide

"We need to reflect on how we can do things differently and put community at the heart of everything we do"

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Hearing the roar

In every engagement, humanitarians are now faced with the new complexity of digital systems creating a potent mix of asymmetrical communication, data and information flows. This is a change. A new paradigm, happening within a context of extreme urgency, barely understood cultural norms and, as often as not, a plurality of languages. While the voice of communities remains stifled in some crises, in many countries digital technology is enabling a whisper to become a mighty, collective roar.

Yet, evidence shows vulnerable groups are more likely to be cut off, out of reach and without a voice because of factors such as weak infrastructure, restricted and unequal access to technology and unaffordable pricing. In emergencies and development contexts technology-based services differ, sometimes falling into unhelpful and separate categorisations, which prevents the humanitarian and development sectors working in concert to design lasting, longer term solutions.

Digital exclusion and tenuous humanitarian-development links were among the many topics CDAC Network members and partners addressed during the organisation's two-day annual forum held in Nairobi from 31 May to 1 June. Over 160 participants from more than 20 countries gathered to unpack the many challenges facing aid professionals and crisis-affected populations in ever more volatile, complex environments as new technologies bring both advantage and risk.

Opening the event, CDAC Network's Executive Director, Marian Casey-Maslen recalled that after three decades of trying to have a more joined-up humanitarian-development approach, success has been patchy and welcomed the World Humanitarian Summit call for reinforcing humanitarian-development connectivity to overcome persistent funding and institutional obstacles. She noted that CDAC Network's core thematic area - communicating and engaging with communities - is crucial to improving assistance and strengthening community leadership, and is also effective in bridging divides. The forum sought to throw the spotlight on innovative initiatives and programmes seeking to redress imbalances, push for system-wide change and increase local leadership.

Making connections and breaking with convention

Reflecting on the humanitarian-development nexus, Ambassador Mette Knudsen, Embassy of Denmark to Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea and the Seychelles, highlighted the efforts by Denmark, in cooperation with UNDP, to promote achievement of the Grand Bargain 'nexus' commitment. In 2017, the Danish Government, for the first time, developed a joint humanitarian and development cooperation strategy. Its implementation has demanded adaptive approaches and flexible financing that support collaboration amid complexity. The Danida-funded Somalia programme provides practical examples, including:

- The Danish Refugee Council in Somalia addresses the more urgent needs of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) arriving in host cities, while, at the same time, putting significant emphasis on listening to them, mapping out their aspirations for the future, and embedding social protection measures to provide longer-term safety nets.

- A World Bank programme increases access to livelihoods for refugee communities by providing support that benefits both the host communities and the refugees. This approach serves as an incentive to governments to address ongoing development challenges, while giving more opportunities to refugees during their time of greatest humanitarian need.

In 2017, Denmark also appointed its first global 'Tech Ambassador' based in Silicon Valley, recognising technology is a major driving force shaping the world. This move points to the influence big digital players like Google and social media giant, Facebook have over the way people are changing the ways they communicate, connect and crowdsource solutions for pressing common challenges.

Visualising and layering data for greater impact

The potential for shared humanitarian and development frameworks for data gathering and monitoring was demonstrated by the crowd-mapping platform Ushahidi; UNOCHA's open platform for sharing data - The Humanitarian Data Exchange; and, by the Africa's Voices Foundation's approach to amplifying marginalised community voices to improve aid, all of whom presented during the forum. Participants discussed developments in data-sharing platforms and tools to combine datasets, ensuring data are accessible for interpretation and analysis to inform collective action and decision-making.

Although there is a considerable amount of citizen-generated data, participants concurred, clearer paths need to be put in place to share data among common systems to give a fuller picture and ensure different perspectives count. Questions remain about incentives to encourage organisations to find new approaches to connect humanitarian and development data in decision-making and how organisations make funding decisions to ensure this is prioritised internally.

