

The Participation Revolution is happening – it just doesn't involve aid

By Martin Dawes

Funding appeals for humanitarian action are seeking ever increasing amounts, even as funding gaps challenge the system. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit brokered the 'Grand Bargain' to improve the delivery of humanitarian aid. One of the goals was a 'Participation Revolution' to make aid more effective through the inclusion of people and their communities in 'our decisions'. As part of its supporting advocacy the CDAC Network organised a global forum in 2017 on 'The authenticity challenge to the Participation Revolution'.ⁱ Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge to governments, systems and response. Now, Martin Dawes, formerly of the CDAC Secretariat, asks: what is the state of the revolution?

We were all drawing breath. After two years of unprecedented restrictions, billions of dollars spent and seismic societal shocks, there was considerable conversation about what the 'new normal' would look like. Covid-19 reset so much. It is a true watershed in world history.

And then came the invasion of Ukraine. This wholly avoidable, manmade disaster will soak up billions, create unpredictable economic consequences and mark a tear-soaked milestone in the story of multilateralism. Both pandemics and wars change human history, sometimes in ways that take years to understand.

Aid in its many forms is needed more than ever. The Grand Bargain attempted to reset the way humanitarian organisations operate and to address known challenges. While there have been successes, promises have been broken. There has been a systematic failure to involve local communities and people. This not only ignores their rights, it also excludes diversity and knowledge while suppressing grassroots action and sustainability. In a time when there is less money available, ineffective approaches that inhibit local capacity-building are threatening to the whole construct.

Since the Grand Bargain was forged, there have been huge shifts in the humanitarian ecosystem, and not just because of Covid-19 and a new war in Europe. Climate change is now much more a public concern as

weather events increase vulnerabilities around the world. High profile cases of abuse by aid agency staff, either in terms of sexual predation or corruption, have highlighted inherent inequalities, lack of accountability and a failure to listen to whistle-blowers. Finally, I would argue that the shambolic and shabby treatment of people in Afghanistan as the Taliban resumed power should prompt international agencies to put much more emphasis on the safety of nationals working to agendas set elsewhere.

The eye-watering amounts of money that all the above require, including within institutions to maintain robust and sustained safeguarding, might suggest that aid in future is only for the big battalions. I argue differently. Everything now points to the need to be far more empathetic and closer to communities; to provide what people need, and to do it with their consent and participation.

Organisations with the capacity to handle large amounts of donor cash and work cross-border are needed. However, they should be judged not just by their ability to supply and account, but also by how their effort engages and is changed by the inclusion of local commitment, knowledge and expertise.

A promise unfulfilled

In 2017 the CDAC Network identified the steps to create an authentic 'Participation Revolution'.ⁱⁱ I will admit to some scepticism as I co-wrote the main argument, not about the principle itself but about whether the bulk of established aid organisations and multilateral institutions were willing to include disparate national voices at a level that sets policy and priorities. It was, after all, asking them to facilitate a loss of power. However, the closing thought – that adaptive and responsive organisations are the ones that will have a future – still, I believe, holds true.

Among the CDAC Network's '12 Essentials for System Change'ⁱⁱⁱ was a need for new ways of doing business and including different partners. In short, this was about being innovative, open and reflexive. It would involve approaches that could be characterised as empathetic, careful, insightful and knowledgeable.

As we know, such approaches are often not the reality. Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), however it might be defined, is often identified as the conduit through which local knowledge and feedback flows into humanitarian response. The UN has a system of Peer to Peer (P2P) missions to countries to look at what is being done and recommend changes. The 23 missions between 2014 and 2018 (which covers the period during which the Grand Bargain was agreed) found that 'not one country had (at the time of the mission) a functioning, comprehensive collective AAP system, including a collective complaints mechanism or complete AAP strategies with feedback systematically informing decision-making, programming and strategy.'^{iv} Similarly, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) P2P missions to Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Ethiopia in 2020/2021 found 'a clear gap on accountability to affected populations and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse ... inadequate or outdated coordination structures, and a disconnect between the leadership and operations in the field'.^v

