



WORKING PAPER 1

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ACTION: BARRIERS, ENABLERS AND GOOD PRACTICE

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Community engagement—whilst long part of the dialogue of development programmes—has become an increasing priority within the humanitarian sector. In recent years, critical initiatives such as the 2014 Core Humanitarian Standards and the 2016 ‘participation revolution’ outlined in the World Humanitarian Summit’s Grand Bargain have sought to better embed community engagement. However, despite these efforts, limited progress has been made.

Action Against Hunger has commissioned this paper to identify the barriers and enablers to community engagement and highlight examples of good practice (see Figure 1 for a summary of research findings). This paper is the first stage of a research project that will inform their future global community engagement policy and practice. Action Against Hunger welcome wider sector engagement, if you are interested in collaborating or learning more, please reach out to MEALServices@actionagainsthunger.org.uk.

FIGURE 1: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Community Engagement in humanitarian and development action</h2>	
<h3>What is 'Community Engagement'?</h3>	
<p><i>Within this paper we have defined it as:</i></p> <p>Community engagement means collaborating with affected populations and communities to design, implement, and evaluate effective and high-quality programmes.</p>	
<h3>What are the barriers and enablers?</h3>	<h3>What does good practice look like?</h3>
<h4>Practical (project and programme) level</h4>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of urgency required to meet community needs • Access/lack of access to community • Strength/weakness of existing relationships and trust between staff and community • Security/insecurity in area • Level of 'consultation fatigue' • Level of complexity of social and political power dynamics • Delivery through local partners • Communication methods available • Impact of the crisis on the community • Level of compensation (financial or in-kind) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing adequate funding • Allocating staff with the necessary skills and adequate time • Exploring and factoring local social and political power dynamics into decisions • Using appropriate communication methods • Including marginalised groups • Responding to feedback
<h4>Organisational level</h4>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of organisational commitment • Level of clarity and consistency of what community engagement is and why it is important • High/low staff capacity (e.g. skills, experience, time) • Level of clarity around who is responsible for community engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding a clear definition of community engagement and why it is important • Fostering a culture of responsiveness and transparent decision making • Supporting learning within and across projects and programmes • Assigning clear roles and responsibilities for staff, supported by adequate resources
<h4>Systemic level</h4>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate/Inadequate funding with sufficient flexibility and long enough timeframe • Structural incentives/lack of structural incentives • Level of collaboration and coordination between different delivery organisations working in the same communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocating flexible funding • Allocating funding with an adequate time frame • Supporting structural incentives for community engagement

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Community engagement—whilst long part of the dialogue of development programmes—has become an increasing priority within the humanitarian sector over the last 30 years. Alongside community engagement, ‘participation’ and ‘accountability to affected populations’ are overlapping, and often synonymously used terms that have been seen in a raft of policies and commitments. Earlier initiatives such as the 1994 *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* outlined principles on both participation and accountability (IFRC and ICRC, 1994). More recently, the *Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability* (CHS Alliance, Group URD and The Sphere Project, 2014) was introduced in 2014, and in 2021 *The Grand Bargain 2.0* called for greater support for the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs (IASC, 2021).

Despite all these initiatives and commitments, several recent publications have highlighted that limited progress has been made (Alexander and Kerkvliet, 2021; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2021). For example, a Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) report concluded that ‘the humanitarian system is [still] not accountable at the collective level to the communities it serves’ (Holloway *et al.*, 2020, p. 9). In their five year reflection on the Grand Bargain the HPG also noted that while there is evidence of ‘a lot of activity at institutional [level].., much of this seems to have focused on engaging with affected populations for information purposes ... and to solicit their feedback’ (Metcalf-Hough *et al.*, 2021, p. 7). There is limited evidence to demonstrate that affected populations are engaged more meaningfully in making decisions at key stages of programme cycles, such as design; furthermore, the processes are not fully accessible, especially for the most vulnerable (Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021).

Surveys undertaken by Ground Truth Solutions found that overall there was no improvement in accountability to affected populations over the past five years [since the launch of the Grand Bargain] (Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021)

Action Against Hunger have been part of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance since 2010. In 2018 they undertook a self-assessment and identified that Commitment 4—humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback—is a priority area for improvement (AAH, 2019). To start tackling this, Action Against Hunger UK on behalf of the global network have commissioned the authors to work in partnership with them to improve their approach to the implementation and documentation of community engagement across their work in both a humanitarian and developmental context.

This working paper is the first publication linked to this research, with further working papers due to be published throughout 2023 and 2024. Whilst the primary audience for this paper is Action Against Hunger staff, it has been published externally to make the research available

to peer humanitarian and development organisations and support those who are addressing the same challenges.

1.2 Research questions

The aim of this paper is to summarise current knowledge and identify gaps in evidence to inform the next stage of research. The research questions this paper seeks to address are:

1. What is 'community engagement'?
2. What are the barriers and enablers to community engagement?
3. What does good practice in community engagement look like?

Section 2 of this paper addresses the first question. Research questions 2 and 3 (barriers, enablers, and good practice) are reported at three key levels:¹

- Practical (project and programme level) (Section 3)
- Organisational level (Section 4)
- Systemic level (Section 5)

Section 6 of the paper concludes with an outline of the next steps for this research project.

1.3 Methodology

This paper draws on a range of humanitarian and development literature - including both peer-reviewed publications and 'grey literature' (e.g. guidance documents, blogs and toolkits). Given the various interpretations and alternative terminologies a two-pronged approach was taken to identify the literature for inclusion in this review. Firstly, a broad scoping search ran key search terms² through a variety of databases including online practitioner libraries³, academic databases⁴ and delivery organisation's websites⁵. Secondly additional documents were identified through interviews with 18 people who have in-depth knowledge or experience of community engagement across the humanitarian and development sectors. For

¹ Following testing and inductive coding, the three final categories were adopted from Fluck and Barter (2019). The researchers considered this a helpful structure for reporting for two key reasons. Firstly, it was a good fit for the data identified through the literature review and interviews, which could be categorised or 'coded' systematically. Secondly, it aligned well with the organisational structure of Action Against Hunger, with different barriers, enablers and good practice being directly attributable to different functions of the network. For example, the 'practical' barriers, enablers and good practice findings were helpful for those designing or delivering projects or programmes. Whereas the 'organisational' barriers, enablers, and good practice findings were more applicable to the leadership within the organisation.

² Search terms included: 'community engagement', 'participation', 'participatory', 'accountability' and 'engaging with affected'

³ Website searched: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library>

⁴ Websites searched: <https://www.scopus.com/> and <https://scholar.google.com/>

⁵ Websites searched: The individual Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) members, see <https://www.dec.org.uk/> for the full list.

both methods 'snowballing' (reviewing the references of the literature we had included in the review to find other useful sources).

