'Working with what we have'

Key advocacy messages for inclusive communication and engagement in the Horn of Africa

April 2023

The Horn of Africa is experiencing consecutive failed rains and the worst drought and food insecurity in the region in more than a decade. The situation continues to deteriorate – millions of affected people and communities are experiencing severe food and water insecurity, crop failures, high food prices and death of livestock – with no end in sight.

In a crisis of this magnitude, effective communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) are a matter of life and death. Information and continuous dialogue support people to make decisions that impact their lives and livelihoods. Safe and accessible channels for people to communicate with service providers about their needs and concerns improve the quality, relevance and timeliness of the aid they receive. Simply put, **communication is aid – and a right of affected people**.

Robust, transparent and inclusive CCEA should represent the minimum foundation of humanitarian programming, yet funding for collective CCEA remains less than 1% of humanitarian funding. Challenged by insufficient dedicated funds and prioritisation, efforts to identify opportunities and initiate collective CCEA efforts in the Horn of Africa continue to fall short, leaving CCEA a weak link in the complex humanitarian response.

Affected communities cannot afford to wait. In the face of insufficient funding and operational constraints, CDAC Network and its members, key stakeholders and regional and in-country CCEA coordination structures[1] are calling for all humanitarian actors and other CCEA-related service providers to 'work with what we have' – including existing local structures, initiatives and partnerships – to drive inclusive and quality CCEA in affected areas. This note presents critical areas of focus to prioritise within existing programmes in order to catalyse change in the Horn of Africa context.

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1   CDAC Network consists of 35 of the largest humanitarian, media development and social innovation actors – including UN agencies, Red Cross/Red Crescent, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media and communications entities. CDAC works closely with the Regional Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Working Group, Ethiopia AAP Working Group and Somalia Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) Taskforce and other structures and actors in the region for the H2H Network-funded project to strengthen collective CCEA in the Horn of Africa.

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1   Information and dialogue save lives: prioritise provision of actionable information that upholds people's rights, dignity and agency

Actionable information that helps people shape decisions and cope with challenging realities can make a life-changing difference in a context where assistance and services may not be readily accessible to all. Communities also expect information on the assistance due to them and information on their rights and entitlements. Enabling people to have a say in the decisions that impact their lives and to express their needs and concerns is just as important – people need to be made aware of their right to provide feedback, the various methods to do so and assurance that feedback will not result in retaliation or other negative consequences for themselves or others.

What we can do differently

➔ Communicate information on critical topics that support people to manage their daily lives – for example, advice on conserving water, preventing the spread of communicable diseases or treating diarrhoea at home. This information should be accessible and shared using people's preferred formats, channels and languages. Work with other sectors to get the messaging right.

➔ Regularly communicate what services are available, when, and how people can access them, in the languages that people speak, without using jargon or technical terms.

➔ Work with diverse and trusted actors to share information, including community members, local organisations, government entities and media actors.

2   Use data to inform decision-making and close the feedback loop

Ensuring that humanitarian responses are driven by the needs and preferences of affected communities is non-negotiable, and this hinges on the systematic collection, analysis and use of data. While many organisations responding in the Horn of Africa routinely collect data from communities, challenges with consistent data analysis and data-sharing between organisations hinders collective action to close the feedback loop. We know that the use of data to inform strategic and programmatic decision-making improves services and outcomes for communities, and it must be a priority.

What we can do differently

➔ Promote referral pathways and information-sharing with existing complaints and feedback mechanisms, cross-check information between agency-specific mechanisms and compare feedback. Developing a shared taxonomy, including agreement on describing and classifying data from communities, can connect diverse, organisation-specific approaches to enable more efficient collective approaches.

➔ Develop and adopt data management and sharing protocols. These should address joint data collection, analysis, sharing, access and use processes, with an emphasis on data protection measures. This should also include processes to systematically share analysis with communities to strengthen their participation in programme design and delivery.

3   Foster collective CCEA approaches

There are diverse CCEA approaches being rolled out at the regional and country level in the Horn of Africa – including sector/cluster-based, issue-based (e.g. protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; gender-based violence; minority groups), consortium-based and area-based approaches. Initiatives to streamline and coordinate diverse approaches should not be misconstrued to mean dismantling or merging efforts to establish one collective approach. The focus now should be on strengthening links between diverse approaches to ensure coherence, foster collaboration, build and retain capacities of CCEA focal points/staff and promote collective advocacy and use of data to inform and influence decision-making.

What we can do differently

➔ Strengthen links between all CCEA collective approaches in-country by mapping and publicising CCEA approaches and efforts to enable organisations to plug into existing systems.

➔ Document and advocate for the benefits of coordinated and cohesive collective efforts.

4   Bolster diverse stakeholder engagement and partnerships

Effective humanitarian action requires engagement with, and collaboration between, diverse actors. Currently, engagement of local organisations, government authorities and media actors in the Horn of Africa response is notional, with limited pathways and opportunities to systematically engage them in CCEA planning and implementation. Inclusion of diverse actors in CCEA will enhance the speed, coverage and quality of assistance provided to communities.

What we can do differently

➔ Consider forging pathways between diverse actors with different capacities and areas of focus to enable broader participation in CCEA coordination and implementation.

➔ Recognise and leverage the expertise that different actors bring – for example, local media are experts on how to talk to and engage with their audience and know how to get a message across, while certain local community-based organisations and NGOs may specialise in engagement with specific groups of people.

Key resources for practitioners

- How-to guide on collective communication and community engagement in humanitarian action – CDAC Network
- Community engagement and accountability (CEA) toolkit – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
- Information management for communication, community engagement and accountability to affected people (CCE/AAP) – CDAC Network
- Data responsibility guidelines – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)
- Mapping information ecosystems to support resilience – Internews
- Guide for humanitarians on working with media – BBC Media Action
- Local media and community engagement in humanitarian settings – Internews
- Five easy steps to integrate language data into humanitarian and development programmes – CLEAR Global
- Protection implications of the drought in the Horn of Africa region – UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)
- Operational guidance on accountability to affected people – UNHCR
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) accountability and inclusion resources portal – IASC Taskforce 2 on AAP
- Accountability and inclusion helpdesk – IASC
- Engaging with people affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence – International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

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Cover photo: Dayniille internally displaced people camp, Mogadishu region, Somalia, 2022. Credit: Ismail Taaxta/ICRC.

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