In other words, 'accountability' was in the plan, but the main actors responsible for insuring coordination and joined-up approaches were not 'doing' it in a way that ensured results and addressed the legitimate aspirations of people to be part of decision-making. A Ground Truth Solutions survey of people in five African countries found that more than half said the aid they received 'did not cover their most important needs. In Chad, only 10 percent of people we surveyed were positive about the aid they got.'^{vi}

It sounds like a system-wide failure. As she opened the 2021 Grand Bargain annual meeting to assess progress after five years, Sigrid Kaag of the Netherlands said flatly that, 'We have not seen a participation revolution: affected people are still not always listened to or included.'^{vii}

At the CDAC Network meeting in 2017, one of the contributors observed that money might trickle down, but power doesn't.^{viii} If shifting more resources toward national bodies was intended as a way to irrevocably alter the power balance, then the most relevant promise at Istanbul was that 25% of all aid funding would go as directly as possible to local or national organisations by 2020. This did not happen. Just 3.1% of funding was funnelled directly to those bodies in 2020,^{ix} and figures up to 2019 suggest the target was never in reach.

Will it be different in the 'new normal'?

As was identified in the 2013 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and throughout the world in the Covid-19 response, health interventions need a strong engagement that addresses fears, taboos and misinformation.

Covid-19 is now a fact of life, and one that may be with us permanently. While it exists, populations and their health systems will remain under threat. Response will continue to absorb funds from donors and governments, all of which are working with reduced budgets.

However, the priority to get the job done must mean resources for working with the kaleidoscope of local and national organisations that bring the private sector, civil society, people with disabilities, women and the marginalised into the solution.

To do otherwise courts failure, as seen in the DRC. COVAX, the newly created partnership for the supply of Covid-19 vaccines, had to ship most of the stockpile to another country as they risked not being used, even though only 0.16% of DRC's 90 million population had received a single dose. Misplaced confusion from the government over the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine, suspicion and social media conspiracy theories added to distribution problems in a country with a woeful lack of healthcare and with other diseases of much more concern to those being asked to get vaccinated.^x

There is a direct link between this inability to run a successful immunisation effort as part of a global health imperative, and the multifaceted failure over decades to work with communities.

DRC has experienced a lot of humanitarian effort. It is also a country where corruption is endemic. UK Aid commissioned Adam Smith International to look at how corruption and fraud affects aid efficiency. In terms of the interaction between communities and aid bodies, it concluded that community participation was minimal and this contributed to a mutual lack of trust. This was compounded by short funding cycles leading to insufficient time to consult with communities. This situation increased opportunities for corruption and misdirection of funds. Where there were systems put in place to guard against abuses, they often failed. The many hotlines established by different entities for reporting abuse were overwhelmed and there was no system for cross-referencing or collating information across the sector. Sometimes lines were not answered, adding to disenchantment.^{xi}

The vaccination campaign would have stood a better chance of reaching greater numbers in the DRC if the relationship between aid and people was not so seriously flawed.

The recognition in the pandemic that global safety rested on universal vaccination led to new approaches. Scientists worked together to sequence the virus and new types of vaccines were developed in record time. Global health organisations, UN agencies, the private sector, governments and scientists launched the Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator), of which COVAX is a part. Under pressure, solutions were found through cooperation between diverse actors and the adoption of new ways of working to solve complex issues around development, production, funding and supply.

Humanitarian country teams, donors and agencies might learn from such a model that focuses disparate entities toward a common goal. Community engagement requires real innovation. Funding needs to work on a timescale geared for long-term change, rather than siloed, short programme cycles. Vials of vaccine were available in the DRC, but a lack of trust left people in danger. The pandemic shows how we must do better.

New ways are already emerging

Covid-19 was not only a health emergency but also an economic and social crisis that created change. After all, it forced governments to be much more concerned with and involved in finding solutions to the immediate needs of their populations.

The importance of information and communication technologies became evident, and mobile companies reported a massive surge in usage during lockdowns. A report by an industry body, commissioned by the Swedish development agency SIDA, stated that, 'In addition to managing the surge in demand, mobile operators made a concerted effort to understand local situations and needs and how they could support health care, education and commerce to continue to function – as well as support government containment efforts'.^{xii} Working with the company MTN, the UN's Economic Commission for Africa set up a hub that aimed to provide Covid-19-related information to governments and more than 600 million mobile users.

Mobile providers are a fixture of humanitarian response. They act fast to restore communications and, in many countries, they have more data on populations than any other organisation, including governments. Both the networks and the extracted data will become ever more important in setting priorities and providing for those most in need. But data security will prevent agencies accessing the information, unless they are able to develop relationships allowing them to receive data stripped of any personal identification.

The World Bank estimates that 97 million people were forced into extreme poverty because of Covid-19, which set poverty eradication back by four years.^{xiii} Haphazardly, sometimes imperfectly and through a variety of ways, there has been an explosion in cash transfers from governments aided by increased connectivity. In the first year of the pandemic the World Bank counted more than 3,300 new welfare schemes, a quarter of which were in poor countries.

Such payments for the poorest have seen governments explore new ways of assisting their people, and these mechanisms will affect assistance in the future. Increased use of communication technology will also mean the collection of substantial data. Even if schemes are transitory, they show how regular, sustained payment could be established for the poorest. The West African state of Togo took just 10 days to get a payment system up and running through mobiles. Given this, we must ask why this is not possible on a regular, sustained basis for the poorest? Undoubtedly there will be space for aid organisations in areas such as technical capacity-building and digital education with communities, but traditional aid approaches and organisations may be squeezed as government and people are enabled by private companies to have a direct relationship around needs.

In support of the promise for a 'Participation Revolution', in 2021 (five years after the World Humanitarian Summit) the IASC published guidance on how to support participation within humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Civil society groups and those representing sections of the community were identified as being essential for effective response along with practical ways for them to be brought into process. In effect, these groups are where 'participation' is happening, in many cases with minimal contact with 'aid'. Unfortunately, the pandemic's economic hit has badly affected local organisations and threatened the future of many.

More than a thousand such groups in Africa were surveyed by the Global Fund for Community Foundations. Sixty-eight percent said they had suffered a loss of funding since the start of the pandemic. The scale and disruption of the pandemic, according to the Fund, is such that the future of many such bodies is now in doubt. Their report states that, 'massive losses of funding, coupled with persistent restrictions on civic space that pre-date the pandemic, have limited the ability of African Civil Society Organizations CSOs to do their work, sometimes forcing organizations to close down altogether. Indeed, COVID-19 has exacerbated historical challenges, such as pervasive under-resourcing, that have long undermined the sector, and provides a sobering reminder of the perils facing African CSOs'.^{xiv}

The role of these organisations as an 'aid ally' cannot be overstated. In Malawi, voluble and courageous criticism, by groups such as the Human Rights Defenders Coalition and the Centre for Democracy and Economic Development Initiatives, of abuses around Covid-19 funding fed public outcry. A government audit led to a ministerial dismissal and arrests. During their campaign, these groups put on record how lives were lost because of the corruption – a bald statement of fact that was unlikely to have come from international NGOs and UN agencies based in the country.

The IASC guidance provides a good basis for going forward. It calls for real engagement with communities, and a change in attitude that urges more investment of both time and money. This will mean many international brands having to back off. Nationally based civil society groups should not be seen as their rivals for funding. Nor should there be funding processes that leave national entities hanging on the coat tails of an international partner. Established local networks need to be respected and bolstered. If internationally orientated aid structures are to be relevant in the future, then local partners and networks must be incorporated at the highest levels of decision-making. They are the true enablers of participation.

The drive for better

As she left the UN Environment Programme to take up her new post as Deputy Head of OCHA and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Joyce Msuya said that we are facing a planetary emergency from climate change, biodiversity and pollution.^{xv} Bringing her knowledge and experience to the centre of UN humanitarian response is likely to add to pressure for more environmentally aware assistance. When one thinks of the plastic involved in the Covid-19 response – the protective clothing, masks and testing kits – it is tempting to ask for the environmental impact study and safe disposal plan! It also seems reasonable to suppose that working in a more equitable way with local organisations will have a 'green dividend' by being more cost-effective, reducing travel and having empowered bodies in place that can truly understand and represent community concerns as they experience dramatic changes to their weather.

The world known to many aid responders has changed. New actors are helping to solve problems, while the sector as a whole has failed to make reality the democratic and legitimate right of people to be involved in decisions about them. This is especially worrying if international aid groups are to continue to play a major role in health interventions. The funding squeeze and the pandemic have also created a host of unforeseen consequences and opportunities, notably around the extension of welfare and increased focus on local groups that understand people's context, culture and needs.

Sigrid Kaag said in her address that change is happening, but no revolution. It may be truer to say that, as far as international humanitarian action is concerned, a revolution *is* happening. The question is whether international actors can be part of it.

The Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network facilitates the pre-positioning of national and sub-national mechanisms in disaster risk countries that enable more predictable and intentional two-way communication and engagement with people affected by disasters. See case studies on its work in countries such as [Burkina Faso](#), [Fiji](#) and [Vanuatu](#) and follow [@CDACN](#) on Twitter.

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ⁱ CDAC Network (2017) *The authenticity challenge to the participation revolution*. Two thought pieces, the first from Martin Dawes, CDAC Secretariat's Communication and Advocacy Advisor, and the second from Jenny Hodgson, Director of the Global Fund for Community Foundations, titled 'Seeing the woods and the trees: the quiet rise of community philanthropy' (www.cdacnetwork.org/policy-briefs/20170610-authenticity).

ⁱⁱ CDAC Network & SCHR (2017) *12 Essentials for System Change*. Report on the Global Forum on 'The authenticity challenge to the Participation Revolution' (www.cdacnetwork.org/policy-briefs/2017061012-essentials).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} A. Chatelet and M. Sattler (2019) 'Coordinating a Revolution; the critical role of responsive leadership in improving collective community engagement' *Humanitarian Exchange* 74 (<https://odihpn.org/publication/coordinating-revolution-critical-role-response-leadership-improving-collective-community-engagement/>).

^v IASC (2021) *Background Document: Analysis of Peer-2-Peer Mission Findings. December 2020–October 2021* (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Analysis%20of%20Peer-2-Peer%20mission%20findings_December%202020-October%202021%2C%20IASC%20OPAG%20Meeting%2023%20November%202021.pdf).

^{vi} N. van Praag and M. Satler (2022) 'Accountability is about leadership, not mechanisms: why we need to stop "doing" AAP'. Ground Truth Solutions, 6 January (<https://groundtruthsolutions.org/2022/01/06/accountability-is-about-leadership-not-mechanisms/>).

^{vii} Grand Bargain Eminent Person, Sigrid Kaag, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, at the Grand Bargain Annual Meeting, 15 June 2021 (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-06/Opening%20Statement%20-%20Grand%20Bargain%20Eminent%20Person%20Kaag%20-%20June%202021.pdf>).

^{viii} CDAC (2017) 'Authenticity and the Participation Revolution, Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, CIVICUS'. Video from the CDAC Network Public Forum (www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjLqCtCCyY&ab_channel=CDACNetwork).

^{ix} See: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2021/chapter-4-funding-effectiveness-and-efficiency/>.

^x See: www.africanews.com/2021/12/04/dr-congo-struggles-with-covid-vaccine-push/.

^{xi} Henze, N. et al (2020) *Operational Review of Exposure to Corruption Practises in Humanitarian Aid Implementation Mechanisms in the DRC*. Produced for DFID (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EN_Operational%20Review%20DRC%20Final%20Report_July.pdf).

^{xii} GSMA (2020) *New perspectives: How COVID-19 has shifted sustainability priorities in the mobile sector* (www.gsma.com/betterfuture/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ind_purp_covid_report_11_20-1.pdf).

^{xiii} Sánchez-Páramo et al. (2021) 'COVID-19 leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality'. World Bank Blogs, 7 October (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/covid-19-leaves-legacy-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality>).

^{xiv} Epic Africa and @AfricanNGOs (2021) *The Impact of Covid-19 on African Civil Society Organisations; Ongoing Uncertainty and a Glimmer of Optimism* Global Fund for Community Foundations (https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EPIC-Africa_TheImpactOfCOVID-19.pdf).

^{xv} See @JoyceMsuya on Twitter, 9 February 2022: <https://twitter.com/JoyceMsuya/status/1491410161059393537>.