With the resources available for this research, only search terms in English were used; texts available in English or French that were identified through the interviews were analysed and reported. As a result of the available literature, the data synthesised in this report is primarily based on the perspective of humanitarian and development organisations working at an international level, and not those of community members or local organisations. This limitation will be addressed by the next stage of the research (see Section 6 for further details).

The 18 interviews were used to supplement the literature review and interviewees were asked to provide their insights on the research questions. This included Action Against Hunger staff, as well as people working for other humanitarian or development agencies and donors. A semi-structured interview guide template was used and the research complied with *DFID's Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities* (Thorley and Henrion, 2019).

This paper has been reviewed by the Action Against Hunger staff and updated following their comment.

2.0 What is community engagement?

2.1 Use of community engagement and associated terms by humanitarian and development actors

International actors emphasised the importance of participation in development throughout the twentieth century. For example, the United Nations promoted ‘community development’ during the 1950s, while amendments to the US Foreign Assistance Act called for the involvement of ‘beneficiaries’ in planning and implementing aid projects in the 1960s and 70s (Cornwall, 2006). The use of participatory approaches and tools developed rapidly from the 1980s onwards with the introduction of tools such as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers, 1994). PRA gradually became known as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) while participatory approaches to development moved from radical to mainstream (IIED, 2015).

In 1994 *The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* (IFRC and ICRC, 1994) included principles on both participation and accountability to affected populations. Principle seven - ‘Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid’ - included the ambition to ‘strive to achieve **full community participation**’ in the ‘design, management and implementation’ of humanitarian programmes. While principle nine stated simply that ‘we hold ourselves **accountable** to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources’. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) also introduced participatory tools such as Participatory Hygiene And Sanitation Transformation (PHAST) in 1998 (IFRC, 2007) and the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) in 1999 (IFRC, 2006).

In 2003 the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) was established to promote **accountability** to affected people. HAP’s *Principles of Accountability* included:

- **‘Communication:** Members inform, and consult with, stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries and staff⁶, about the standards adopted, programmes to be undertaken and mechanisms available for addressing concerns
- **Participation** in programmes: Members involve beneficiaries in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and report to them on progress, subject only to serious operational constraints

⁶ HAP’s *Principles of Accountability* highlight the importance of engaging with ‘stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries and staff’ (HAP, 2007, p.5). The Research Team note that, in 2023, the term ‘affected population’ is preferable to ‘beneficiary’ and that stakeholders include a broad range of local actors, not just beneficiaries and staff. See Section 2.2 for the terminology used by Action Against Hunger.

- **Addressing complaints:** Members enable beneficiaries and staff to report complaints and seek redress safely' (HAP, 2007, p. 5).

*“Participation: the disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme”
(The Sphere Project, 2004, p. 28)*

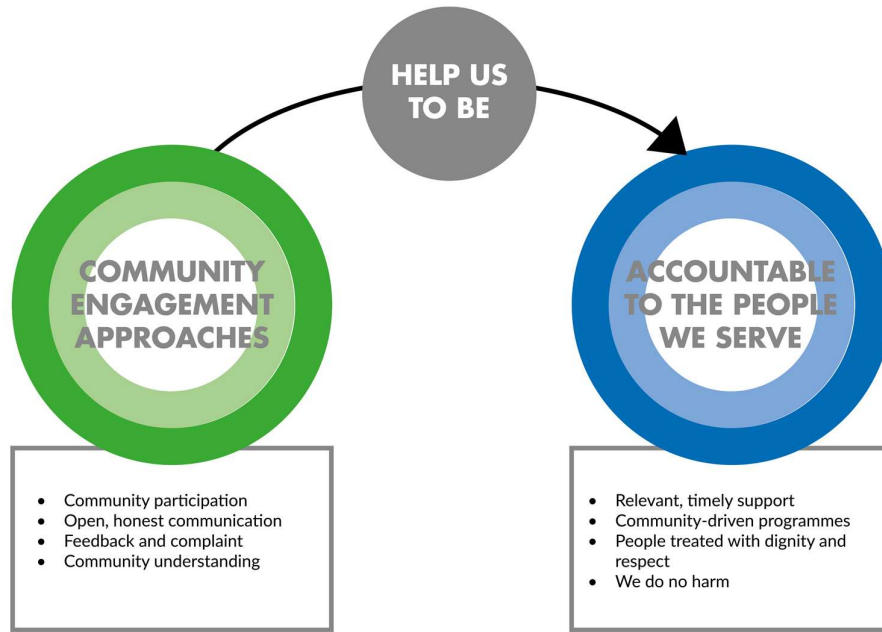
In 2014 these three core strands of accountability to affected populations – **communication/information, participation and feedback/complaints** - were embedded in the *Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability* (CHS Alliance, Group URD and The Sphere Project, 2014). This included two key commitments:

- Commitment 4: ‘Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to **information** and **participate** in decisions that affect them. Quality Criterion: Humanitarian response is based on **communication, participation and feedback.**’
- Commitment 5: ‘Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle **complaints**’ (CHS Alliance, Group URD and The Sphere Project, 2014, p. 9).

In 2016 a ‘participation revolution’ to ‘include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives’ was included in *The Grand Bargain*. This included providing accessible **information** and effective processes for **participation** and **feedback**. Commitment 6.1 called for improved ‘leadership and governance mechanisms at the level of the humanitarian country team and cluster/sector mechanisms to ensure **engagement** with and **accountability** to people and communities affected by crises’ (IASC, 2016, p. 10).

In 2019 the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RCRC) brought **community engagement** and **accountability** together in its *Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability* (IFRC and ICRC, 2019). It’s definition (see Figure 2 and quote below) incorporates the three strands of accountability introduced by HAP in 2003: communication, participation and addressing complaints.

FIGURE 2: THE RCRC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY DEFINITION (IFRC AND ICRC, 2021)



'Community engagement and accountability is a way of working that recognises and values all community members as equal partners, whose diverse needs, priorities, and preferences guide everything we do. We achieve this by integrating meaningful community participation, open and honest communication, and mechanisms to listen to and act on feedback, within our programmes and operations' (IFRC and ICRC, 2021, p. 11)

In 2023 humanitarian actors continue to use a wide range of terminology to describe participation, accountability to affected populations, and community engagement. As the definitions in this section suggest, associated with all these terms is a recognition that there is a sharing or transfer of different degrees of decision-making power (see Box 1 for discussion). Three of the most predominant terms used are: Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) which is favoured by the RCRC; Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) which is prevalent within the UN-system; and Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) which is more commonly used in health and epidemic responses⁷. While there may be no agreed definition, Holloway et al. (2020) found that in practice the terms are often used synonymously and there is little real difference in meaning. The RCRC agree that 'all these terms are essentially describing the same thing - the process of working in a transparent and participatory way with communities that improves the quality of programmes and operations' (IFRC and ICRC, 2021, p. 13).