Creating a common picture

Angela Oduor Lungati, Director of Community Engagement, Ushahidi explained how the renowned crowdsourcing information platform (see here for presentation link) has allowed ingestion of various data streams for visualisation, response and information sharing. The platform has been adopted in various countries, such as Kenya, Russia, Haiti and Nepal, to support crisis response and citizen participation, particularly in situations of electoral violence. A critical aspect of the platform is the participation of communities in providing primary data that forms the basis of analysis for mapping gaps and trends. "*Data is like a seed but it requires fertile land to make it meaningful,*" said Lungati, referring to the fertile land as communities.

Lillian Nduati, HDX Nairobi Lab Manager, said in her presentation 'Making Humanitarian Data Easy to Find + Use for Analysis' that since the inception of the Nairobi Lab in 2014 about 60 partners in the East Africa region have shared over 500 datasets, allowing "*small amounts of unstandardised data to create a common picture of needs,*" she explained. It extends the impact of an individual organisation's data, to get users' feedback for collective analysis and to better target efforts. Ushahidi is now working with HDX to link datasets.

Tech, an enabler not a solution

The limitations of technology for data collection were highlighted by Andrea Suley, Deputy Representative, UNICEF, South Sudan, who noted: "*Tech is not a solution, it's an enabler. In South Sudan less than 30% of the population has access to telecommunications.*" Reliance on traditional mechanisms such as community mobilisers becomes the only alternative in generating quantitative and qualitative data. Getting data fast enough using this mode is a concern; but so is the idea of equipping community mobilisers in a conflict area with technology when they could be targets of criminality and their safety could be at risk. In this context "*paper and pencil is safe,*" said Suley.

The renewed focus on greater humanitarian-development connectivity was welcomed by Matteo Frontini, UNDP Programme Coordination Specialist, Great Lakes Region. Frontini felt it has been the strongest leadership push in 30 years, ignited by the UN Secretary General's call at the World Humanitarian Summit. Drawing on its peacebuilding and community engagement expertise, UNDP has been using a number of data collection methodologies and reporting, but acknowledges some of the tools need to be better adapted for the digital age. Methodologies are adapted depending on the 'community', be it ex-combatants, refugees or host communities. Efforts are now leaning towards developing a humanitarian-development approach to move beyond country offices to border areas, so as to collect vital data to support peacebuilding programmes.

Changing data collection mindsets

Ambassador Knudsen remarked that there needs to be a change in mindset in humanitarian data collection as there is a tendency to approach the data through the lens of communities first and foremost as vulnerable people or victims. She highlighted the recent Kakuma as a Marketplace report that views the refugee camp of Kakuma in Kenya as a marketplace and refugees as economic actors,[i] looking at what resources people have and what solutions they can come up with. Re-examining the data element may be a necessary part of change, she noted. In her presentation, Ingrid Gercama from Anthrologica, pointed to the need for rapid usable intelligence and in-depth ethnographic research and analysis to better understand the needs of affected populations.

Doing no digital harm

Among responsibilities highlighted is the well-established requirement to 'do no harm', which, in this context, means that those collecting and holding information must be data secure, with protocols and transparent polices about how the information will be shared that are easily understandable by those providing personal details.

Open data sharing platforms, such as those presented, are becoming more commonplace. This sort of information sharing is improving response and providing new opportunities for feedback from and involvement of affected populations. However, such technical responses should not negate the need to be inclusive around data collection, being mindful of existing networks used to collect information, such as community mobilisers in South Sudan, and must avoid introduction of unsustainable, duplicate or inaccessible systems.

Verification of crowdsourced data

Concerns over the validity of crowdsourced data and social protection of communities that participate in digital data collection streams are multiple. It was noted that mechanisms to validate crowdsourced data do exist alongside an overarching duty of care to provide credible data amongst industry players. Additionally, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability remains the reference point for many agencies on the duties, responsibilities and ethics in aspects of data collection and management and if adopted, organisations are obligated to 'do no harm'.

