

Rhetoric or reality?

Putting affected people at the centre of humanitarian action

Discussion starter

Engaging with and being accountable to affected people should be part of any humanitarian worker's DNA. The reality of engagement does not always live up to aspirations, though, and for a few years now many humanitarians have been trying to do better.

ALNAP's 29th Annual Meeting in March 2014 provided a forum for these discussions. Nearly 200 participants representing around 100 organisations from 40 countries met in Ethiopia to discuss key issues constraining engagement and accountability to affected people and to share good practice. The result? A new ALNAP study distilling that global conversation.

Participants discussed the many meanings of engagement, accountability and participation. They agreed that most international community discussions revolve around 'how' to engage affected people, instead of stepping back to also think 'why' they do so.

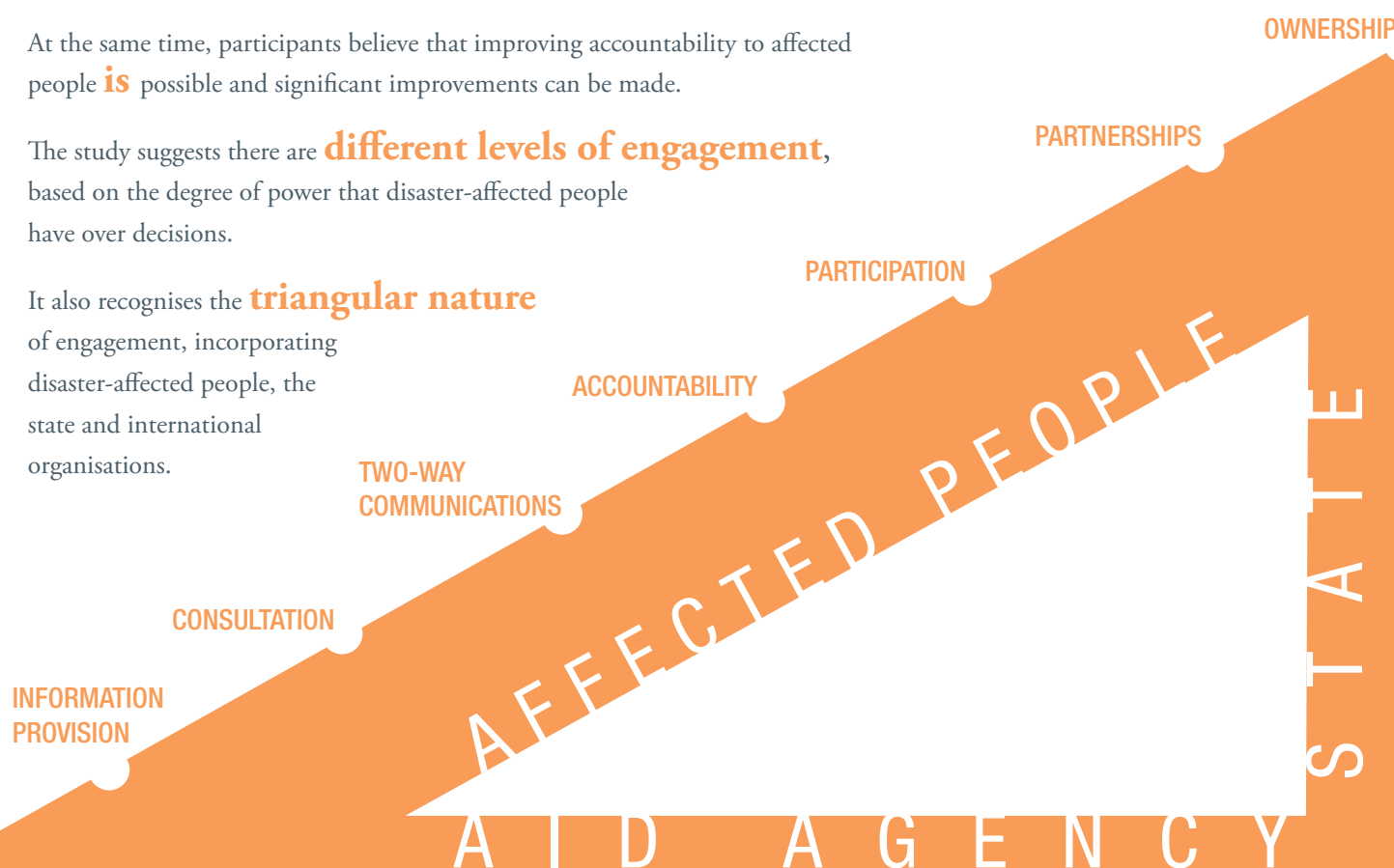
Humanitarians in the meeting also agreed that they need to pay more attention to the many other actors engaged in responses. There is a large and growing number of these at a project level – with crisis-affected states, civil society and local organisations making a huge contribution – yet these groups, who 'own' the emergency initiatives are often poorly understood by agencies, and are often ignored. Affected people need to believe that they are being listened to and that their questions, concerns and problems are being addressed in order to achieve effective programming.

Most meeting participants agreed that the current structure of the humanitarian system does not provide incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people (see last page). They felt meaningful change across the sector will probably require a rethink of the architecture and structures of the system, with humanitarian agencies thinking of themselves rather as 'facilitators' than 'experts' and 'doers' (more lessons inside).

At the same time, participants believe that improving accountability to affected people **is** possible and significant improvements can be made.

The study suggests there are **different levels of engagement**, based on the degree of power that disaster-affected people have over decisions.

It also recognises the **triangular nature** of engagement, incorporating disaster-affected people, the state and international organisations.



LESSONS FROM ALNAP'S 29TH ANNUAL MEETING

(More details on pages 50, 51, 71-76 of the study)

Engagement is multilateral

Engagement does not involve the humanitarian agency and the affected group only. State and non-state actors, companies, military forces and donors all play a role in negotiating who is – and who is not – being engaged in responses to a crisis. Special attention needs to be paid to the growing number of local actors and the increasingly crucial role of states in humanitarian responses.

More sticks, not only carrots!

All actors involved in humanitarian responses need to be accountable for what they do. New technologies allow affected communities to access more information. This will increase their demand for accountability. In order to achieve this, clear sanctions are to be set up to 'reward the good and punish the bad'.

More engagement is needed

Although many agencies are going the extra mile to engage affected people, much more needs to be done. People are often engaged in providing input and feedback, but this is often done on the agencies' terms, and it is humanitarian organisations who set the questions. Engagement also occurs more at some phases of the programme cycle than others. Importantly, while feedback can be used to improve individual programmes, it seldom influences broader strategy or 'the bigger picture'.

Be clear on what you want

Agencies need to be clear about why they want to engage with affected populations, to what degree, and how to do so. At the same time, they should understand and respect how affected people want to engage with those providing assistance.

Engagement makes a difference

Providing information and listening to affected people is not merely a 'nice-to-have', but a 'must-have'. It makes responses more effective, as affected communities will be more likely to share information themselves and identify with the action being taken.

One size does not fit all!

There is no magic formula: whereas engagement with affected populations is feasible in some contexts, it proves more difficult in others. While in some cases it may raise the effectiveness of responses, it may also slow them down or make them more dangerous.

Humanitarians need to further their understanding of local contexts to identify how, when and to what extent affected people should be best engaged. They should also better differentiate between the myriad types and phases of crises, and pay more attention to marginalised segments within affected populations.

Change your mind!

A thorough mind-set change is needed if engagement is to be more than just rhetoric. Humanitarian agencies need to recognise that disaster-affected people are not passive actors, but are the first, and often the most effective responders. On this basis they should rethink their role and start asking: 'Who engages whom?' The question should be more about how crisis-affected people want to engage with aid agencies rather than the other way around.

There is a need for humanitarian actors to 'disempower themselves'. They would do well to conceive of themselves as facilitators rather than experts and doers. Also, agencies should not only look for technical approaches to better engagement, but for 'human' ones as well: the system needs more long-term thinkers and stronger listeners instead of project thinkers and highly specialised implementers only.

Bridge the gap

Humanitarian responses and development programmes would profit from better informing of each other. Engagement is a cross-sectoral issue that needs more sharing of resources, experiences, expertise and approaches.

Preparedness is key

Humanitarian responses tend to be more successful when international agencies have already established relationships with local actors before a crisis occurs. There is much more agencies can do in advance.

POLITICAL CRITIQUE

Participation, as a process that seeks change, is inherently political and thus is alien, if not opposed, to the impartiality which is a core principle of humanitarian action.

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Engagement has become a means to reinforce rather than resolve power imbalances within the humanitarian/development sector. The engagement debate 'whitewashes' fundamental issues about the distribution of power, and makes structural inequalities acceptable. Engagement is only meaningful where there is a readiness to question and tackle the fundamental structures of the humanitarian system.

TECHNICAL CRITIQUE

Top-down approaches may save the most lives in emergency situations because centrally managed approaches enable the most effective mobilisation of efforts and resources.

CONCEPTUAL

CHALLENGES TO ENGAGEMENT

OPERATIONAL

HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT & PROGRAMMING

- Cost
- Access
- Information
- Replicability/scaleability

STAFF

- Attitudes & behaviours
- Short-term assignments

HUMANITARIAN STRUCTURES & PROCEDURES

- Projectisation
- Evidence, measurement & reporting
- Supply-led paradigm

POWER

- Power relations in the local contexts
- Power relations in the humanitarian activity
- Power inside the aid agency



The study 'Rhetoric or reality?' and other material about our 2014 Annual Meeting are available online at

www.alnap.org/meeting2014