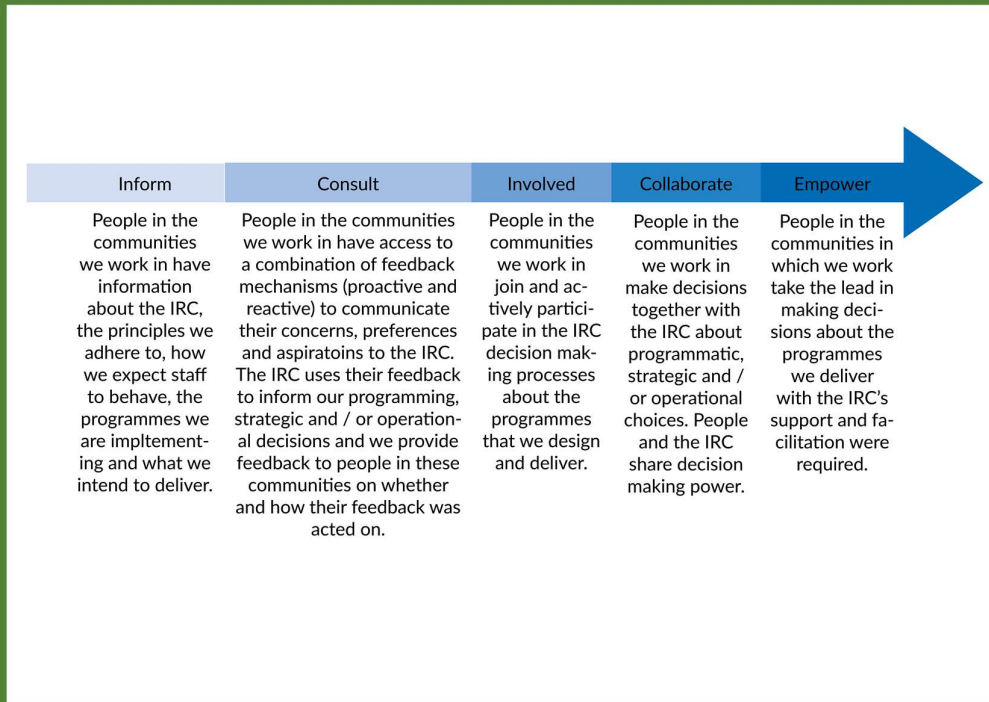
⁷ All three have online platforms to share learning between organisations: <https://communityengagementhub.org>, <https://aap-inclusion-psea.alnap.org/> and <http://www.rcce-collective.net>

BOX 1: Ladders, levels or degrees of community engagement

Published in 1969, Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen's Participation*, was a ground-breaking paper that first articulated the different 'levels' or 'degrees' of participation. She argued that if a process is to be considered participatory in any genuine or practical sense, it requires the redistribution of power. Arnstein outlined a continuum of participation that moves from non-participation (therapy, manipulation), to tokenism (informing, consulting, placating) to citizen power (control, delegated power, partnership) (Arnstein, 1969).

This articulation of participation or community engagement as a continuum has been adopted by the humanitarian and development sectors and continues to be used to this day in various iterations. For example, in 2021 the International Rescue Committee (IRC) used five levels - inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower - to describe its approach to participation (IRC, 2021)- Figure 3.

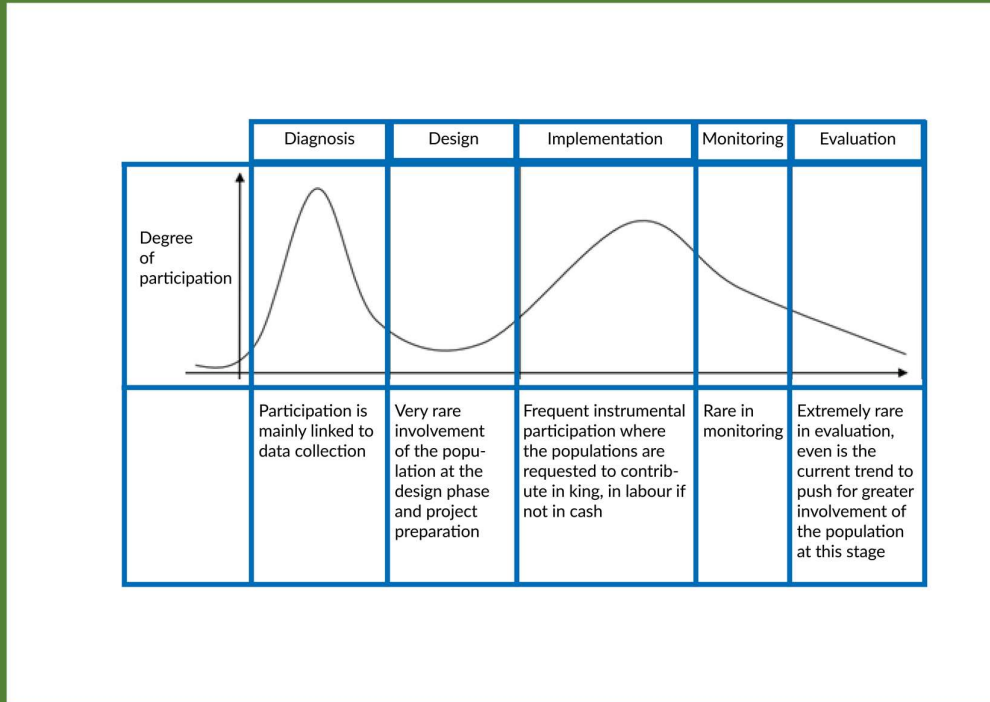
FIGURE 3: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEES LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION (IRC, 2021)



Within a humanitarian situation, the level or degree of engagement of different projects, initiative or organisation varies depending on the context and the stage of the response (Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019). Furthermore, de Geoffroy and Grunewald (2008) note that the 'degree of participation' can vary throughout the project lifecycle (Figure 4). However, recent publications reflecting on the success of the 2014 'participation revolution' of the Grand Bargain have been critical of the progress achieved across the sector, with engagement primarily focussed on the lower end of the ladder (inform) and limited sharing or handing over of decision-making power (Martin, Singer and

Mathias, 2021). There are of course exceptions to this, including the survivor and community-led crisis response (sclr) which has been developed by Local to Global Protection (L2GP) and the Start Network- see Example Boxes 4 and 5.

FIGURE 4: EXAMPLE OF HOW THE DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION CAN VARY ACROSS THE PROJECT CYCLE (based on de Geoffroy and Grünewald, 2008)



2.2 Use of community engagement and associated terms over the last 20 years by Action Against Hunger

In 2006 Action Against Hunger’s *Community-Driven Participation: In Humanitarian Relief Programming* defined **community participation** as ‘the process of actively involving local people in assessing their own needs, designing and implementing relief projects, and making decisions that affect them’ (ACF, 2006, p. 10). This closely aligned with Common Standard 1: Participation from the 2004 edition of the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (The Sphere Project, 2004).