Digital-ready approaches boosting community voice

Much discussion focused on the seismic shift of digitalisation, which has allowed for a much more diffuse communication environment, uses of considerable amounts of harvested data and multiple opportunities for innovation. Participants noted the plethora of new technologies should not blind the sector to what was there before, and still exists now such as the importance of face-to-face communication, traditional networks and diverse communication channels, which are as old as communities.

Participants acknowledged the communication environment is now one where hierarchical business-as-usual approaches are demonstrably less effective and on the wrong side of history. The resounding sentiment in the room was that if humanitarian and development agencies are to be relevant in a world where a woman drawing water at a well has a device that enables a conversation with the world, there has to be wide, systemic change. Moreover, harnessing the power of digital means significant reform in terms of organisational and funding structures. Achieving humanitarian and development environments that are targeted, cost-effective, connected and 'client' oriented will mean disruption, and acceptance there are many new actors involved and openness to different approaches.

Getting real about localisation

Discussions also focused on Grand Bargain commitments agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. One commitment was to achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders to improve outcomes for affected people and reduce transactional costs.

Creating trusting relationships to make use of digital opportunities has implications for how communication and community engagement should be funded. Building understanding between equal partners requires a mindset for longer term funding, particularly if the partnership is intended to span humanitarian and development contexts. There would have to be greater understanding that such networks and partnerships are a lasting 'good' that build sustainability and need to be repeatedly used.

The processes involved in communication and community engagement will take time with activities and responsibilities that need to have a sustainable funding model. Nevertheless, changing funding structures comes with significant obstacles as highlighted by Niamh Dobson from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, who pinpointed administrative challenges in funding a smaller number of grants for a larger number of local organisations: "*We need to recognise this and think about how we work around it. For example, we're working in Somalia to explore pooled funds – the Somalia Humanitarian Fund went to a large percentage of local organisations.*"

Participants highlighted that there is much within the 'digital revolution' to draw on in terms of tools and learning that can enable communities to lead and build stronger defences against disasters and shocks and participate in the design of solutions. However, this is dependent on the level of commitment shown by donors and leaders of humanitarian and development organisations to see through necessary change.

Enabling communities to have decision-making roles in the design, planning and distribution of aid is naturally tied to consistent community engagement. This may be dependent on what is secured through donor-funded programmes, with agencies retaining significant influence through the use of such funds. Agencies and NGOs, therefore, should be realistic and transparent about what can be achieved long term, and that promises need to be fulfilled and power relinquished to communities.

Communication and engagement should also be a process that is not defined around the needs of those with the resources, but be shaped and owned by all those taking part. Louise Tunbridge, International Media Support (IMS), Radio Ergo, Somalia noted: "*We get frustrated by humanitarian clusters when after an emergency response ends, the flow of information stops. I can only assume the willingness to carry on the conversation with the communities has stopped.*"

Conflict does not preclude humanitarian-development collaboration

Strong engagement during crises and conflict situations was viewed as paving the way for a more direct, sustainable and meaningful engagement in the longer-term development period. This was highlighted in a session on communication and community engagement in situations of armed conflict and violence, moderated by Philippe Marc Stoll, Head of Communication Policy and Support at the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva. It was noted that there is growing evidence in situations of armed conflict and violence that many communities feel left out of humanitarian decision-making despite people being increasingly vocal about humanitarian action.

Lessons drawn from organisations implementing communication and community engagement in situations of armed conflict indicate the starting point has to be an understanding of the conflict dynamics, knowing existing information and communication ecosystems and finding ways of building trust.

Elijah Manyok Jok, Executive Director of [Smile Again Africa Development Organisation](#) (SAADO), South Sudan, pointed out communities will only engage organisations that make themselves accessible to them. This requires organisations to build an understanding of the geo-political power dynamics in conflict situations to be able to act impartially in these contexts and deliver responsive interventions to the affected communities.

