

Stepping up to the challenge of community engagement in a digital age: Creating dialogue and ‘virtual safety nets’



(Picture; Dahlia)

Report on Special Event on Community Engagement

26 September 2016



ICRC



'The inclusion of direct testimony ... can help to make it less of a monologue and more of a dialogue, as peoples' testimony begins to require answers and as their voices force the development establishment to be more accountable for their actions. In short, it is not enough for the development 'expert' to summarise ... the 'others' must be allowed to speak for themselves'

Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson on the benefits of acting on what people are saying from their book 'Listening- For a Change' (Panos, 1994)

Introduction

On the 26 September 2016 a special event was held by the CDAC Network, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), on how to meet the challenge of community engagement in a digital age. The event, held at the ICRC Humanitarium in Geneva, brought together humanitarian, media development and private sector actors operating in the humanitarian sphere to take a concentrated look at community engagement.

The event was inspired by the global push for more effective community engagement and participation set out in the 'Grand Bargain' agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit, as well as the commitments and principles in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If the vision in these two international frameworks is to be realised, each and every actor involved in humanitarian action needs to meet the challenge.

While there has been significant progress in terms of recognition for quality feedback, accountability and engagement, there is a need to put down another marker of intent to reinvigorate individual and collective efforts. We need to go to scale.

Going to scale would mean approaching communication and community engagement in a rigorous and serious way that demands results. This would involve seeing humanitarian interventions being designed and adapted because of what affected populations are saying, and even working toward the provision of a '*virtual safety net*' where, not only cash, but also some social services requested by affected people, is made available through connectivity and availability of technology.

The event was opened by **Dylan Winder**, Head of Humanitarian Policy and Partnerships at DFID and chaired by **Dr Hugo Slim**, Head of Policy at the ICRC.

There were three panels, reflecting the areas of biggest concern where an agenda is being set by humanitarian need or where there is a lack of capacity and knowledge.

These were:

- Communicating with communities during armed conflict and other situations of violence;
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and public-private cooperation: creating an enabling environment for community engagement;

- The critical role of communication and community engagement in preventing and addressing public health crises.

Setting the context

The importance of connectivity and building relationships of trust

In her address of welcome Marian Casey-Maslen, the Director of the CDAC Network, noted that the title of the event and the link to ‘*virtual safety net*’ was triggered by a 2016 report on the ‘[Voices of Refugees](#)’ which tracked the information and communication needs of those fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, travelling across Greece and into Germany. The report by CDAC members – BBC Media Action in partnership with Dahlia – found that even in this age of digital technology, information needed to make critical decisions was hard to come by. Some were frustrated by a simple lack of internet access or mobile connectivity. In many cases the most vulnerable were forced to rely on what people smugglers told them.

She stated that the number of people displaced from their homes is as large as the population of the United Kingdom and the demand for greater engagement with communities is higher than ever before. She noted that technology should be part and parcel of our response, but reminded the audience that digital technology is only part of the work of communicating with affected people.

The [Grand Bargain](#), recently launched at the [World Humanitarian Summit](#) highlighted the importance of communication and engagement with communities, acknowledging that communities themselves are first responders and that humanitarian actors must work more closely with civil society and national governments.

Ms Casey-Maslen urged the humanitarian community to provide greater incentives to organisations to use information gathered from affected people. ‘*Meaningful community engagement builds a relationship of trust with people affected and only delivers value for money if organisations use it to adapt to better reflect their needs,*’ she said.

Strengthening local action and participatory decision-making

In his opening remarks, Dylan Winder highlighted the importance of CDAC’s convening role, bringing UN, donors, civil society and media together and urged that more donors should support activities that bring the voice of the affected to the policy table. He reiterated the success achieved through the Grand Bargain, especially with regards to Accountability towards Affected People (AAP) and highlighting the need for local needs assessments and localisation of humanitarian assistance.

Mr Winder went on to note the positive impact that technology has had on humanitarian operations, drawing attention to the cost effectiveness of the [Internews project Radio Bakdaw](#) after Typhoon Haiyan which enabled aid agencies to not only provide information to people affected by the typhoon, but also allowed them to voice their concerns. More recently after the earthquake in Nepal, he mentioned a joint platform for community engagement, of which CDAC Network played a role, which delivered tangible outcomes for better addressing people’s needs.

A continuing challenge with community engagement, he said, was the lack of take up by decision makers of information collected through feedback channels. ‘We need to

get much better at bringing feedback from populations into international humanitarian response.’ He urged greater clarity on how Humanitarian Country Teams use information provided by affected people. [Ground Truth Solutions](#) was noted as a strong actor in collecting and collating information from affected people. In addition, he recognised the need to link with the private sector and develop new partnerships to ensure digital and IT aspects are included in humanitarian programs. For example, the [Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation](#), was highlighted as an opportunity to take issues around community engagement on board.

Finally, he noted that the UK government is delivering new guidelines for civil society funding, noting that two main aspects of this will be AAP and preparedness.

Dignity, significance and creativity

The chair of the event, Dr Hugo Slim, centred his remarks on the dignity, significance and creativity that comes with engaging with affected people. He reminded the audience that *‘we are in a profession about people recovering their dignity. The ability to voice their concerns and wants, is part of that process of dignity.’* People have the right to speak and participate in events and policies that determine their lives, he said.

He highlighted the significance in the information that comes from affected people, and that what people say to the world can be used to improve humanitarian action.

Creativity in dialogue between all actors was also noted, and puts a mirror to humanitarian actors. *‘In people’s words we hear what people think about what we offer and what we do. It’s a motor to change what we’re doing,’* Dr Slim said.

Dr Slim read some paragraphs from his book from 1994, ‘Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development’ which was published during what he called an *‘early participation revolution.’* His reading opened with a quote from a woman who was displaced from her home, *‘Words from the heart are more alive than your scribbling. When we speak, our words burn.’*

Finally, Dr Slim stated that we know that new forms of communication through connectivity and technology are important. We no longer need to ask why we are communicating with affected people, he said. What he urged was to focus on how we do it, requiring more examples and funding to continually push how we do it better. He noted that ICRC is taking its responsibilities on communicating with communities seriously and focusing this year on doing more with AAP.

The prevailing themes from panel discussions¹

In the three panel discussions that followed, a number of themes prevailed:

1. **Balancing the new with the traditional ways of communicating:** Technology has undoubtedly enabled more efficient and widespread two-way communication in humanitarian settings. These advances have increased humanitarians’ awareness of affected people’s needs, preferences and provided greater opportunity for them to give feedback. Information technology has been especially important in settings where proximity to affected people is limited. There are certain challenges however, which include reinforcing power imbalances within

¹ A Summary Record of each panel discussion is attached

families and communities, as well as the potential for rumours and misinformation to spread. Furthermore, panellists noted that technology related successes remain in 'pockets' and that humanitarians still struggle to bring these advances to scale. Despite the advantages, other forms of communication such as traditional news providers, story tellers, recognised local leaders and health networks should not be overlooked or replaced. Face to face dialogue should remain a prime method of engagement whenever possible.

2. **Using information in decision making:** Overwhelming amounts of data are potentially now available to decision makers from numerous sources. The challenge lies in ensuring that data is analysed quickly and used to inform decisions. This will require creating greater incentives for managers and decision makers to take the voices of affected people into consideration and adapt programmes accordingly. In particular, there was a call for donors to put greater pressure on humanitarian actors to demonstrate how they have used input from affected people to inform programme decisions. As Sir Brendan Gormley, Chair, CDAC Network stated in his closing, 'We need to shift the balance from being clever about collecting information from affected people, to being clever about spreading the knowledge and responding to it.'
3. **Documentation of engagement practice in different contexts:** Documenting what we do, what works, what doesn't and why, is an essential part of reflection and learning and particularly with those in critical and complex environments such as situation of armed conflict. It must be planned and budgeted for if lessons are to be learned, and practitioners do not waste resources, use inappropriate systems or conduct activities that are not properly thought through. There should also be recording of the consideration given to ethics, data protection and how engagement was undertaken in ways to counter inequalities such as those affecting women and children who may have limited access to media or feedback channels.
4. **Partnerships with private sector:** Mutual understanding and partnerships between the private and humanitarian sectors are needed to further bring digital and information technology into humanitarian programming. This includes understanding each other's motivations, drivers but also constraints. For partnerships to be successful and sustainable, private sector contributions must be part of a larger corporate benefit. As more private sector actors become involved in humanitarian work, many noted the need for stricter policies around data protection and privacy. In addition, as companies like Facebook have more influence on the actions of people affected by crisis, they must acknowledge the significant responsibility that comes with this power. Finally, identifying and creating agreements with external actors (including the private sector and media) are essential to being prepared to meet the immediate information needs of communities.
5. **Local voices must be at the decision-making table:** Panellists called for greater localisation of aid and a recognition that the humanitarian sector plays only a small part of the work done to help communities recover during and after crisis. Communities themselves are always first responders, playing an important role when it comes to protection and resilience. Diaspora groups also provide significant inputs – both through financial but also with moral and technical support. The international role should be one that facilitates these connections,

and supports them in creating the networks they need to survive while ensuring there is full participation in developing response.

6. **‘Joined Up’ engagement should involve donors and private sector:** communicating with communities and effective engagement is likely to result in challenges to hierarchical approaches and the culture within some humanitarian organisations, which in turn could lead to tokenism or a lack of buy-in. If donors are to ‘hold the feet of humanitarian responders to the fire’, as one panellist suggested, then this area might profit from a closer understanding that encourages risk and innovation to achieve results. This in itself might be innovative. It could help move relationships beyond that of funder and implementer, while giving a clear signal toward the SDGs, the vision implicit in the Grand Bargain and the participation revolution.

The meeting considered also an embryonic idea about ‘*virtual safety nets*’. Behind this is thinking that would stretch traditional humanitarian action beyond lifesaving and short term service provision. It would involve developing connectivity in the longer term (rather than ad hoc arrangements) to help those on the move to maintain their family and network connections, seek answers and be in a wider dialogue. As with social protection ‘safety nets’ this might require government action, licensing and the cooperation of the private sector to ensure, for example, free mobile access for people crossing borders and perhaps even the recognition that providing a suitable mobile is a vital intervention. The ‘virtual safety net’ would be a way of enabling people, go beyond cash transfers, and start to provide contact for other social services while allowing feedback and accountability from dispersed and vulnerable people.

Concluding remarks

In closing, Sir Brendan Gormley, said that his ambition in five years was to close CDAC. ‘Let’s give ourselves a timetable’, he said. ‘There is’ he added, ‘a need to shift from looking inward to looking outwards to engage effectively with people, understand their needs, and support them in creating the networks they need to survive. He pressed the humanitarian community to ‘work in new ways and incentivise humanitarian leadership to respond to feedback.’

The CDAC Network, ICRC and the UK’s Department for International Development gratefully acknowledges the contributions from panellists and those in the audience for taking the time to engage, suggest new ways of working and make this event a success.

Looking to the future

This event coincided with the roll out of the CDAC Network Strategy for 2016-2021 which supports policy, practice and systems-level change on communication and community engagement so members and the wider sector can better meet the needs of women, men, girls and boys affected by crisis.

The global context of a growing refugee crisis, increased usage of mobile phones, the ability to get messages to and from people and the potential to use such feedback to help assess effectiveness means that the skills to create effective dialogue are now at the top of the ‘must do’ list.

This is a historic opportunity, and the CDAC Network is convinced that a considerable step change is possible. Subject to resources being available the CDAC Network will build on learning from this Geneva event to establish a joint space with donors, the private sector and others involved in humanitarian action that will seek to take engagement with communities to a new level by:

- a) Encouraging risk, innovation and change in organisations to better benefit affected communities through the building of a strong evidence base, and capacity support on the ground.
- b) Promoting a healthy balance between analogue and digital technology to support inclusive approaches.
- c) Creating demand for documentation of ethical approaches to engagement that demonstrate results both from the perspective of people affected and the implementing organisation.
- d) Advocating for local voices, knowledge and experience to be included systematically in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response and related verification processes.

The CDAC Network will continue to encourage thinking and advocate for the development of '*virtual safety nets*' to maintain connectivity for all those in need, including those on the move, or beyond the physical reach of organisations or other social services.

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Annex 1: Summary Record of Panel Discussions

Panel 1: Communicating with communities during armed conflict and other situations of violence

This panel looked at the need for humanitarian organisations to improve their communication with communities in conflict settings in order to increase their acceptance by the community and other stakeholders, improve their safety and security, and broaden their access to assist those in need. While 86% of the humanitarian responses and funding are in conflict settings, the implications and opportunities of engaging with communities in armed conflicts and other situations of violence are less well known and documented because of the operational complexities and the increasingly contested information space.

Topic Leader: Dr Hugo Slim, Head of Policy, ICRC

Panellists:

- Scott Pohl, Senior Community-Based Protection Advisor, UNHCR
- Charlotte Bennborn, Head of Unit, Economic Security, ICRC
- Alyoscia D'Onofrio, Senior Director, Governance, IRC
- Daniel Bruce, Chief Executive, Internews Europe

Alyoscia D'Onofrio, opened the discussion noting that **humanitarian managers have huge amounts of data, but little of it approximates to what people's preferences are**. 'We have needs assessments, but they are imperfect tools, often a one off engagement, conducted early on, usually that comes with preconceived assumptions. What is truly missing is the question of *how are we doing?*' Going to the field and speaking to people was the only way to get that direct impression, he said, but it does not give the whole picture as it is not representative. IRC has been working with [Ground Truth Solutions](#) to find a way to aggregate people's perspectives and raise 'red flag' issues in operations.

He said recent events have demonstrated humanitarians 'waking up to the changing world,' citing the work done in Greece where humanitarians provided mobile charging stations and created web based platforms to dispel rumours. He reiterated however, the question raised by Dylan Winder of **how much feedback from affected people is actually followed up on**. He suggested tracing people's routes more thoroughly to get their feedback and understand their concerns. A critical element for this was the need for translation, and he noted that the IRC was able to get 3-4 languages covered.

Finally, he noted that the humanitarian sector tends to **assume that new technology provides answers to inequality and power**. This is not always the case, especially with gender disparities and access to mobile technology.

Charlotte Bennborn discussed the challenges she experienced engaging with communities in Yemen. There, she explained, the **humanitarian sector usually did not have close proximity to communities and used technology to gain access**. This was challenging, not only because the networks did not always function, but also because many people sold their phones for petty cash. The humanitarian community did not know who had access to phones or what their role in the family was. She added, 'we have a collective responsibility to provide the infrastructure for people to be able to communicate.'

Scott Pohl reminded the audience that ‘new technology is not an end of itself, but a tool to get us to community engagement and protection.’ He stressed that **technology should not substitute for face to face communication**, and that people want to be spoken with directly for which technology can actually set up another barrier. ‘While digital technology is essential, we have to find a smart way to use it. We shouldn’t think that just because we’ve developed a new breakthrough that it should super-cede face to face communication.’

One of the biggest **challenges that comes with digital technology, he said, is misinformation and rumours** to be spread. Thus, the humanitarian sector must ensure that the technologies it uses to engage with people do not fall into the hands of people they are not intended for. Finally, he noted that phones can be prohibitively expensive and typically the strongest member of the family controls it, creating tensions within the household but also a tendency for women and girls to turn to negative coping mechanisms to get access to phones. ‘**Access to connectivity is not equal,**’ he emphasised.

Daniel Bruce remarked on the considerable progress made in the field of communicating with communities. While innovative best practices have been identified ‘in pockets’, he noted the **challenge of bringing these examples to scale**. The evidence base, he said, should include tools and approaches to help take these initiatives to scale. In the context of conflict situations, he mentioned the need to reflect on what the information is being used for and what forms of information are needed for people to better themselves.

Data protection was noted by Charlotte Bennborn as a significant challenge for the ICRC, which is protective of the information regarding people they work with. Cash programming, for example, requires information about beneficiaries that is linked to service providers. Passing on this information would be ‘an enormous responsibility and risk for us,’ she said. Daniel Bruce mentioned the work being done with Oxfam to look at back end policies and mechanisms for mitigating breaches of privacy, but noted that this is an area that the humanitarian community has not yet looked at with considerable depth.

Aloyisia D’Onofrio noted the strong culture of data protection within UNHCR, but said that **this is becoming more challenging as the organisation engages with private companies**, citing the use of SIM cards as an example. Finally, he noted the need to train staff, partners, refugees, local NGOs on the basics of keeping themselves safe on the internet and minimising risks.

Better responding to community feedback was brought up by the audience, and Scott Pohl explained UNHCR’s starting point of talking to people in a ‘systematic and multi-functional way.’ This means that multiple sectors jointly speak with people at all stages of the program cycle. However, the pressure to implement as soon as possible often leads to fragmentation in terms of consultation. One of the biggest challenges he said, is bringing the voices of affected people to senior management levels who are able to course correct. ‘The architecture is there,’ he said but ‘getting it to be fully implementable is where we’re still a ways off.’

Aloyisia D’Onofrio reiterated this noting that ‘there’s huge rigidity in the way programs are set up and we need to address it.’ He observed that ‘we work in a business that wants to improve and its theory of change is that if we can just have better inputs we can get better outputs.’ Decision makers are deluged with information, **but there are**

few incentives for them to take into consideration voices of affected people, especially when managers are judged on successes in other areas (for example how much they increased their budgets). He requested donors ‘hold our feet to the fire and keep them there’ when it comes to demonstrating how inputs from affected people have influenced program decisions. ‘We need to focus on incentive structures within and between our organisations and donors should ask, **‘what have you done differently as a result of talking to your beneficiaries?’**”

Charlotte Bennborn noted the need to improve the quality, not quantity of what we’re delivering. The danger, she noted of collecting too much information was that we don’t differentiate it between different levels and sources. The more technology that is used, the more information is collected and the challenge becomes how to analyse and use it all.

In response to the question whether connectivity is a form of a safety net, it was stated that people affected by conflict depend on connectivity, not only to speak to their loved ones at home, but for other benefits like sending money back home. In that way it is a virtual safety net which needs to be capitalised upon.

Alyoscia D’Onofrio reminded the audience, there are **many analogue safety nets as well, which don’t involve the humanitarian sector**. Communities are connecting to other communities and this plays a significant role when it comes to protection and resilience. There are extraordinary examples in Syria in places where the humanitarian community cannot reach. Our role should be to amplify these. Finally, he noted that a virtual safety net is a positive idea, but our assumptions about what people actually want should always be tested.

Panel 2: ICTs and public-private cooperation: creating an enabling environment for community engagement

Information and communication technologies are widely viewed as enablers for development and their expansion essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The European migrant and refugee crisis provides the strongest evidence yet of an international humanitarian crisis in the digital age where a mobile phone is the key tool to survival and finding safe passage in a crisis that overflows boundaries. Social media platforms have flourished during this crisis, and have become a standard means of communication and information. Aid organisations used to providing physical assistance to displaced populations are recognising that a ‘virtual safety net’ - providing information, contact and even psycho-social support and family reunification - is now vital.

Although the humanitarian sector has made advances in ICTs which have enhanced connections between humanitarian and development work, it still struggles with engaging with the private sector. In the digital age, the traditional nature of aid is changing with businesses able to link directly with disaster affected populations in preparedness and response and ‘affected populations increasingly expect aid agencies to provide assistance through local markets rather than serving as frontline aid providers themselves’.²

Topic Leader: Paul Conneally, Head of Corporate Communications Division, International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

² Humanitarian crises, emergency preparedness and response: the role of business and the private sector. Final report. Steven A. Zyck and Randolph Kent, ODI, July 2014 (www.odi.org/projects/2738-humanitarian-private-sector-engagement)

Panellists:

- Gwi-Yeop Son, Director of the Division for Corporate Programmes, OCHA
- Leonard Doyle, Director, Media and Communication Division, IOM
- Oliver Parsons, Market Engagement Manager, Disaster Response, GSMA
- Alpha Bah, Chief Global Emergency Telecommunication Cluster and IT Emergency Preparedness and Response Branch, WFP

Gwi-Yeop Son, cited three key issues: **interoperability of data** among partners working with actors in communities, **setting standards** so that data can be analysed systematically; **ensuring data privacy and security** for which we have not found clear solutions. OCHA has recently established Humanitarian Data Center in the Hague to help move forward in these areas. She explained that it came out of a need to leverage data and provide a shared space for partners to innovate and work on solutions that are practical and scalable. The Humanitarian Data Centre is aimed at shifting the mind-set of the humanitarian community to leverage the right technology to scale up to gain efficiency.

Ms. Son cited a number of tools and platforms already created in this area including [Humanitarian Data and Exchange \(HDX\)](#), which shares analytics on data collected. Through the HDX feedback from communities is collected and shared with the clusters so they can respond appropriately. OCHA also organised a literacy session for HCs to discuss how big data is used and how data can help inform leaders in their decision making, she explained.

Alpha Bah noted the **increased demand for information and the need to see how technology can support the wider response community**, especially affected people. 'As communities take centre stage in everything we do, we need to enhance the technology so that affected people can communicate with themselves.' WFP, he explained, is looking at feedback mechanisms to help provide better targeting and understanding their needs. 'Once you empower communities, it helps their wider community support them.' For example, two-way communication allows the diaspora to get involved and to work with humanitarians, allowing wider community engagement.

Data doesn't reside in one place, he noted, and **having a principled way of managing the data continues to be one of WFP's biggest challenges**. Their tool, [SCOPE](#) which was initially conceived as a cash based mechanism is now becoming more of a beneficiary management platform.

Finally, **technology isn't the goal in itself**. 'The word communication is not about ICT, it's a part of it. There are low tech ways of doing communication and community engagement, but what technology does is create a catalyst for change. It allows us to do things we weren't able to before. It helps us be more efficient in engaging with communities.'

Oliver Parsons, Market Engagement Manager, Disaster Response, GSMA discussed the barriers to private sector engagement. He noted that **many private sector organisations are willing to work with humanitarians on this topic but there is a lack of understanding of the constraints that the private sector faces**, in particular, regulations, and anti-competitive laws in the country. He also mentioned that at the end of the day, companies have a commercial business plan behind their

engagement. 'Where we see success is when partnership is mutually beneficial. It doesn't just focus on what private sector can give for free, but looks at where value to partnership and how that can be best matched on humanitarian side as well.'

The private sector wants to be engaged in these activities, and find innovative ways in which it can provide a useful service. Operators are in the business of connecting people and there is an interest in doing that in a crisis situation, he remarked. The most interesting and sustainable initiatives are those not handled by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) departments but those which provide services from a business perspective. Paul Conneally also mentioned that the SDGs have captured the imagination and strategic engagement of the private sector unlike the MDGs.

Mr Parsons noted the **importance of preparedness and that setting up these agreements in advance is critical.** The **Humanitarian Connectivity Charter** is one of the ways which they are trying to do this. It asks all operators to commit to a set of principles to bring these partnerships to scale. Part of this process is introducing the private sector and humanitarian organisations to each other for mutual understanding. *'If we as an industry design ways in which in the future we can instigate these processes without going through discussions around policy and governance, then the process will be much smoother,'* he said.

Leonard Doyle, Director, Media and Communication Division, IOM noted the enormous number of people operating on mobile phones, and particularly using Facebook to get information. **'The media landscape has totally changed, the media now is Facebook.** That is the elephant in the room.'

As more people use tools like Facebook, especially during migration, the company has a responsibility to communicate to people about the dangers ahead. 'When you're luring an impoverished, illiterate people to get on bus, and then potentially perish, there has to be responsibility of new media.' Facebook has worked with IOM when there was hate speech on their platform and to help sensitise Germans on the benefits of having a diverse population. 'They have a huge footprint, need to see more of their engagement since they're the ones speaking to affected people.'

Panel 3: The critical role of communication and community engagement in preventing and addressing public health crises

The West Africa Ebola crisis precipitated multiple examples of how poor communication, bad messaging and misunderstanding by responders can have tragic results in a health emergency and contribute to the spread of disease. Such events and sudden onset disasters provide the biggest test of how well authorities are prepared for having a constructive dialogue with communities near and far. People are safer when they are informed, and able to take some actions that help limit the spread of diseases in the face of a frightening epidemic or an earthquake that has forced them to live in the open without clean water. In a connected world where growing numbers of people are more vulnerable, this is another area where specific attention needs to be directed in terms of funding, knowledge and developing capacity.

Topic Leader: Jamo Huddle, Technical Director Humanitarian Design, Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability, World Vision International

Panellists:

- Dr Juliet Bedford, Director, Anthrologica

- Ombretta Baggio, Global Coordinator, Community Engagement and Accountability, IFRC
- Rosie Parkyn, Head of the Advisory and Policy Team, BBC Media Action
- Ashaluck Bhatiazevi, Technical Officer (Risk Communication), Global Capacities Alert and Response Department, World Health Organisation (WHO)
- Charles-Antoine Hofman, Community and Community Engagement Platform Senior Adviser, UNICEF

Rosie Parkyn discussed **the importance of preparedness when it comes to meeting the information needs of communities**, noting the need to create networks that can be mobilised at the time of crisis. This was made clear in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis where top down messaging initially stoked fear and misinformation. Working with community broadcasters, BBC Media Action made sure that they had accurate information and found platforms to support locally relevant broadcasting.

Ombretta Baggio reiterated this stating that experience has shown – from yellow fever to Zika – **the need to be there before the crisis happens**. What she has found however, is that there is no incentive to listen to people on the ground and that funding for these initiatives is a constant challenge. ‘In West Africa we’re doing amazing work in terms of listening to people’s feedback and concerns, responding to misinformation and connecting people. But there is no more funding to continue this kind of work.’

She described the work of the IFRC in creating a Virtual Volunteer, which allows everyone to be a volunteer in a virtual place, where IFRC can guide the conversation and provide factual information. She noted, ‘we should act more as facilitators with good knowledge. **Facilitating dialogue is the role we should be taking.**’

Ashaluck Bhatiazevi noted that WHO is reforming the way it works in a new health emergency. WHO is in a unique and delicate situation given how closely it works with the MoH, but sees this as where it can have impact in terms of engagement. She mentioned that since Ebola, WHO is **looking beyond the media to a broader spectrum of actors when it comes to engaging with people**.

Juliet Bedford noted that the humanitarian sector needs to realise that it does not work in a vacuum. She described a number of gaps, **including coordination when it comes to seeking information**. ‘Communities should not be put under additional stress because we ask the same questions.’ She also discussed the humanitarians’ bounded concept of community, which tends to consider a location, when in actuality it extends far beyond that, for example to the diaspora. She also noted the need to **act on what we hear and operationalise information**. ‘Putting evidence into action is something that’s difficult to do.’

Charles-Antoine Hofman said there is a case for more collective approaches to AAP mechanisms. While there’s a lot happening at the organisational level, there are fewer experiences at the collective level. **Stronger coordination is needed around the various approaches**.

When asked what they would this discussion to look like in 5 years, panellists focused their responses around localisation of aid. Ashaluck Bhatiazevi said that in five years, **the international agencies would be facilitators and observers**.

Ombretta Baggio wanted Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies to be at the table, describing how a **local organisation has managed and coordinated information on the ground throughout the year** – before and after any epidemic happens. Rosie Parkyn hoped the international office would play a minor role, and partners could apply the principles very swiftly so that there wasn't a swirl of misinformation at the early stage. Juliet Bedford wanted these **concepts to be so embedded that we wouldn't be talking about it as a discreet conversation** in five years. Finally, Charles-Antoine Hofmann wanted to see whether organisations were ready to go as far as what their commitments state in terms of participation and engagement. *'There is room to be a lot more ambitious,'* he said.

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