In its 2016 *Guide to Working with Communities* Action Against Hunger reiterated that ‘it is our responsibility to enable communities and other key stakeholders to **participate meaningfully** at all stages of the program cycle’ (AAH, 2016a, p. 4). Drawing on the HAP *Principles of Accountability* (HAP, 2010) this document also explains that **participation** is one of the five dimensions of **accountability** – alongside **transparency, feedback and complaints mechanisms**, learning and evaluation, staff competencies and attitudes.

Both the 2006 and 2016 Action Against Hunger documents noted that there are different **types of participation** ranging from ‘passive participation’ through to ‘community-led

participation' (ACF, 2006; AAH, 2016a). They cited the *Typology of Participation* described by Pretty et. al. (1995) which builds on a long history of describing levels, degrees or types of participation (see Box 1 for discussion).

Most recently, Action Against Hunger's *International Strategic Plan 2021-2025* identified three key enablers to strengthen the organisation's ability to deliver on its goals. The first enabler - 'we work together with the people we serve' - is based on **community engagement** and **accountability**. This includes building on 'the capacity and knowledge that exists within the community' and 'co-construction with the people we serve' (AAH, 2021, p. 22).

BOX 2: Why do community engagement?

Brown and Donini (2014) describe three main reasons for engaging with crisis-affected communities:

- 'value-based' – it respects the rights and dignity of affected people, fulfils a moral duty, and is the simply the right thing to do.
- 'instrumental' – it makes humanitarian programmes more efficient and effective because they are based on better quality information. It may also improve access, visibility, and security while reducing the costs of implementation.
- 'emancipatory' – it can strengthen society, promote inclusion of marginalised groups, and reduce underlying vulnerabilities and inequalities in the longer term.

This is not just a theoretical distinction 'because in many cases the type and degree of engagement that an agency supports are determined by what the agency aims to achieve' (Brown and Donini, 2014, p. 21). Instrumental goals may be achieved through the provision of 'information' or 'consultation' with communities, but emancipatory goals require higher levels of 'involvement', 'collaboration' and 'empowerment' (See Box 1 for discussion of: Ladders, levels or degrees of community engagement).

Action Against Hunger's *International Strategic Plan 2021-2025* indicates that all three of these reasons are important drivers within the organisation. Specifically, the organisation commits to working with communities 'to design, implement, and evaluate effective and high-quality programmes' (an instrumental goal) as well as developing 'lasting solutions to the challenges they face' (an emancipatory goal) (AAH, 2021, p. 15)

This was also reflected in the interviews with Action Against Hunger staff. For some interviewees community engagement is simply the right thing to do. For example, 'if we work for communities then we must work with them' ('AAH Interviews', 2023). Others explained that community engagement can help Action Against Hunger to understand the needs of communities and how they would like their needs to be met and design better projects and programmes which better meet the needs of communities ('AAH Interviews', 2023).

In the longer-term, interviewees noted that 'putting the community at the centre' leads to community empowerment and generates community ownership over the project so that it will have greater impact and sustainability ('AAH Interviews', 2023).

2.3 How we have defined community engagement in this paper

Based on our review of broader humanitarian literature, Action Against Hunger documents, and interviews with key informants, we have used the following definition of community engagement in completing this working paper: ***Community engagement means collaborating with affected populations and communities to design, implement, and evaluate effective and high-quality programmes.*** We note that the level of collaboration will vary based on the context, phase of the response, and stage of the project cycle (as discussed in Box 1).

3.0 Community engagement at a project and programme level

3.1 What are the practical barriers and enablers to community engagement?

The context, type of crisis and phase of the response will all inform the level of community engagement (Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019).

The need for an **urgent response** was identified by the literature, and interviews with Action Against Hunger staff as a barrier, in particular during the initial relief stage of a humanitarian crisis (Barry and Barham, 2012; AAH, 2016b; ACF, 2017; Konyndyk and Worden, 2019; Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). Action Against Hunger staff highlighted the tension between the additional time required for community engagement and the need for a timely response to save lives: 'for us the more stable the situation the more likely we are to do community engagement...the more [time] critical, the more directive we need to be' ('AAH Interviews', 2023).

The ease or lack of **access to affected populations** was identified as both an enabler and a barrier. In some cases, lack of access can be linked to ongoing conflict and associated insecurity, but can also apply to rural, dispersed populations, or areas with limited transport links (Barry and Barham, 2012; Brown and Donini, 2014; Ormel *et al.*, 2020; Rass *et al.*, 2020). Lack of access was raised by Action Against Hunger staff as a particular challenge they experienced ('AAH Interviews', 2023), and it can also lower opportunities to establish trust (AAH, 2016a). Access is easier when working in a developmental context, or in a humanitarian context in camp settings or with non-displaced communities (Barry and Barham, 2012; Rass *et al.*, 2020).

The **existing relationship and levels of trust** between staff and community members either supported or limited community engagement (Rass *et al.*, 2020). The literature and interviews with Action Against Hunger staff and external stakeholders highlighted that working with communities where there were established relationships can better support the rapid delivery of assistance and facilitate access in areas with protection concerns (Barry and Barham, 2012; AAH, 2016b, 2016a; CDA, 2019; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023).

Working in **areas of insecurity**, such as conflict or those with high levels of violence, hindered community engagement. Key reasons for this included challenges associated with displaced and dispersed populations, protection risks to staff and community members, and depleted resources (Barry and Barham, 2012; Rass *et al.*, 2020). Action Against Hunger (2016a) also noted that the representatives of the population may be parties in the conflicts, and participation processes may reinforce inequalities or tensions between sub-groups. In a conflict context it can take longer to establish trust, especially if addressing sensitive protection issues (Barry and Barham, 2012).

A final factor linked to trust, was the extent to which a community was exposed to ongoing or repeated assessments and assistance, either from the same or by different organisations; this can lead to '**consultation fatigue**' (Barry and Barham, 2012; Rass *et al.*, 2020; 'External Interviews', 2023). This is likely to be magnified in contexts where multiple organisations have engaged, sometimes over many years; during humanitarian crisis, in particular settings involving displaced populations; and where previous waves of community engagement have been more superficial, the work has been poor quality and people feel let down (Ibid).

The level of understanding **the social and political power dynamics** of the communities you are working with can be a critical enabler, or a barrier if not factored adequately into planning processes (AAH, 2016a; Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019; Rass *et al.*, 2020; 'AAH Interviews', 2023). Especially as there is often a balance to be found between a community engagement approach that focusses on traditional forms of leadership versus a rights-based approach that seeks to target the most vulnerable (Barry and Barham, 2012; AAH, 2016a; Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019). Community engagement approaches that focus on traditional forms of leadership may result in exclusion or discrimination of more vulnerable or marginalised groups, whilst a rights-based approach can be destabilising or create tensions within the community (ibid). Depending on the context, groups who may be excluded from traditional decision making include women, disabled people, children, racial or religious minorities and displaced populations (Barry and Barham, 2012; Save, 2013; Oxfam, 2014; Concern Worldwide, 2020; Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021).