Timely delivery of the response is also critical for the success of community engagement. "*In conflict there is a lot of trauma and frustration, it takes a lot of time to respond to the needs that have been assessed. As a result, communities quickly lose trust in the responder and are unwilling to participate or to be engaged,*" remarked Manyok Jok. Reflecting on his personal experience, he urged the audience to be mindful of the very high levels of trauma and frustration in conflict situations as first responders are also those who are directly affected. "*The last people left are the locals. If you don't listen to them, you do more harm,*" he said.

[UNHCR](#), Preeta Law – Deputy Director, Division of International Protection and current co-chair of the IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team remarked that we have to recognise limits of what humanitarians can do in often shrinking spaces and communicate the limitations clearly to affected communities. Communities also have got to be connected and be able to make decisions that affect their own safety, security and protection through virtual means where humanitarians do not have access.

Mark Lwanga Agoya, Humanitarian Adviser, [Department for International Development](#) (DFID) Somalia called on humanitarian organisations to put more emphasis on outcomes than outputs, looking to the longer-term impacts of humanitarian work.

"*Are we hearing the right voices from the right people? We're trying to share the net wider and share the microphone wider…People don't see their lives compartmentalised as humanitarian and development. People just don't see things like that,*" asked Louise Tunbridge of IMS Radio Ergo.

Community-driven innovation is not business as usual

Participants discussed ways humanitarian and development sectors are increasingly harnessing the potential of new technologies to improve the timeliness, effectiveness and relevance of aid. There is more knowledge about how people are connecting and maintaining their own networks. Too often though, they noted, the development of exciting new applications followed old habits by being top down, overly bureaucratic with the design being far removed from the intended users and innovation being suffocated.

There are clear signs this is changing, participants observed. A number of efforts, such as the Language Equality Initiative established by Translators without Borders, the collective efforts of the [Inter Agency Working Group on Disaster Preparedness for East and Central Africa](#), and the partnership between [Adeso](#), [iHub](#) and [MasterCard Foundation in Kenya](#) to establish community-centred innovation labs to tackle drought among affected communities. Under [UKaid's Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP)](#) innovation window managed by [Start Network](#) and CDAC Network, this programme is breaking new ground in community participation.

Eric Mogoi, manager of Maarifa Kona the Kenya-based and community-centred innovation lab shared details about the structure of the overall project. The lab led by Adeso supports local level innovation to build resilience and preparedness for communities facing drought. Application of the human-centred design model has allowed direct input from communities at every stage of the process. In total, 236 community ideas were received, with 20 of the most viable going through to the first stage of selection out of which two ideas will be awarded a grant. Mogoi explained translating the concept of innovation into local languages was challenging, as was moving away from traditional programming to support the community to come up with ideas.

Information you don't understand is not information

Rebecca Petras of [Translation without Borders](#) (TWB) highlighted provision of information in any humanitarian response can only be useful or meaningful if it is clearly understood by the affected communities. "*Information you don't understand is not information,*" she said. With over 3,000 languages spoken in 40 countries beset by humanitarian crisis, actors must remain cognisant of the barriers to information owing to the language needs in heterogeneous communities.

Through the [TWB Language Equality Initiative, the Gamayun](#), use of technology is advancing efficient information dissemination to affected communities through 'machine learning' along the lines of Google Translate. This initiative gives direct control to affected communities to access critical information when they need it and in a language they understand. With the exception of medical information, machine learning has the ability for faster translation of content into multiple languages, while maintaining higher levels of accuracy. Concerns over usability of machine learning for persons with disabilities and where literacy concerns exist, requires agencies to use face-to-face interaction – the most effective information dissemination mechanism.

Let communities capacitate us

Mirko Ebelshaeuser, Innovations Officer at the Lesotho Office of the [UN Resident Coordinator](#), shared four 'must haves' for fostering community-driven innovation for better humanitarian outcomes: i) Opening up different channels (two-way) for collaboration and engagement; ii) Developing strategies that put communities at the centre - "*Let communities capacitate us*"; iii) Using community resources to achieve inclusion in your work and outcomes; and, iv) being open to different approaches and new challenges. "*Engaging communities opens up possibilities for communities to input into the design on the solutions. People facing the problem often know very well the solution,*" he noted.

Based on lessons learnt in App development, Sheilah Birgen, of the Nairobi-based start-up incubator, [iHub](#) reiterated the importance of including community feedback in the innovation process. She explained at iHub, a 'community of users' was established to provide feedback to developers to build more practical solutions. "*We started inviting farmers to come for forums because our programmes were not inclusive enough. When you build solutions for communities you have to involve them from the word go,*" said Birgen.

Communities as powerful innovators

The concept of 'Human Centred Design' is increasingly recognised as a viable model in humanitarian and development innovation processes. Meg Sattler, [OCHA](#)'s Community Engagement Global Adviser and board member of Humanitarian Innovation Fund, highlighted humanitarian innovation has to be based in the local context with the aim of building resilience and preparedness, while drawing on the experiences from complimentary sectors such as business. Experience within the humanitarian and development sectors shows the chance of scaling up innovations is dependent on buy-in of communities, which starts with their inclusion throughout. Quite simply, this requires a more reflexive attitude within organisations and an understanding from donors that collaborative processes with communities need innovative thinking, flexibility and funding.

Bijay Kumar, Executive Director, [ActionAid International Kenya,](#) called on the audience to remove the mystique from innovation remarking that: "*Innovation in my understanding is a simple thing, how things can be done in a simple way*".

From Words to Action

The 'Communication and Community Engagement Initiative' (CCEI), which held a regional practitioners workshop ahead of the forum, presented summarised outcomes. The workshop, organised by IFRC, OCHA, UNICEF and CDAC Network, was attended by more than 60 participants from 11 African countries.[ii] Insights included an urgent need to address challenges working with and for communities affected by extreme insecurity and to come up with a common agreement over what constitutes 'community engagement' and how it should be integrated in both humanitarian and development programming. Actions to take forward included:

- Country-specific plans for communication and community engagement built on existing initiatives and focused on strengthening and coordinating activities rather than creating new ones; and,
- Establishing a regional community of practice based on the existing model in Asia Pacific.
- Stronger leadership in support of community engagement.

Presenting outcomes of the CCEI workshop, Alexis Manirakiza, Head of Communications and Resource Mobilisation, Burundian Red Cross Society observed: "*We are here as eleven countries. We need to talk about technical needs and go back to our respective countries and implement actions plans. [Community Engagement] is impossible if there is no leadership…It is crosscutting and needs the involvement of all actors…When we talk about partners, we have to have a budget that is earmarked allocating a certain percentage to community engagement so it is integrated in all programmes.*"

Addressing the leadership vacuum

Brendan Gormley, Chair of the CDAC Network Board challenged representatives from NGOs, UN and donors on the role of leadership in setting the tone for community participation, and empowering communities to play a leadership role in preparedness and response. "*Let's not wait,*" he urged. Participants widely agreed deliberate engagement of leadership within organisations is critical for necessary buy-in and a shift from business as usual.

All too often, the lack of support from agency leaders and coordinating bodies for ensuring meaningful two-way communication and engagement with communities was missing when indeed it should be a non-negotiable, strategic objective and a collective responsibility for humanitarian and development actors. "*Many of us when we go to communities we don't really listen and we miss so much. The issue of common standards of engaging with communities, differing approaches can confuse communities,*" pointed out Aydrus Daar, Executive Director, WASDA and member of the NEAR Network Leadership Council.

The shrinking space for engagement was raised as a concern that has huge impact on conversations between governments and international organisations. Getachew Taa, Head of IFRC Office, East Africa, called on humanitarians to adopt the mantra, "*nothing for local communities without the involvement of local communities."* He added: *Engagement of local organisations and continuous capacity building needs to be achieved in order to deliver impactful engagement. If we genuinely want communities to lead we need to equip organisations with the right mindsets, skills and time. It takes time and when it works it is truly emotional*." Strategic donor engagement should be sustained, especially in achieving the localisation commitment in the Grand Bargain.