The **delivery of projects or programmes through local partners**, was identified in the Action Against Hunger interviews as both an enabler and a barrier ('AAH Interviews', 2023). Working through local partners was recognised as a way to address a number of the factors discussed in this section- the local partners understood the social and cultural power dynamics, they had access to the communities and in many cases, there was an existing relationship or common language ('External Interviews', 2023). However, interviewees raised concerns about the time availability and facilitation skills of some local partners that could represent a barrier (Ibid). A literature review by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response in 2017 noted that there was limited documentation or discussion of community engagement⁸ through local partners, and this research has not identified a great deal more in the intervening six years. The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response suggested that the reason for this is may be that: 'participation of affected people is not prioritised under the terms of the partnership... [reflecting] organisational cultures which do not internalise participation as a core component of high quality, accountable and principled humanitarian action, but more as a good-to-have somewhat "politically correct" addition' (2017, p. 6).

A factor that was both an enabler and a barrier was the **communication methods** available and appropriate for use in different contexts. For example, illiteracy, lack of phone or internet access and restricted access to radio and telephone networks can be practical barriers to community engagement (ICRC and IFRC, 2017; Fluck and Barter, 2019; 'AAH Interviews', 2023). Linked to the challenges associated with social and cultural power dynamics, the most

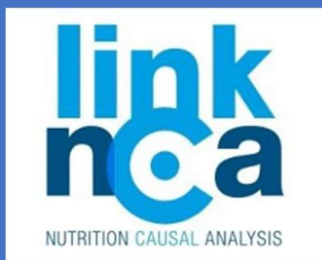
⁸ The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response used the term 'participation'

marginalised or vulnerable groups can disproportionately experience these communication barriers, increasing the risks of misinformation or exclusion (ICRC, 2018). On the other hand, in certain contexts the use of new technology, in particular mobile technologies such as those associated with on-line surveys can be a useful enabler to support rapid and efficient needs assessment or feedback mechanisms (Brown and Donini, 2014; World Vision, 2015).

A key factor influencing an affected population's ability to engage in a humanitarian context is **the physical or psychosocial impact of the crisis on the individual** (Barry and Barham, 2012; AAH, 2016a). People who have experienced trauma and distress may need additional time and support in order to meaningfully engage; critically, the process can help people come to terms with their situation, to analyse and prioritise their next steps, and to move forward in a more planned way (Barry and Barham, 2012).

Finally, a key barrier and enabler that was discussed in the literature was the **level of financial or in-kind compensation**, typically at an individual or household level. Examples of compensation included food items, money, refreshments and the reimbursement of transportation costs (Concern Worldwide, 2020; Ormel *et al.*, 2020). In situations when compensation was provided it could be a helpful motivation for community engagement, and when it was not, or it was inadequate, it could be demotivating (Rass *et al.*, 2020). In communities that had experience of humanitarian or development programming, or where there were multiple organisation's working, expectations around compensation were affected by the work of these other agencies (Concern Worldwide, 2020; Ormel *et al.*, 2020; Rass *et al.*, 2020).

EXAMPLE 1: Link NCA – Nutrition Causal Analysis (2010 – ongoing)



Link NCA is a *participatory and response-orientated method for conducting a nutritional causal analysis* developed by Action Against Hunger, Tufts University, the Institute of Research for Development, and the World Food Programme. It was initially piloted in Zimbabwe and Bangladesh 2010-2011, before being refined and further updated following testing in Burkina Faso 2012-2015. The resulting Link NCA Guidelines, Indicator Guide and Pathways module were published in 2015 (Link

NCA, 2017).

The process draws together community members, key informants, and technical experts to share knowledge and data about undernutrition within a specific location. The Link NCA is not an emergency assessment tool, however, it can provide a useful pre-emergency baseline for measuring and understanding the impacts of an acute shock (Link NCA, 2017).

The approach uses a range of research methods and requires approximately four to five months to work through five stages of data collection, analysis and dissemination (Link NCA, 2023a). Link NCA is currently ongoing in across the AAH network and has been implemented in 26 countries since its launch (Link NCA, 2023b).

3.2 What does good practice look like?

Whilst good practice varies considerably across contexts, there are some common approaches at a project and programme level.

Allocate adequate resources, time and staffing levels to build relationships and trust (Maxwell *et al.*, 2011; AAH, 2016b; ICRC, 2018; IRC, 2021). As the IFRC and ICRC (2017, p. 7) stated: 'to build trust with communities, it is essential to spend adequate time listening and talking with communities'. It is important that staff have the skills, experience and interpersonal communication style to build these relationships (Barry and Barham, 2012; Konyndyk and Worden, 2019; IRC, 2023). This can be particularly important during the initial design and planning stages of a project or programme in order to understand the context and build the foundations of trust for implementation (IRC, 2021; 'AAH Interviews', 2023). It also underpins many of the other areas of good practice noted within this section, as without the resources, time and staffing levels it is not possible to deliver strong feedback mechanisms, adequately take local social and political dynamics into consideration or be fully inclusive. Finally, frontline staff play a critical role and it is important that they have clear guidance as to what is expected of them; for example: '[frontline staff should be] provided with clear expectations in the form of guidance, frameworks, policies, role descriptions, and individual performance objectives which helps them to make time for and to see participation as central to their role, rather than an optional add-on' (IRC, 2023, p. 5).

'The more community engagement we do the closer we come to actually understanding and solving the real underlying problems' ('AAH Interviews', 2023)

Respond to feedback to foster trust and reduce the risk of community frustration (AAH, 2018; CDA, 2019; 'AAH Interviews', 2023). For example, it is not sufficient to just establish a feedback and complaints mechanism, it is also critical to communicate that the information has been received, heard and how it has been used (*ibid*)- see also 'adopt suitable communication methods to support an inclusive process' below. It is also important that there is a plan or system in place to ensure that there is adequate coordination with other organisations working in the same area, to prevent duplication and confusion (ACF, 2017). Research from 2014 indicated that other critical factors for the functioning of a feedback mechanism are:

- clear and consistent communication and messaging on the purpose and usefulness of the mechanism to both affected populations, local partners and staff.
- when applicable, local partners are supported in their role of collecting feedback and relaying responses to affected communities.
- the 'institutional' location of the feedback mechanism within a programme, or agency's organogram, creates a 'path' for feedback information to be shared within the agency and looked at by different users together with data from other monitoring

sources to support decision-making on projects or programmes (Bonino, Jean and Knox Clarke, 2014, p. 30).

Take local social and political dynamics into consideration to limit the risk of increasing tensions or further reinforcing inequalities (AAH, 2016a; Rass *et al.*, 2020; 'AAH Interviews', 2023). This is especially critical in contexts with protection concerns, or for excluded or marginalised groups, when careful analysis and the principles of 'Do No Harm' are essential (Barry and Barham, 2012; ACF, 2017). When working in a new area, undertaking an initial investigation, mapping or analysis of the context is an important first step (Brown and Donini, 2014)- this can include identifying and drawing on the expertise of community members to understand these power dynamics.

'If you are not including the vulnerable, you might as well not call it community engagement' (Holloway *et al.*, 2020, p. 41)

Undertake a community engagement process that is inclusive and takes into account the situation of those who are excluded or marginalised (Barry and Barham, 2012; Oxfam, 2014; ACF, 2017; Holloway *et al.*, 2020). Practical steps include: disaggregating data for different demographic groups; scheduling meetings in secure, accessible locations; holding separate focus groups for those who may have different perspectives (e.g. for men and women); and arrange meetings around other responsibilities or commitments (Oxfam, 2014; AAH, 2016b; ACF, 2017; Ormel *et al.*, 2020).

Adopt suitable communication methods to support an inclusive process. For example, when working in communities with high levels of illiteracy, or where multiple languages are spoken using image based or oral communication may be more effective than written materials (ACF, 2017; Fluck and Barter, 2019; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2021). Asking the communities their preferred method of communication and which ones they trust is critical (ACF, 2017; ICRC and IFRC, 2017; Fluck and Barter, 2019; 'External Interviews', 2023). Using multiple methods of communication- such as meetings, posters, feedback boxes and a hotline- might be helpful when an urgent response is required (World Vision, 2015).

EXAMPLE 2: Seeds of Hope (2022- ongoing)

Seeds of Hope is an Action Against Hunger initiative that aims to address the root causes of climate change related hunger by improving livelihoods and food, water, nutrition and ecosystem security. Seeds of Hope works with a wide number of stakeholders and acts as a connector and facilitator to improve communication and coordination (e.g., to identify funds available locally and facilitate their use).



Source: *Seeds of Hope booklet*, (ACF, 2022)

In 2022 Action Against Hunger launched the Seeds of Hope pilot in six communities in the Senanga District, Zambia. Seeds of Hope is not considered a 'project', rather it is a way of working, or a methodology that centres the community in planning processes to equip them with the knowledge, technical support, and tools they need to mitigate the climate risks they themselves face. This pilot has been internally funded by Action Against Hunger and this enables it to have a flexible delivery plan and there is no defined timeline- rather it can take the **time needed to build relationships and trust with communities and stakeholders**. The approach also recognise that climate change disproportionately affects women, people with disabilities and other minority or marginalised groups, and has mechanisms in place to work closely with them and to **give them a voice**.

In 2023 Action Against Hunger plan to launch Seeds of Hope in South Sudan. They have reviewed the approach and are adapting it to the context. For example, the team anticipate that a barrier in the South Sudan context will be high illiteracy rates, which will affect the communication methods needed to support an **inclusive process**- they are designing this into the programme. Another critical factor in the areas where Seeds of Hope will be launched is the weak **social ties due to displacement**; additional time may be needed to take the social and political dynamics into consideration and to limit the risk of increasing tensions or further reinforcing inequalities.

4.0 Community engagement at an organisational level

4.1 What are the organisational barriers and enablers to community engagement?

This research identified several organisational barriers and enablers to community engagement that NGOs and others may experience.

The **organisational commitment** to community engagement is a central barrier or enabler. The literature identified that consistent, strong leadership and drive was required to embed community engagement practices, and to put it at the heart of decision making (Brown and Donini, 2014; SCHR, 2017; Fluck and Barter, 2019; Holloway *et al.*, 2020; IRC, 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). However, when this organisational commitment is not adequately institutionalised and shared across the agency then community engagement can be perceived as an 'add-on' or a 'nice-to-have', leading to its de-prioritisation for example at times when pressure on delivery is high (Konyndyk and Worden, 2019; Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019).

Linked to commitment, a further enabler or barrier identified at an organisational level was the **clarity and consistency of what community engagement entails and why it was important** (Barry and Barham, 2012; SCHR, 2017; IRC, 2023)⁹. Without a clear definition or framework to articulate community engagement, or an explicit rationale, different interpretations can create confusion and de-prioritisation (IRC, 2023)- see also discussion in Section 2.0 'What is community engagement?'

Another critical factor that challenged community engagement practices was the **capacity of staff**. If staff did not have the necessary skills or experience, shared language nor an attitude or personal communication style that was compatible with the context this represented a significant barrier (Brown and Donini, 2014; AAH, 2016b; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). Within a humanitarian context, further barriers associated with capacity included insufficient time to delivery community engagement activities and short term-contracts with a turnover of staff every three- six months (Barry and Barham, 2012; Brown and Donini, 2014; Fluck and Barter, 2019). This high turnover of staff made it hard to build and maintain relationships with communities and impacted the organisational commitment discussed above (*ibid*). As Brown and Donini reported: 'Too often the decisions and approach to engaging with crisis-affected people – and the seriousness with which it is pursued – depend on the vision and ideals of the staff in charge rather than on agency policies' (2014, p. 55).

⁹ Please note: All sources cited use the term 'participation'

A final factor that linked to the other organisational barriers and enablers was **clarity around who was responsible for community engagement**. The literature and interviews highlighted that lack of clarity led to duplication of efforts, confused communication with communities and poorly informed programme design (SCHR, 2017; CDA, 2019; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023).

4.2 What does good practice look like?

Whilst good practice varies considerably across contexts, there are some common approaches at an organisational level.

Embed a clear definition of community engagement and why it is important to your organisation. For example, within strategy and policy documents, as well as those associated with project or programme delivery such as standard operating procedures, checklists and guidance notes (SCHR, 2017; IRC, 2021, 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). It is important that the definition and rationale is simple, clear, practical and available in local languages so that it can be used and referenced across the organisation (IRC, 2023).

Foster a culture of responsiveness and transparent decision making. This is underpinned by strong, dedicated leadership and investment, and supported through practical measures such as the establishment of internal accountability systems, for example regular reviews of feedback received by staff and Standard Operating Procedures (World Vision, 2015; CDA, 2019; Fluck and Barter, 2019; Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019; IRC, 2021). Special consideration should be given to empowering and systematically engaging frontline staff in decision making, programme design and accountability.

When everyone in the organization understands what participation is, its purpose and value, how to put it into practice, and what resources it requires, frontline staff are much more likely to be afforded the time, space, support, materials, and funding they need to this well (IRC, 2023, p. 24).

Support learning within and across projects and programmes. Training, mentoring and peer-to-peer learning opportunities are essential for staff to develop their knowledge and skills (IRC, 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). It is helpful to deliver regular trainings, in different languages, as a way to deepen skills, support new team members and address gaps caused by staff turnover (IRC, 2023). Adequate data management systems are also required to support learning so that information is stored safely and systematically, and can be easily accessed when required (e.g. through a dashboard) (ACF, 2017; Fluck and Barter, 2019; IRC, 2021).

Assign clear roles and responsibilities for staff, supported by adequate resources.

Responsibility for community engagement should not sit just with one person, but is best shared across the organisation (Fluck and Barter, 2019; IRC, 2021). As the IFRC note, based on their experience: 'while a focal point is necessary, it alone is insufficient. It is crucial that the staff who focus on community engagement have the requisite skill, time, and passion to drive the initiative forward, rather than it being just one of many responsibilities within their

portfolio' (CDA, 2019, p. 11). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) recommend that organisations clearly, and simply, define the minimum actions and standards that are expected from frontline staff and other teams and levels (IRC, 2023).

EXAMPLE 3: Action Contre la Faim Madagascar (2018 - ongoing)



Source: ACF Madagascar's Community Engagement Strategy (ACF, 2023).

«L'engagement communautaire est avant tout une action sociale qui sollicite la participation de la communauté pour susciter le changement positif à travers les projets menés par Action Contre la Faim et ses partenaires » (ACF, 2023, p. 4)

Community engagement is seen first and foremost, by Action Contre la Faim Madagascar, as a social process that utilises community participation to bring positive change through projects carried out by ACF and its partners (ACF, 2023). In 2018 they initiated a cross-cutting approach to all their programmes called “Mob Com” (pour Mobilisation Communautaire/ for Community Mobilisation) (ACF, 2023).

Mob Com aims to strengthen the **trust and relationships** between Action Contre la Faim and the communities they serve. First implemented in the south of the country, it was rolled out in 2020 by the Antananarivo office. In 2021, a review was undertaken to consolidate the progress and lessons learnt (ACF, 2023).

The Mob Com facilitators are the primary representatives of Action Contre la Faim that communities engage with. This avoids '**consultation fatigue**' and allows for Mob Com to collaborate with technical teams to coordinate their response. Mob Com is recognised as a technical specialism, requiring **staff with the relevant skills and experience (capacity)** and sits alongside other departments (i.e., water, sanitation and hygiene- WASH) (ACF, 2023).

5.0 Community engagement at a systems level

5.1 What are the systemic barriers and enablers to community engagement?

Several of the factors that we have discussed throughout Sections 3 and 4 find their origins in wider systemic barriers and enablers.

Access to adequate funding was cited as a key barrier. In particular, access to funding **with a sufficiently long time frame**, that allowed the opportunity to build relationships, establish trust and foster local ownership was challenging on a 6-12 month funding cycle (Barry and Barham, 2012; Fluck and Barter, 2019; Konyndyk and Worden, 2019; Rass *et al.*, 2020; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). Whilst community engagement activities in general are chronically under resourced (Holloway *et al.*, 2020; 'External Interviews', 2023), interviewees also reported there was especially limited funding available for the initial, exploratory stages ('AAH Interviews', 2023). There is often significant pressure to write proposals quickly, allowing for little time for engagement and resulting in in-adequate buy in from the wider community (Barry and Barham, 2012).

Compounding this, **the flexibility of the funding** was identified as both a barrier and an enabler. When the conditions of the funding were rigid and required the delivery of activities and outputs that were pre-defined, oftentimes with limited community buy-in, there was very limited scope to adapt the delivery based on a better understanding of needs or fluctuations in the context (Barry and Barham, 2012; CDA, 2019; Corbett, Carstensen and Di Vicenz, 2021; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). In turn, this hinders community engagement: 'if communities share things that need to change, but the organization is inflexible and cannot or will not make those changes, then communities will eventually get frustrated and stop providing input or using the systems available' (CDA, 2019, p. 11).

A further systematic barrier was the lack of **structural incentives** to undertake community engagement. The literature reported that 'upwards' accountability to donors was facilitated by the existing structure, based primarily on the fear of losing financial support (Brown and Donini, 2014; Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021; 'External Interviews', 2023). There is no such structural incentive to embed community engagement practices, rather there are possible disincentives; for example, it can require additional time, or the additional resources required for community engagement may lead to a reduction in the number of people who would benefit etc. (Brown and Donini, 2014; 'AAH Interviews', 2023; 'External Interviews', 2023). This is linked to power imbalances within the system, and the willingness of donors and NGOs to pass on decision making power to the communities they serve (SCHR, 2017; Martin, Singer and Mathias, 2021; 'External Interviews', 2023).

A final barrier to community engagement is insufficient **collaboration and coordination between delivery organisations working within the same communities**. Different interpretations and process for community engagement, duplicative assessments or planning processes and feedback mechanisms that do not communicate can result in tension,

fragmented delivery and consultation fatigue (Barry and Barham, 2012; Fluck and Barter, 2019; Rass *et al.*, 2020).

EXAMPLE 4: Survivor and community led crisis response (sclr)¹⁰

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) was established in 2009 with research into community responses to crisis. This research led to the development of the **survivor and community-led crisis response (sclr)¹¹** approach, and L2GP partners with a variety of international, national and local organisations to implement this approach in humanitarian contexts around the world. The sclr approach seeks to enable external aid actors to connect with, support and strengthen crisis responses identified, designed, implemented and monitored by existing or new self-help groups among crisis-affected populations (Local2Global Protection, 2021). When considering the continuum of participation outlined in Box 1, the sclr approach can be understood as sitting at the ‘citizen power’ or ‘empower’ end.

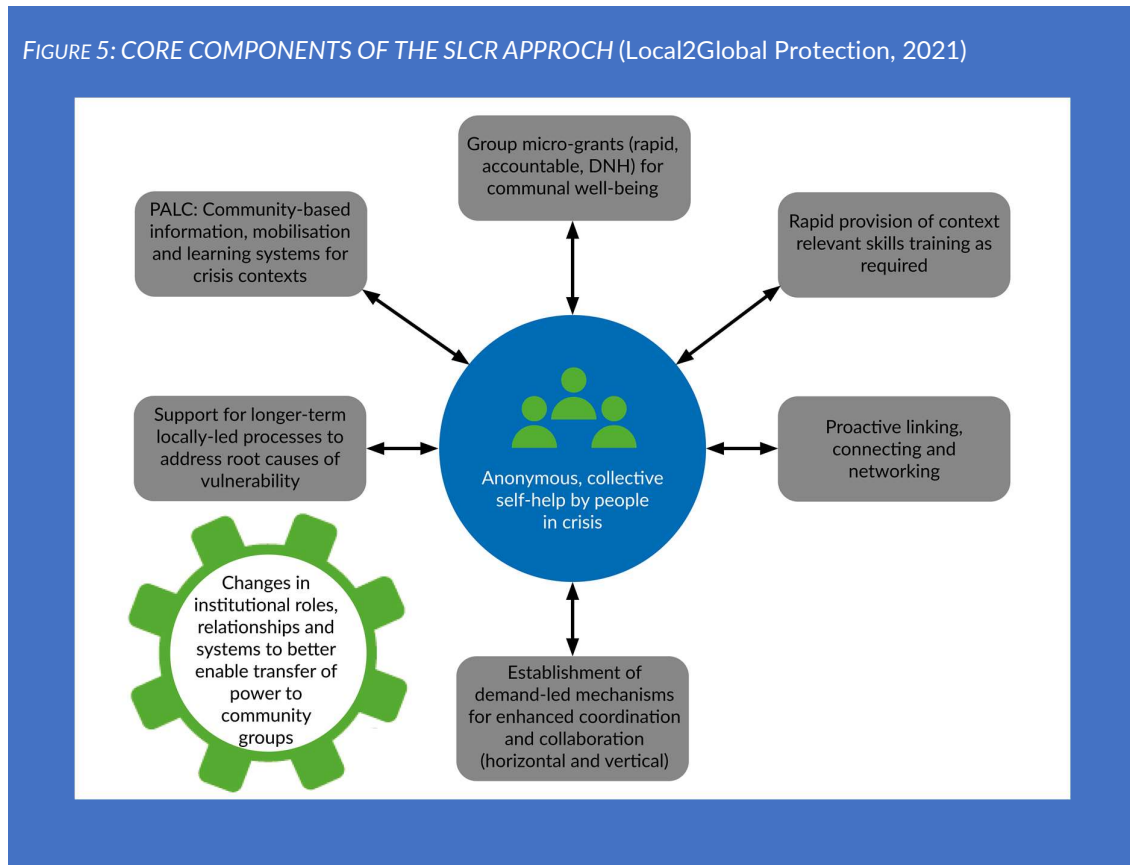
Sclr uses microgrants to explicitly transfer power and resources to existing and emergency self-help groups and organisations that mobilise during crises (Local2Global Protection, 2021). For example, following cyclone Nargis the Paung Ku project created a mechanism for processing and distributing funding applications to **local organisations and self-help groups** in under two hours (Local2Global Protection, 2016). Other core components of the sclr approach include rapid provision of demand led skills training, as well as actively linking, networking and where necessary supporting coordination of self-help groups with each other and with institutions (Local2Global Protection, 2021)- see Figure 5 for further details.

¹⁰ For further information, publications and training materials see the L2GP website:

<https://www.local2global.info/>

¹¹ In Francophone countries, the acronym RMC is often used as an alternative (soutenir les Réponses aux crises Menées par les Communautés/survivants) (Local2Global Protection, 2021).

FIGURE 5: CORE COMPONENTS OF THE SLCR APPROCH (Local2Global Protection, 2021)



5.2 What does good practice look like?

At a systems level, key good practices for community engagement centre around funding.

Ensure the conditions associated with funding are adequately flexible. It is important for project or programme quality that the activities and outputs can be adapted as contexts change or needs evolve (CDA, 2019; Fluck and Barter, 2019), for example through the provision of unrestricted funding. Equally as NGOs shift towards working with local partners it is essential to consider this dynamic. As Barry and Barham reflected: ‘the growing trend of sub-contracting field work to multiple implementing partners increasingly distances the field worker from strategic as well as operational decision-making. This risks maintaining the level of quality of participation itself and how much the voice of the affected community can influence programme decisions at the higher levels’ (Barry and Barham, 2012, p. 66).

Ensure that funding cycles are an adequately length to establish relationships. As discussed in section 3.1, it can take time to build trust and a working relationship between staff and communities. Longer funding cycles can better support this important process, as well as address some of the challenges associated with high staff turnover associated with short (3-6 months) programming (Barry and Barham, 2012; IRC, 2023).

Put in place structural incentives to support community engagement. Donors can play a critical role in putting mechanisms into place that can better systematically embed

community engagement into project and programme design (SCHR, 2017). This could include measures such as:

- Make community engagement a requirement in funding proposals (e.g. explain how people will be involved in the programme design and delivery)
- Require regular and precise reporting (e.g. evidence examples of how communities have been engaged and how they have been part of decision-making)
- Make a high-level commitment to community engagement (e.g. so staff are understand the importance of community engagement, and the requirements of those receiving funding) (IRC, 2023) ¹².

¹² The IRC (2023) document uses the term 'participation'.

EXAMPLE 5: Community-Led Approaches to MEAL (2022)



Source: *Community-Led MEAL* (ACF, 2022)

The Start Network's vision is 'for a locally led humanitarian system that is accountable to people affected by and at risk of crises'. In 2022, the Start Fund offered seven network members a small flexible research grant. This 'Community-Led Approaches to MEAL' grant aimed to ensure that 'people at risk of, or affected by, crises have more of a say in how impact and success are monitored, evaluated and measured, in a humanitarian intervention' (Start Network, 2023).

Action Against Hunger Zimbabwe received funding to develop and pilot test a Community-Led MEAL approach with community members in Ward 12, Kariba District, Zimbabwe. This co-research project investigated: how communities understood MEAL processes and the project cycle; how they define the success of development projects; and how they measure the impact of interventions. Twenty community monitors were selected by the community to pilot test Community-Led MEAL of two humanitarian projects. Based on this, Action Against Hunger Zimbabwe developed a Community-Led MEAL methodology report (ACF, 2022) and they are already introducing components into project proposals.

The **additional flexible funding** from the Start Fund enabled Action Against Hunger Zimbabwe to gather evidence and pilot test a new approach to Community-Led MEAL, alongside implementing more traditional humanitarian interventions funded by USAID-BHA. Since completion there has been lots of interest in the project from across the region, and it has given Action Against Hunger Zimbabwe a platform to **coordinate and collaborate** with other organisations regarding community engagement in humanitarian interventions. Future activities are planned to share learning through the humanitarian cluster system and MEAL communities of practice.

6.0 Next steps

This paper concludes the first phase of Action Against Hunger's community engagement research and learning project.

The second phase of the research (June to November 2023) involves primary research to explore a number of Action Against Hunger's projects, programmes or initiatives in-depth. This series of case-studies will document good practice and lessons learnt across the global network.

The third phase of the project will draw together and build upon the earlier two strands to develop an action framework, that will support Action Against Hunger embed the findings from this research.

**Action Against Hunger welcome wider sector engagement- if you are interested in collaborating or learning more please reach out to:
MEALServices@actionagainsthunger.org.uk**

Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
CEA	Community Engagement and Accountability
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standards
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies
L2GP	Local to Global Protection
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PHAST	Participatory Hygiene And Sanitation Transformation
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RCCE	Risk Communication and Community Engagement
RCRC	Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
sclr	Survivor and community-led crisis response
VCA	Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

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