Nicole Walden, Deputy Regional Director East and Horn of Africa, International Rescue Committee (IRC) highlighted the power dynamic in moving the area of communicating with communities and community engagement beyond words to action. "*Ultimately what we're discussing is power sharing. Power is never conceded it's taken. Also what we are talking about is our value system. Do we honestly believe in the impact we can have if it's based on what communities need and want? Do we believe we need to drive towards collective outcomes?*" Walden asked participants.

Participants acknowledged funding is not the only underlying cause of the slow pace of adoption of this area in programmes. Lack of mechanisms to fund collective actions are also preventing movement of community engagement to the next level and promoting the humanitarian-development nexus. Max Schott of UNOCHA Somalia advocated leadership of the Humanitarian Coordination Teams (HCT) to drive commitments to collective actions to push community engagement into practice: "*Ensure it's embedded in the existing coordination architecture like the CwC [communicating with communities] working group in Somalia. Each cluster has a focal point that will support in the process. If we don't do this in the long run we are losing our credibility,*" he said.

Are we shifting or sharing power?

Summarising insights from day one of the forum, Dr Sharath Srinivasan of Africa's Voices Foundation noted the tensions in shifting power to disaster-affected populations. He emphasised concerns about how communication with communities and community engagement are areas that are not highly prioritised in humanitarian action or that exist as silos within organisations. What is needed is a change in mindset and incentivising ways of working with local NGOs to improve engagement in crises.

Communication and data flows, he echoed, have changed power dynamics and aid organisations' interactions with the communities they serve. There have been significant shifts in this regard; many organisations have dropped the term 'beneficiaries' and starting using 'clients' instead, giving people receiving humanitarian assistance more power to hold organisations to account and have a say in the design of services and systems. Dr Srinivasan pointed out that more private sector actors are showing interest in the field, not only because of a corporate sense of social responsibility, but because there is commercially valuable data to be collected, which poses ethical concerns.

Underlying all action within the complexity of digital communication and engagement, there has to be trust, he emphasised. Only with trust can there be a relationship which results in people accepting and imparting information, particularly in an age of fake news and data harvesting, and within contexts where promises around aid deliveries, for example, are of vital importance. Inherent in trust is an idea of mutual respect, listening and equality. Again and again, he said, forum participants reiterated that inequality is a major issue that undermines implied commitments to a long-term relationship.

Dr Srinivasan identified the following key points from the forum:

- A nexus between community and citizen engagement, and communication, technology and data needs to be further established, in order to clearly define the linkages and opportunities for adoption in humanitarian action.

- It is important to define 'who' will be engaged by organisations in the drive to achieve accountability to affected communities or undertake communication and community engagement activities. This is necessary owing to different programmatic scope that might target either populations at risk or citizens in the affected community or governments.

- Overloading communities in the drive to improve engagement, especially through application of technology and other diverse innovations, is a growing concern, particularly where expectations may be raised but remain unattainable. This will impact and erode trust in communities. A 'cautious balance' should be maintained in the adoption of new and existing approaches to communication and community engagement (CCE).

- A change in mindset and incentivising certain ways of working, as well as building partnerships with local NGOs, are critical ways in which organisations can achieve the 'how' and ensure positive, lasting impact.

- Digital technologies remain critical enablers for CCE. It is the catalyst that is driving the communication revolution in humanitarian and development contexts, as well as influencing private sector partnerships, which have bolstered information platforms, data flows, wider connectivity and livelihood initiatives within communities.

- Digital technologies are enabling affected communities to be heard, hence moving them from being victims to mobilisers and responders in crisis situations.

It is incumbent on all involved in the humanitarian and development sectors to support and advocate 25 per cent allocation of humanitarian funds towards enabling local leadership and championing the 'Participation Revolution' of the Grand Bargain.

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i International Finance Corporation (IFC) World Bank Group, 2018, "Kakuma as a Marketplace: A consumer and market study of a refugee camp and town in northwest Kenya", SPECIAL CONFERENCE EDITION.
ii Burundi, CAR, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan.