Rhetoric or reality?

Putting affected people at the centre of humanitarian action

Dayna Brown and Antonio Donini

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Have you read the **ALNAP discussion starter** that accompanies this study?

An electronic copy of the study, the discussion starter and other related resources are available on the ALNAP website at **www.alnap.org/meeting2014.**

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CDAC	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSO	Civil society organisation
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
EU	European Union
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
IAWG	Inter-Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crisis
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LEGS	Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NTA	National Taxpayers Association
PIA	Participatory impact assessment
UN	United Nations

Introduction

Since its foundation in 1997 ALNAP (the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) has consistently highlighted the relationship between humanitarian agencies and crisis-affected people as critical to improving both accountability and performance. In the early 2000s ALNAP produced reviews of the Spanish, French and English literature on the subject; six country monographs on consultations with and participation of affected people in humanitarian action; and a practitioners' handbook, published in 2003 (ALNAP and URD, 2003). Since then many other studies and guidelines have been written by the Network and Member organisations. A selection of these is listed in the bibliography at the end of this report.

Despite this consistent concern with issues of engagement, participation, communication and accountability, 'beneficiary participation often achieve[s] rhetorical rather than real results' (SOHS, 2010: 29). The most recent *The state of the humanitarian system* report finds that, compared to other aspects of the humanitarian endeavour, 'the weakest progress and performance [is] in the areas of recipient consultation and engagement of local actors, despite the rhetorical emphasis given to these issues' (SOHS, 2012: 49). There is also a considerable discrepancy between donors' and international aid providers' perceptions of their motivations and performance on the ground, and the expectations and perceptions of affected people, local organisations, and governments (Hallam, 1998: 13; Anderson et al., 2012).

Institutional commitments and rhetoric are limited in practice by a number of factors, including time constraints, bureaucratic impediments, lack of incentives and funding, security and political constraints, differences between the social and cultural values of outsiders and insiders, and lack of capacity. Engaging with crisis-affected people can be costly, complicated, time-consuming and, arguably, inappropriate for international actors in certain humanitarian situations. While progress has been made in recent years, some remain unconvinced that the participation of affected people in humanitarian response activities can be anything other than tokenistic or even manipulative. Hard data on levels, quality and outcomes of various approaches to engaging with crisis-affected people are scarce, as are data on the ways that crisis-affected people themselves respond to and engage with aid providers.

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This paper summarises current understandings of methods of and approaches to engaging with crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. A draft version of this paper was prepared to provide a basis for discussion at the 29th ALNAP Meeting in Addis Ababa in March 2014 with the theme of 'Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action'. It has now been revised to take account of the discussions in Addis, and includes additional comments received and subsequent interviews conducted by the authors.

1. What is meant by 'engagement with crisis-affected people'?

While there has been growing interest and considerable rhetoric around the challenges of engaging with people affected by crises, there is little clarity on the concept (Figure 1). Humanitarian agencies use a variety of approaches to establish relationships with people affected by crises and to include them in the design or implementation of humanitarian programmes. These approaches include, but are not limited to, the following:[1]

- **providing information** about the situation and the response (including information about the effects of the crisis, the aid agency, the amounts of assistance it will provide, eligibility criteria, the location and timing of distributions or other assistance, how to provide feedback or complain, what standards to expect, etc.). Increasingly, information is seen as an aid 'deliverable' along with food, water, shelter, and other necessities critical to survival and recovery, leading an increasing number of agencies to focus on 'info as aid'. Many governments and aid agencies use a variety of methods, such as radios, SMS, social media, information boards, community meetings, volunteers, help desks, and others to reach large numbers of people simultaneously

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1.   These are drawn from the ALNAP/URD practitioners' handbook (ALNAP and URD, 2003), which adapts categories of participation from Pretty (1994) and expands on these categories in light of more recent approaches.

- **two-way communication** between aid agencies and crisis-affected people regarding the latter's needs and the quality, timeliness and relevance of the aid being provided. Some agencies refer to this as 'beneficiary communications', and they commonly conduct assessments of the key stakeholders with whom they need to communicate, the local media landscape and people's preferred communication channels to understand how best to communicate with a range of people. Organisations use a variety of methods based on what is relevant and appropriate in the local context to both provide information and to listen to or obtain information from crisis-affected people and others who may be marginalised from mainstream communications, as will be highlighted later in the report

- the **direct involvement** (often by providing labour or materials) of crisis-affected people in programme activities designed by the humanitarian organisation or government

- **consultations** to obtain the input of people affected by a crisis on various aspects of humanitarian needs and assistance – often as part of needs assessment and to provide input on programme designs – but also during implementation and as part of monitoring and evaluation. The degree to which governments and humanitarian agencies take this input into account varies significantly from one situation to another and from agency to agency

- the establishment of **accountability** frameworks, processes and mechanisms to ensure that humanitarian responders are held to account for their actions and use their power responsibly. Most humanitarian agencies' approaches to accountability include the provision of information, consultation, participation and explicit feedback, as well as the setting up of complaints and response mechanisms to allow people affected by crises to voice their ideas and concerns and to get a response to their feedback or complaints

- **participatory processes** that engage people in determining various aspects of programming and humanitarian operations. This may include assessing vulnerabilities, needs and capacities, and designing, monitoring and evaluating programmes or specific aspects of humanitarian operations, but does not always include participation in decision-making processes managed by the aid agency or government

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Approaches to engaging crisis-affected people include providing information, two-way communication, direct involvement, consultations, accountability frameworks, participatory processes and partnerships.

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- 'community-based' and **'partnership'** approaches, in which an international humanitarian agency works with a local civil society organisation (CSO) to jointly design or implement response activities. The relative degrees of decision-making authority enjoyed by the international and local organisation differ significantly from one situation to another. In many cases partnership has amounted to little more than subcontracting certain elements of the response. In an increasing number of responses international aid agencies provide funding to and/or strengthen the capacity of local partners whom they expect to engage more directly with crisis-affected communities. United Nations (UN) agencies and some international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) also partner directly with certain parts of crisis-affected governments, both supporting their efforts and strengthening their capacities.

FIGURE 1. THE TERM 'ENGAGEMENT' ENCOMPASSES A WIDE VARIETY OF APPROACHES[2]

2. As described in this paper and discussed by participants at the meeting.

Importantly, in addition to these approaches – all of which tend to be initiated from the outside by international humanitarian organisations – aid agencies can and do engage by providing support to responses and programmes designed and implemented by affected communities themselves and/or by local or national authorities. Donors, policy-makers and practitioners refer to this as supporting 'local ownership'.

Discussions on 'engagement' tend to focus on the bilateral relationship between the humanitarian agency and the affected group or community. In reality, more often than not additional stakeholders are directly or indirectly involved in the relationship and aid response. Increasingly, as the debates in Addis demonstrated, the state – both at the national and sub-national levels – is a key player in many crisis situations and often has its own views on what constitutes desirable levels and methods of engagement with outside and local aid agencies. In many contexts these relationships may be multilateral because donors, the private sector, non-state actors, and national or foreign military forces may also be involved in enabling or curtailing the engagement of those affected by crises.

A single humanitarian activity may thus to varying degrees incorporate several of these approaches and relationships to achieve a variety of outcomes. As a result, there is often some confusion in the terminology related to engagement. In the literature and in discussions among practitioners there is often a good deal of overlap between ideas of participation, accountability and communication. Our exploration of 'engagement' and related concepts begins by defining the latter three terms.

Participation. The idea of 'participation' originated in the development sector, and Robert Chambers, a well-known expert on participatory approaches, attended the meeting and offered his reflections and insights to participants (Chambers, 2014a; b). The term 'participation' has been interpreted in a variety of ways by humanitarians (see Box 1) and, as a recent report notes, 'an agreed standard definition remains elusive' (Barry and Barham, 2012: 21). In some cases the term is used to cover all of the activities included in Figure 1 and is qualified by terms such as 'active' and 'meaningful' to describe situations where affected people have power or influence. Moreover, affected communities are always the first responders when disaster strikes; thus, they are also the first to 'participate' – although their involvement is not always recognised.

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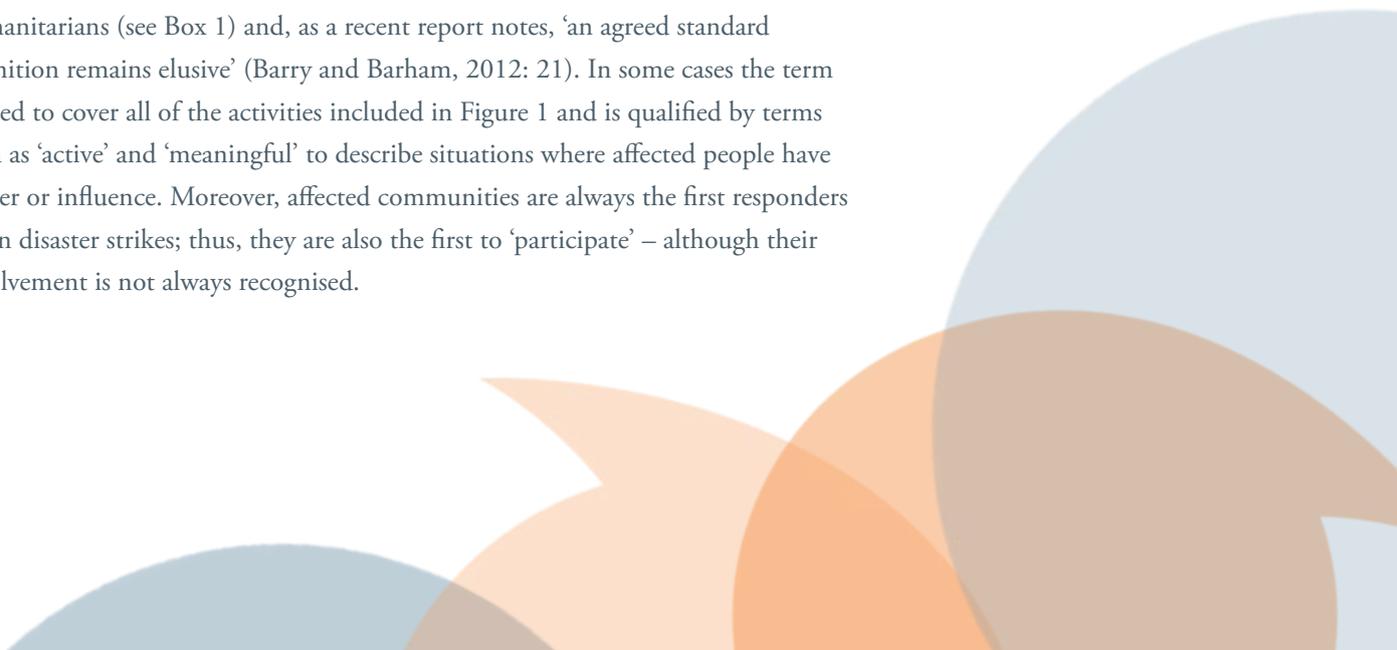
For some humanitarian agencies (particularly multi-mandate organisations) 'participation' is seen as an approach to ensure that people affected by a crisis have the power to influence their situation and the decisions and humanitarian activities affecting them. Some humanitarian agencies see participation as a means to an end, while a few see it as an end in itself. In this interpretation, participation is essentially about power, and specifically power over decision-making: the interpretation excludes rhetorical and non-meaningful participation from the definition and retains at least some of the original, developmental meaning of the term.

BOX 1. WHAT DO HUMANITARIAN ACTORS MEAN BY 'PARTICIPATION'?

Participation is the most common form of engagement discussed in the literature. One of the earliest humanitarian definitions appears in the handbook *Participation by crisis-affected populations in humanitarian action*:

> Participation in humanitarian action is understood as the engagement of affected populations in one or more phases of the project cycle: assessment; design; implementation; monitoring; and evaluation. This engagement can take a variety of forms .... Far more than a set of tools, participation is first and foremost a state of mind, according to which members of affected populations are at the heart of humanitarian action, as social actors, with insights on their situation, and with competencies, energy and ideas of their own. (ALNAP and URD, 2003: 20)

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) standard includes the notion of informed consent and sees participation as both a right and as a key principle of accountability. It defines participation as:

> Listening and responding to feedback from crisis-affected people when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes, and making sure that crisis-affected people understand and agree with the proposed humanitarian action and are aware of its implications. (HAP, 2013: 18)

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The Inter-Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crises has this to say on the subject:

> Participation is the involvement of key stakeholders in all aspects of the programme cycle – assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Opportunities for involvement should be transparent, free of coercion and open to all. It is essential to assure the participation of all groups, including women, men and adolescents (both male and female). It may be necessary to seek out the active involvement of often-marginalized groups such as minorities, young people, widows and the disabled. (IAWG, 2010: 10-11)

A European Union (EU)-commissioned report defines participation as

> Establishing and maintaining a relevant representative dialogue with crisis-affected populations and key stakeholders at every opportunity throughout the humanitarian programme to enable those affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them. (Barry and Barham, 2012: 10-11)

The first and third definitions imply that participation should take place in all aspects of the project cycle, but do not clarify the degree of control that affected people should have over decision-making. The second definition suggests that, at the least, people's views should be heard and responded to, while noting that this is subject to serious operational constraints (HAP, 2010: 25). The final and most recent definition suggests that participation requires crisis-affected people to have an active role in decision-making processes.

Accountability. This paper and many participants at the meeting follow HAP definition of accountability as 'the means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power' (HAP, 2010: 1). In this definition accountability relates to power, but there is no assumption that power is shared or transferred from external agencies to the crisis-affected community, although obviously this may happen and for some agencies this is a goal. While there is significant overlap between the ideas and goals of participation and accountability, the latter, rather than focusing on 'empowerment', is concerned primarily with ensuring that the power of humanitarian aid agencies is used responsibly. In the humanitarian sector 'a large body of opinion concentrates

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> Aid agencies' investments in communications activities are seen as a means to promote transparency and accountability as well as participation.
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on exploring participation through the lens of beneficiary accountability, within which a great deal of the current focus is placed on communications initiatives and feedback mechanisms' (Barry and Barham, 2012: 21). Participants at the meeting noted that the current emphasis of humanitarians on accountability rather than participation denotes a difference in focus from the developmental emphasis on participation as key to effectiveness. Some suggested that focusing on accountability is easier for humanitarian agencies because focusing on participation is seen as developmental and thus trying to affect power and politics, which some humanitarian organisations want to avoid because it would detract from their impartiality and ability to access those most in need.

Communication. In humanitarian contexts, agencies are increasingly addressing the information and communications needs of people affected by crises. The Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network defines the approach as

> based on the principle that information and communication are critical forms of aid, without which disaster survivors cannot effectively engage in their own recovery. When people are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and provide feedback, this enhances their sense of well-being and can help them adapt to the challenges they face. Communication, whether through new information and communications technologies or more traditional means, is therefore essential for the engagement of disaster-affected people in humanitarian action – as well as in their own efforts to help themselves. (CDAC Network, 2014)

Governments and communities affected by crises are increasingly using new technologies and communications tools to warn people of impending disasters and to organise their own responses. Aid agencies' investments in communications activities are seen as a means to promote transparency and accountability (for example, by ensuring that people are aware of how international agencies should be working and where they can get assistance, and by creating a channel for people to report any misuse of power), as well as participation (allowing the opinions of affected people to be heard and included in decisions). As such, communication between agencies and crisis-affected people is an important element of accountability and participation.

This paper uses 'engagement' as a catch-all term to cover all instances of people in crisis-affected communities becoming involved in planning and implementing responses to the crises affecting them. This broad definition covers the entire range of intentional interactions between those providing humanitarian aid and affected people, including activities focused on communication, accountability and participation.

Importantly, this definition also covers actions taken by local actors and crisis-affected people themselves to respond to a crisis directly without the intervention of international humanitarian organisations. These actions include prevention, preparedness, early warning, disaster risk reduction and mitigation efforts; first-response activities in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or crisis; response and recovery activities led by community groups, CSOs, local authorities and the affected government, and local businesses; and advocacy for policy changes, each of which may or may not be supported by international humanitarian organisations.

While this broad definition encompasses the direct engagement of those affected by the crisis in the response and how they engage with those coming from outside to support their efforts, most of the literature and the discussions at the meeting focused on how outside agencies attempt to engage with crisis-affected people, not the other way around. The meeting did, however, witness a resounding call by Robert Chambers and many others for a definitional shift away from using the term 'beneficiary', which is still widely used in the literature and in some of the definitions mentioned above. There was a consensus that it should no longer be used because of its connotation of passivity. There seemed to be agreement that 'crisis-affected people', or 'vulnerable' or 'at-risk' groups were better alternatives. Interestingly, the definitions in the literature rarely mention the role of the affected state in engaging with crisis-affected people. This is likely to become an area of increasing concern as states in the global South develop more effective disaster response capacities.

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This definition of engagement thus covers a wide variety of activities. It may be useful to order these activities, and one way of doing so is in terms of the degree of power that people affected by a particular crisis have over the humanitarian response. Figure 2 summarises various approaches to engagement that humanitarian agencies currently use, and organises them – from the provision of basic information about the crisis and response activities all the way to meaningful participation, partnership and ownership – according to the level of influence and power that crisis-affected communities are able to exert through these modalities.

FIGURE 2. DEGREE OF EMPOWERMENT OF CRISIS-AFFECTED GROUPS IN DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

PARTNERSHIPS

ACCOUNTABILITY

OWNERSHIP

CONSULTATION

PARTICIPATION

TWO-WAY
COMMUNICATIONS

INFORMATION
PROVISION

1.1 A brief history of engagement in humanitarian action

The engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action is a goal to which the international aid community in general – and the humanitarian aid community in particular – has expressed a broad commitment, at least in discourse, if not in practice. Many approaches to engagement have their origins in the development arena, where participatory methods blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period the concept of empowerment (seen as an outcome of participation) gained support, particularly among non-governmental organisations (NGOs) influenced by the ideas of Robert Chambers, Paulo Freire and others. This was complemented by the emergence in the 1990s of rights-based approaches that stressed the rights and responsibilities that people have to drive their own development and to hold duty bearers to account (see Jupp et al., 2010).

By the late 1980s, in the light of a number of studies that suggested that humanitarian aid failed to take account of local knowledge and attitudes (Harrell-Bond, 1986; de Waal, 1989), humanitarian actors began to consider how ideas of participation might inform humanitarian programmes (Mitchell and Slim, 1990). Interest in the topic intensified after the response to the genocide and displacement in Rwanda and the subsequent publication of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR, 1996). While earlier attempts to increase the engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action had been largely at the level of individual programmes or organisations, the Joint Evaluation helped inspire the creation of system-wide initiatives and standards, such as Sphere, HAP, People in Aid and ALNAP.

This increased focus on issues of engagement resulted in the institutionalisation of the commitment to participation by crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. For example, participation was identified as an essential foundation of people's right to life with dignity, as affirmed in Principles 6 and 7 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief. Similar statements appear in the Sphere and HAP standards, and in many UN agencies' and humanitarian organisations' principles and programmatic guidance. More recently, donors have also formalised their commitment to the participation of crisis-affected people. The Good Humanitarian Donorship agreement calls for the involvement of beneficiaries in all aspects of disaster response.[3] The commitment of crisis-affected (and in some cases, crisis-causing) governments to ensuring the participation of those affected by crisis is less clear, however. Nevertheless, as articulated in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, all governments have an obligation to consult with displaced people and to facilitate their participation in the decisions that affect their lives.

In sum, the importance of engaging directly with people affected by conflicts and disasters is a common theme in the literature and in normative discussions on humanitarian action and development, governance, peace-building, and human rights. The participation debate, which had its origins in development theory and practice – and earlier still in the social and political development policies of Northern governments and institutions – has since expanded to other spheres of international cooperation. In the humanitarian system the importance of engaging

> " This increased focus on issues of engagement resulted in the institutionalisation of the commitment to participation by crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. "

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3.   Good Humanitarian Donorship Principle 7 states: 'Request implementing humanitarian organisations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response.' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee)

with affected communities has been enshrined in UN Security Council resolutions; UN agency manuals; international conventions; codes of conduct; and countless frameworks, standards and guidelines.

In 2011 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee agreed to incorporate the Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations into its policies and operational guidelines and to promote them with operational partners, in Humanitarian Country Teams and among cluster members. The commitments are focused on key factors needed to effectively engage with crisis-affected communities, as shown in Box 2.

BOX 2. INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE COMMITMENTS ON ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS

1. **Leadership and governance:** Demonstrate their commitment to accountability to affected populations by ensuring feedback and accountability mechanisms are integrated into country strategies, programme proposals, monitoring and evaluation, recruitment, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, and partnership agreements, and are highlighted in reporting.

2. **Transparency:** Provide accessible and timely information to affected populations on organizational procedures, structures and processes that affect them to ensure that they can make informed decisions, and facilitate a dialogue between an organisation and its affected populations over information provision.

3. **Feedback and complaints:** Actively seek the views of affected populations to improve policy and practice in programming, ensuring that feedback and complaint mechanisms are streamlined, appropriate and robust enough to deal with (communicate, receive, process, respond to and learn from) complaints about breaches in policy and stakeholder dissatisfaction.

4. **Participation:** Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practices to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.

5. **Design, monitoring and evaluation:** Design, monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives of programmes with the involvement of affected populations, feeding learning back into the organisation on an ongoing basis and reporting on the results of the process.

Source: http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-common-default&sb=89.

1.2 Why engage with crisis-affected people?

Most humanitarian actors and aid providers would agree that engagement is a worthwhile goal, particularly since all agree that the dignity of those affected by crises must be respected. However, aid agencies are often not clear on why and for what purposes people affected by crises should be more engaged in humanitarian action. Broadly speaking, the literature identifies three main rationales for participation by and engagement with crisis-affected communities: value-based or normative, instrumental and emancipatory (Brookings Institution, 2008: 10).

Value-based or normative rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it is the right thing to do, in order to:

- fulfil a moral duty

- respect the fundamental rights and dignity of affected groups

- act in solidarity with those who have been affected by crisis or disaster

- fulfil written obligations.

Instrumental rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it makes humanitarian programmes more effective by helping them to:

- gather information to inform programming decisions

- assess a particular context in terms of the protection of civilians or security conditions

- improve the agency's visibility and funding prospects

- improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian programmes

- better meet the needs of those affected by crisis, for example by improving targeting and timeliness

- reduce costs, waste or inefficiencies

- gain access to the crisis-affected area and improve the security of humanitarian staff

- encourage communities to contribute labour or resources

- keep managers satisfied and meet donor requirements.

> " It is sometimes unclear whether engagement is seen as a right and a moral duty, and thus a valuable objective in itself, or simply as a way to achieve better humanitarian outcomes. "

Emancipatory rationales argue that agencies should support engagement because it strengthens society and addresses underlying vulnerabilities and inequalities. It therefore can:

- give voice and agency to marginalised groups

- give people information that enables them to make more informed decisions

- strengthen the capacity of local CSOs and government

- increase citizens' expectations of and demand for accountability

- transform power structures and dynamics

- improve the sustainability of the outcomes of projects and interventions

- give people greater control over their lives.

There is, then, a fundamental distinction between engagement to achieve a particular goal (such as better programme quality) and promoting it as a value. In practice, agencies do not always explicitly state why they believe engagement is important, and staff members working on the same project may have different opinions on the reasons for promoting engagement (Bonino et al., 2014). This is important because in many cases the type and degree of engagement that an agency supports are determined by what the agency aims to achieve. Simple information provision or consultation may be enough to fulfil instrumental goals, while emancipatory goals are best served by approaches that encourage participation or support local ownership.

In some cases there may also be tension between the different rationales for engagement. Emancipatory approaches in particular may challenge humanitarian principles and values, because they imply tackling structural inequalities or promoting social change and therefore entering controversies of a more political nature. We will explore these tensions in more detail in section 3. What is important to note here is that it is sometimes unclear whether engagement is seen as a right and a moral duty, and thus a valuable objective in itself, or simply as a way to achieve better humanitarian outcomes. Some current thinking, particularly in HAP and the EU Humanitarian Consensus, seems to be that it is a right (DG Humanitarian Aid, 2007; Davis, 2007: 11).

At the meeting there were questions on the extent to which participation or engagement in humanitarian contexts should necessarily have empowerment as an overt goal. Many participants – from Robert Chambers, who gave the keynote speech, to representatives of small African local NGOs – viewed social

change as a key rationale for engaging with affected groups. The more traditional humanitarian Dunantist[4] voices, who would argue that it is not for humanitarians to engage with the root causes of structural crises, were very much in the minority. Thus the ambiguities around the application of more developmental approaches to humanitarian situations remained largely unresolved. Not all actors in a humanitarian context would necessarily be comfortable with an empowerment approach or share social change objectives. Some might be pursuing engagement for instrumental reasons, for example to facilitate access and meet humanitarian objectives, but not as part of a social change strategy. As one participant in the session on 'Experiences of participation from three continents' put it: 'Where we often get caught up, perhaps, is that we're using the same language in order to try to do very different things, depending on the mandate and the nature of the agency' (Paul Knox Clarke, ALNAP). While there is no unanimity in the sector on this issue, those attending the ALNAP Meeting spent most of the time discussing 'how' to engage with those affected by crises rather than 'why', because most agreed that the 'how' is an issue that needs improvement and attention and that there is no consensus among members about 'why' to engage with crisis-affected communities.
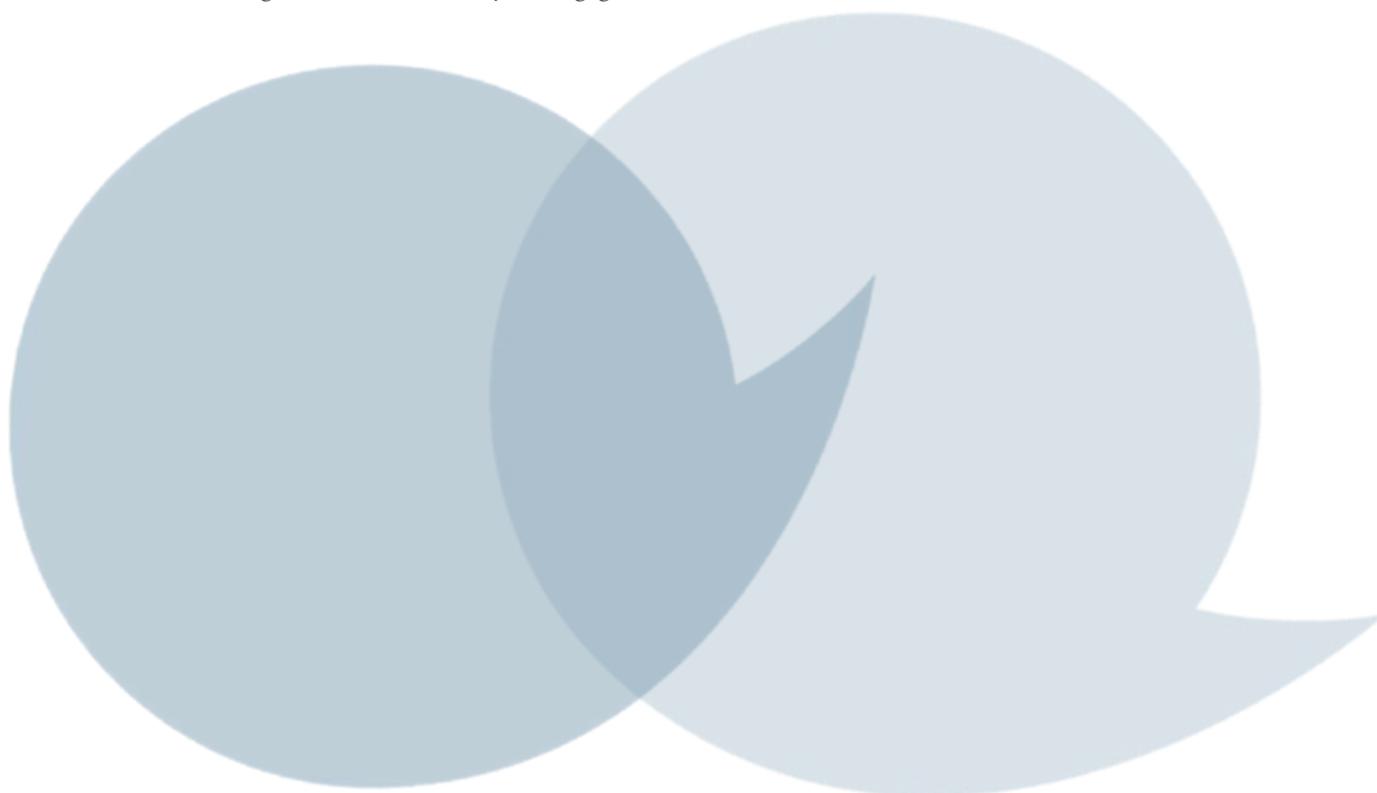
4.   The term Dunantist has tended to refer to those humanitarian organisations operating in the perceived tradition of Jean Henri Dunant, who inspired the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Dunantist organisations tend to operate with an extremely high regard for humanitarian principles, and have often positioned themselves outside state interests.

In brief

- **There is little clarity on the concept of 'engagement with crisis-affected people'.** The fact that humanitarian agencies use various approaches to establish relationships with crisis-affected people and often combine them in a single humanitarian activity accounts partly for this confusion in the terminology.

- These approaches include the provision of information about both the situation and the humanitarian response, two-way communication, the consultation of crisis-affected people during different phases of a programme, the establishment of accountability mechanisms. They also include forms of direct involvement of crisis-affected people in programme design, activities, evaluation and decision-making. Engagement can also involve aid agencies' support to locally-led initiatives.

- While discussions on engagement tend to focus on the bilateral relationship between the humanitarian agency and the affected group, in many contexts these relationships may be multilateral, owing to the actions of donors, military forces, private sector, state and non-state actors which can enable or curtail the engagement of those affected by crisis.

- Engagement is distinct from communication, accountability and participation, though it is framed in this paper as encompassing all three of these areas of practice.

- **This paper understands 'engagement' in a broad sense to cover all instances and degrees of involvement of crisis-affected people in planning and implementing responses to the crises affecting them.** This includes both the range of intentional interactions between those providing humanitarian aid and affected people, and actions taken by local actors and crisis-affected people themselves to respond to a crisis directly.

- Humanitarian actors and aid providers may engage with crisis-affected people for three different purposes: because they believe it is the right thing to do (value-based or normative rationales), because it makes humanitarian programmes more effective (instrumental rationales), or because it addresses structural inequalities and root causes of crises (emancipatory rationales).

- **There is much less discussion and more controversy within the international aid community about 'why' to engage with affected people than about 'how' to do so.**

2. To what extent are crisis-affected people currently engaged in humanitarian action?

We noted above that the idea of 'engagement' covers not only activities undertaken by international humanitarian organisations, but also those initiated by members of crisis-affected communities themselves – as volunteers and first responders (for instance, with national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies or community-based and faith-based groups), as members of local CSOs, as government staff and as local business people. While these activities – particularly those initiated by individuals and community-based groups – are often not well documented and can be hard to quantify, they obviously make a huge contribution to decreasing mortality in emergency situations and protecting at-risk groups. Particularly with regard to preventive action and to the initial responses to rapid-onset disasters, they account for the majority of lives saved, as was highlighted in several panels on disaster early warning systems and on the responses to Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda in the Philippines and the crisis in Syria.

In many conflict-affected areas local humanitarian actors may play even larger roles when international agencies do not have access or are limited by security or political concerns. The panel on Syria provided an object lesson on the complexities – and risks – faced by local agencies, such as the Syrian Red Crescent society and home-grown community-based groups, in trying to provide humanitarian relief to vulnerable groups in a particularly fraught environment where international agencies have little or no access and can only work by remote management (Mitchell, 2014).

As expected, the importance of this type of local ownership and the potential for international actors to support it were themes that were given considerable attention at the ALNAP Meeting as many wrestled with the impacts of having responded to four 'L3' emergencies (the most severe, large-scale crises according to UN classification) in one year. Several examples of indigenous or bottom-up approaches to engagement were highlighted and there was a palpable feeling that the discourse on engagement and participation is no longer the exclusive preserve of international agencies. The Vice-President of Africa Humanitarian Action, an Ethiopian NGO and the host of the ALNAP meeting, affirmed in the opening session that more attention needed to be paid to the 'engagement of crisis-affected states, societies, and local organisations in humanitarian action' (Constantinos, 2014).

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As was highlighted in the panel on livelihoods-based emergency response, community members in Ethiopia have played a role in drought monitoring, mitigation and response by participating in conservation projects, identifying the types of support they need, deciding on which animals to feed and which to cull, and in other ways (Cullis, 2014). In another panel a woman from a village in Myanmar discussed how she and members of her community have analysed the issues facing their community and created plans to address them through 'village books', which they use to engage in discussions with the government and aid agencies who can help them achieve their goals (Wakhilo, 2014). Throughout the meeting members of community-based organisations from a number of crisis-affected countries proudly discussed the ways in which they are preparing for and dealing with the crises that are affecting them and taking more leadership in their communities' responses and engagement with international agencies.

Perhaps because of the presence of many national NGOs and members of grassroots groups, a great deal of emphasis was placed on approaches where international agencies were not directly involved, but rather partnering with local organisations or playing only a supporting role. These ranged from relatively large-scale country-wide initiatives – such as the Kenyan Taxpayers Association (see Box 3) – to urban situations where community groups in a Nairobi slum acted as intermediaries with an outside agency, to very small-scale village-level or community initiatives in Africa and South Asia where outside agencies were not involved.

> How international humanitarian agencies engage and support local initiatives' engagement with people in crisis-affected communities is an area that needs more discussion and where there is more to learn.

This is a trend that is expected to continue. How international humanitarian agencies engage and support these local initiatives' engagement with people in crisis-affected communities is an area that needs more discussion and where there is more to learn from multi-mandate and development organisations who have a long history of working with a range of partners. Moreover, some suggested that the question should be about how crisis-affected people want to engage with those meaning to help them, rather than the other way around. In discussing who engages whom, the role of the state both as an arbiter of the engagement approaches of aid agencies and as an actor itself engaging with affected groups was a recurring theme to which we will return later in this section. This is increasingly relevant, especially in middle-income countries where the capacity for disaster response and preparedness is stronger. These developments are both a challenge and an opportunity, and an area where change is happening at a faster pace than the humanitarian system and many international agencies realise.

2.1 The effectiveness of approaches to engaging with crisis-affected people

The background paper and the discussions in Addis Ababa focused more on the degree to which crisis-affected people have been engaged by international humanitarian organisations in humanitarian responses rather than on the quality of that engagement. Measuring how well, to what extent, and to what effect people affected by crises are engaged is a difficult undertaking, however, evidence is currently being built up through lessons and anecdotal examples. This is an area where more work is required. The significant differences in humanitarian contexts and the types of emergencies that agencies are preparing for and responding to make comparing approaches and impacts challenging. Time pressures, short-term programming, funding modalities and the can-do culture of humanitarian agencies also often limit the scope for in-depth and long-term study, reflection and evaluations. That being said, participants at the meeting provided a number of examples and lessons related to the forms of engagement described in section 1, which, combined with the literature review, shed light on the degree to which crisis-affected people are currently engaged in humanitarian action and the effectiveness of such engagement.

In brief

- **Crisis-affected states, societies and local organisations make a huge, yet often poorly documented contribution to humanitarian action,** primarily with regard to preventive measures and initial responses to a crisis. The discourse on engagement in humanitarian action has to **pay more attention to these initiatives and the growing number and types of actors involved.**

- **It is increasingly important to consider 'who is engaging whom'**: thinking about whether the question of engagement should be about how crisis-affected people want to engage with aid agencies rather than the other way around, and exploring the rising importance of the state as an arbiter of engagement and an actor engaging with affected groups.

- Measuring how well, to what extent, and to what effect people affected by crises are engaged is a difficult undertaking, however, evidence is currently being built up through lessons and anecdotal examples.

> "
> Participants in the meeting noted how information on aid flows, budgets, partnership agreements and entitlements are also helping local people to hold their governments and service providers accountable.
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Information provision and two-way communication

The coordinator of the CDAC Network explained in the panel she chaired that the focus on information and communication as important forms of humanitarian aid 'means the right information at the right time, to the right people in a coordinated fashion, and it means listening to, being in dialogue with, and respecting, and working with views of affected people. It's all about engagement' (Houghton, 2014).

In the panel on women's experiences at the community level, a woman from a drought-affected community in northern Kenya described the importance of access to information and communication in helping those affected by or preparing for crises to make better decisions (Mijioni, 2014). ActionAid communicates with the relief committee she serves on through SMS and other methods about livestock and food prices, the dates of food distribution, ration sizes, when field workers will be there, etc. The relief committee then shares the information with the larger community; for instance, food and livestock prices are put in bulletins that are placed strategically in communal places like dispensaries, marketplaces or local administration offices for people to see. The committee uses the same methods to communicate with ActionAid on issues around conflict, disease outbreaks or malnutrition, and the agency then passes relevant information to relevant government ministries, who are far away from the villages affected.

Participants in the meeting noted how information on aid flows, budgets, partnership agreements and entitlements are also helping local people to hold their governments and service providers accountable. For instance, in a cash transfer programme for disaster-affected people funded by the World Bank and implemented by the Pakistani government, CDAC Network members helped to spread the word about eligibility, amounts of assistance, the use of cash cards, etc. Without this information some local banks would have kept some of the money (Houghton, 2014).

BOX 3. TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION DURING THE RESPONSE TO TYPHOON HAIYAN/YOLANDA

While it is too early to evaluate the impacts, some progress towards more effective engagement was evident in the recent response in the Philippines to Typhoon Haiyan (known as Typhoon Yolanda in that country), where much of the response was locally driven, given the strong existing capacity of the government and civil society actors.

In the first days after the typhoon struck a number of UN and international NGO staff with an explicit focus on communication and accountability engaged with local communities, civil society, media and technology providers. People were able to obtain information through radios about the situation and where to receive assistance in the very early days after the typhoon struck.

Additionally, based on the findings from community consultations and feedback gathered through Twitter, text messaging, radio, help desks and other channels in the first month of the response, aid agencies made rapid changes and noted that engaging with and obtaining information from crisis-affected communities influenced their decisions. The end-of-mission report from the first inter-agency Accountability to Affected Populations coordinator reported:

> It was demonstrated that addressing the communication, information and connectivity needs of communities is a clear first line priority in any humanitarian response, and additionally, that the quality of this approach is enhanced by an Accountability to Affected Populations ... lens that encourages community involvement at a deeper level, clear problem definition, consideration of cross cutting issues according to gender, age, diversity and protection, and greater follow through and response to two-way communication. (OCHA, 2013: 2)

The Communication with Communities Working Group update from less than six weeks after the typhoon showed both the progress made and challenges faced by humanitarian actors trying to engage with communities at this early stage of the disaster – all of which are also common challenges in later phases of responses:

> Agencies need to place equal weight and resources in the capacity to engage in dialogue rather than defaulting to a very limited one-to-many messaging approach. The ultimate goal, a continuous and systematic loop of drawing real-time feedback from communities, analyzing it, acting upon it, and communicating those actions back to the community, is still some

way off. With regard to listening to feedback offered by the community, there are a range of systems run by radio stations, implementing agencies, and government, which are gathering and collating complaints, thanks, requests, and information from the ground. However, improvements need to be made in the management of this information. Collating the various datasets to more broadly represent the voice of the community, making that information available to a broader range of relevant actors, and ensuring that subsequent programming takes this feedback into account, are all areas in which agencies also need to invest capacity, skills and resources. (OCHA, 2013: 1)

Participants at the panel on communication and accountability shared key additional insights and lessons learned (Houghton, 2014):

- Preparedness is key and the lessons learned from responses to previous disasters in the Philippines were used in approaches in the area affected by Yolanda. Some agencies had policies, protocols and procedures in place that had been contexualised to the Philippines before the disaster struck. This experience and the relationships that had been established were critical in helping them re-establish communications days after the typhoon.

- Funding and staff need to be dedicated from the beginning and included in all plans and proposals. Some INGOs were able to obtain senior management commitments for staff and resources because they had shown how their focus on communications and accountability had improved the quality and impact of their work in other places. They had been able to make the argument that communications and accountability mechanisms should not be seen as 'add-ons', but as critical to their effectiveness.

Presentations at the meeting also pointed to ways in which agencies can improve how they provide information and support two-way communication. For example, in the panel on communication and accountability, participants discussed the importance of two-way communication, as opposed to just one-way information provision, noting that people provide better information when they are more informed and engaged, and that this leads to more effective responses and programming (Houghton, 2014). To effectively communicate, agencies need to assess how people access and use information, as well as how they communicate in and outside their communities. This is particularly important in hard-to-reach or insecure areas where aid agency staff may not be able to reach and monitor how information is being used, who has access to it, etc. For instance, a panelist from Internews shared an example of providing information to barbershops in Pakistan where men frequently gather and discuss community matters, and of using other means to reach women (Noble, 2014). He and others noted the importance of using local languages and listening to those beyond 'the usual suspects' to inform programmes and operations.

While these initiatives are increasing the amount of information that affected people are able to provide or have access to, it is not always clear to what degree this information influences decision-making. People engaged in previous humanitarian responses and those who were on the ground in the Philippines highlight that 'community engagement will only be effective if aid recipients believe that they are being listened to and that their questions, concerns and problems are being addressed' (Chapelier and Shah, 2013: 25). It is also important to recognise that in many of these approaches the degree of engagement is fairly low: people are often only able to provide information on questions asked by the agencies or obtain information that agencies are willing to provide, but these may not be the questions and information that are most important to them (Anderson et al., 2012; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014).

There were also instances where communities were less than enthusiastic about the communication approaches proposed. As an International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) participant who had worked in a particularly difficult neighbourhood in Port au Prince, Haiti, put it, 'Many community
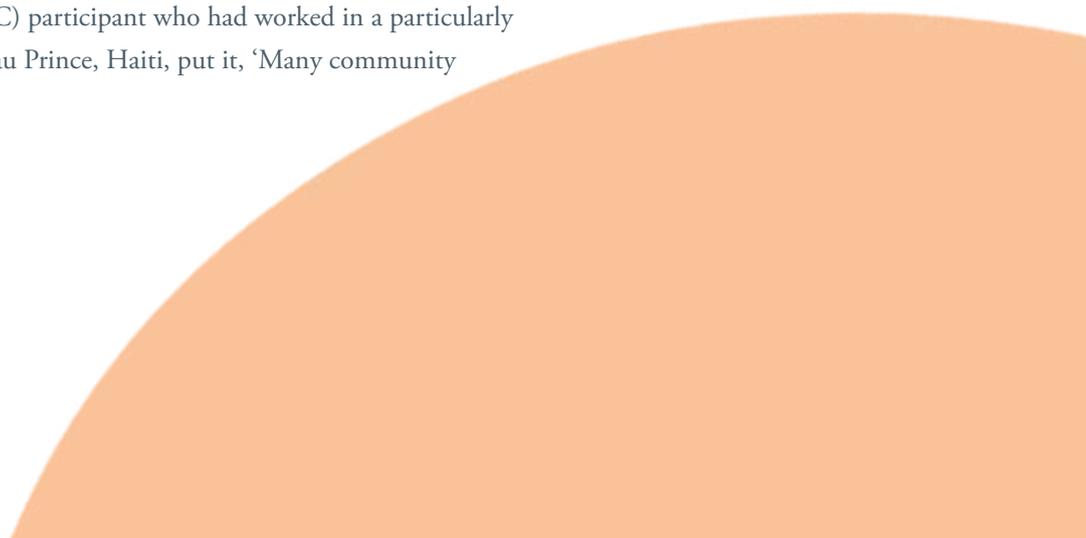
> **Overall the communities engaged believed that the projects were more relevant and that they had greater ownership, which also meant they were more passionate about working with the agencies to sustain the projects' impacts.**

members told me, "I'm sick of answering these questions. Nothing ever changes, we just get the same stuff all the time. People come and ask us questions and don't come back again"' (Sharon Reader, IFRC). This hints at a wider problem: the specificities and difficulties of communicating in urban environments with large numbers of people. The panel on engaging urban communities in humanitarian response (Sokpoh, 2014) highlighted some of the challenges – urban communities are less cohesive, power may be in the hands of unsavoury leaders who misrepresent their needs, some groups may be very 'humanitarian literate' and skilled at manipulation, etc. However, there are also opportunities in urban situations where affected groups tend to be more educated, more connected and comfortable with modern technologies, and more accustomed to expressing grievances and demanding accountability. This was summed up by a presenter on disaster preparedness in Kathmandu, Nepal who said: 'I think what this means is we can't look through rural lenses. We can't assume a common level of need, we can't assume a common level of vulnerability in the urban population, or capacity within the community' (Samuel Carpenter, British Red Cross).

Accountability

Research into the outcomes and impacts of accountability mechanisms completed last year by HAP, Save the Children, and Christian Aid in Kenya and Myanmar used participatory research methods to measure how well the accountability mechanisms delivered against the OECD-DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The findings showed that:

> participation was considered an important contribution to ensuring that the project met the needs and priorities of communities. Lack of participation was considered a significant hindrance to successful interventions. ... Accountability mechanisms have strengthened trust between agencies and project participants, and highlighted the link between community participation and ownership. ... A modest investment in information sharing (in terms of financial resources, staff time and agency commitment), involvement by project participants in the design and delivery of programmes, and ensuring there is a means of listening to and acting on feedback, brings a significant return – not only in participant satisfaction and engagement in projects, but also in the tangible success of projects. (Featherstone, 2013: 9, 13, 14)

Overall, the communities engaged believed that the projects were more relevant and that they had greater ownership, which also meant they were more passionate about working with the agencies to sustain the projects' impacts. Presentations at the meeting highlighted this study and several other examples where accountability mechanisms have influenced communities in ways that went beyond the expected outcomes of the project (Casey-Maslen, 2014; Wakhilo, 2014) and enabled people in affected communities to hold their governments and other duty bearers to account (see Box 4).

Recent research by CDA and ALNAP on feedback mechanisms in humanitarian programmes launched at the meeting shows that crisis-affected people are generally engaged in providing input and feedback on project-level details, but not often on broader programme and agency or humanitarian strategies and principles (Bonino et al., 2014). As Darcy and Kiani note in the 2013 *Humanitarian accountability report*,

> for all the progress made over the past 10 years, there has been a tendency to deal with accountability in increasingly technocratic, depoliticized and self-referential terms by humanitarian organisations. Put another way, there has been a shift in focus from macro- to micro-accountability … it tends to be considered in isolation from the nexus of other [sometimes more fundamental] accountability relationships of which it forms a part. (Darcy and Kiani, 2013: 5)

A participant at the meeting pointed out how hard it is to shift this project-level focus, noting that

> our commitment to accountability and engagement is like buying a membership in an 'Accountability Gym'. We all know we should be doing it regularly and that it is important for many reasons. But it takes real motivation to really live up to this commitment every day. (Steven Wainwright, IFRC)

Participants also discussed the tension between individual versus systematic and collective approaches and responsibility for ensuring that people affected by crises are engaged and able to hold aid agencies accountable. There has been a slow evolution and a proliferation of standards, frameworks and methods that agencies use to communicate with and be accountable to crisis-affected people. As the discussions and panels at the meeting demonstrated (particularly those on the Typhoon Yolanda response), some agencies have made significant investments

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> There has been a slow evolution and a proliferation of standards, frameworks and methods that agencies use to communicate with and be accountable to crisis-affected people… Some agencies have made significant investments and have shown great progress, but others have not.
> "

and have shown great progress, but others have not. The lack of consistent donor funding and UN coordination and leadership to ensure that accountability is prioritised in all humanitarian responses has hindered significant systematic progress and was noted by many as something that needs to be addressed to ensure the quality, accountability and effectiveness of the humanitarian system as a whole.

Participants from crisis-affected countries discussed how local CSOs and government officials are often left out of coordination mechanisms and have neither benefitted from nor been well connected to many of the international initiatives undertaken to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian responses. Many of the accountability mechanisms that international agencies have established do not connect to local structures or help affected people to hold their governments accountable. As one participant at the panel on making space for the voices of communities noted, this limited approach had resulted in 'Accountability without sustainability' (Casey-Maslen, 2014).

BOX 4. DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY FROM THE STATE

In an interesting reversal from the traditional top-down INGO discourse of 'how best to engage with communities', a bottom-up local organisation has developed a seemingly effective methodology for demanding accountability from the state. While the context is not a particularly humanitarian one – although humanitarian needs in northern Kenya are chronic and refugee camps are key sites for humanitarian aid-related corruption – the implications are important, should a similar system be set up to demand accountability from humanitarian aid agencies.

NTA enables citizens to demand accountability from 'a point of knowledge' and looks at accountability from both a horizontal and vertical perspective. The citizen has a responsibility to be accountable to other citizens in terms of their responsibilities and obligations as taxpayers. On the other hand, this level of accountability then grants the citizen the moral authority to demand accountability from the state. As the speaker from NTA put it:

Our main focus is looking at service delivery as in the quality of service the citizens get out of the taxes that they pay. Also ensuring that citizens look at these taxes as a means of not only accessing services, but also engaging with the State as being responsible for this service provision. (Otieno, 2014)

The key tool developed by NTA is the 'Citizen Report Card'. This score card is used mainly to rate the quality of primary education and, to a lesser extent, other services provided by the state. It allows citizens to provide feedback and thus engage with the government more directly and continuously. NTA also convenes forums where citizens can publicly demand accountability from service providers and the government. 'These report cards are very important for us because they create a link between citizens and the State, at several levels. They provide information to the citizens as well as enabling the citizen to be able to demand accountability from a point of knowledge' (Otieno, 2014). They also give the citizens an avenue to demonstrate to the state – and by extension to other service providers, including non-state actors – that the resources that are invested at a local level may not necessarily be achieving the intended objectives and thus demand corrective action.

Once NTA report cards reach a critical mass, the national and local government representatives (local authorities, MPs, etc.) cannot afford to ignore the findings. The score cards are a tool for citizen participation by allowing problems to be identified and addressed. As the presenter explained,

> the state has to be progressively softened. States are inherently conservative. In most cases the state has to be pushed to do what it is supposed to do. If there is no one pushing the state, then things will not happen. That is the cycle that we are trying to break as the National Taxpayers Association so that citizens can begin to demand accountability from the state. (Otieno, 2014)

While thus far the main target has been wastage and corruption in the provision of services by the government, NTA also wants to hold non-state actors to account. The NTA representative referred to a frequent question in Kenya (which echoes what has been heard elsewhere) that aid providers need to address.

> We went to a village and we were seeing INGOs walk in and walk out. I have now grown old and you are still walking in and walking out. There is no transformation in my society. I still get my water from the pond. I still have to travel two kilometres during the dry season to get that water, so what difference are you making in our lives? (Otieno, 2014)

The experience of the Kenyan National Taxpayers Association (NTA) (see Box 4) offered an intriguing counterpoint to the examples shared by INGOs on how best to promote the engagement of and accountability to affected communities by crisis-affected governments (Otieno, 2014).

This 'citizen feedback' approach raises the possibility of citizens holding NGOs to account rather than accountability mechanisms being limited just to people directly involved in an aid programme. This might be an interesting development, because it would force NGOs to expand their discourse on engagement from the people directly involved or benefitting from a particular activity to the citizenry at large – of course, with a difference: citizens can (sometimes) mobilise and vote ineffective or corrupt politicians out of power; they can't do this to NGOs. This might be a welcome challenge to the self-mandated and self-referential ethos of many NGOs, where compliance with standards is still largely voluntary rather than mandatory.

Participation

Throughout the programme cycle

At the Annual Meeting several examples were given of ways to engage with crisis-affected people at various points in the crisis and in humanitarian programming. Researchers with Tufts University's Feinstein International Center highlighted how community participation over many years in livelihoods-based emergency responses in Ethiopia had prevented famine, reduced waste and ended ineffective interventions (such as emergency livestock vaccinations), and had identified effective approaches such as de-stocking for pastoralists during droughts (Cullis, 2014). The government of Ethiopia has now included the principle of community participation and these practices in its national guidelines on livelihoods-based drought response, and the participatory impact assessment (PIA) process was used by agencies working in other sectors, such as health, education and water use in Ethiopia (Catley et al., 2013). The PIA results in Ethiopia also contributed to the international Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS), which are used by many humanitarian agencies in other contexts. The researchers and the LEGS coordinator highlighted the need to invest in the skills and capacities of staff to facilitate the engagement of crisis-affected people, and noted that it may require a profound attitudinal shift among professionals to become facilitators and mentors rather than 'experts' and 'doers' (Cullis, 2014).

'Participatory processes are about bringing people on board, not just harvesting information from them.'

Sharon Reader, IFRC

Through these and other examples participants at the meeting provided evidence of how building on local knowledge leads to more effective humanitarian interventions. Even in more rapid-onset disasters, they suggested that it is possible to facilitate participation with good facilitation and a range of participants. However, participants cautioned that if agencies are not prepared to accept communities' ideas and priorities, then participatory approaches are not appropriate, because they can demotivate and discourage communities from engaging in the future – with aid agencies or with their governments – which is a concern to those with a long-term development perspective.

In decision-making

In the panel on experiences of participation from three continents (Bhatt, 2014), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), with examples from disasters in the Philippines, Pakistan and Haiti, provided an object lesson in participation that not only put the affected groups in the driver's seat, but also forced the NGO to adapt its overall approach to engagement with communities. Rather than coming in with a predetermined model of shelter and discussing the implementation of the project with the community, CRS facilitated the process in a way that allowed the community to decide what type of shelter was culturally and environmentally desirable. CRS studied the local architecture and building practices, and engaged in conversations with community members about how best to rebuild. For example, in some areas of the Philippines affected by Typhoon Washi houses need to be moveable because of the risk of flooding, which precluded the use of the heavy materials that CRS initially planned to provide. The community therefore selected the appropriate materials and decided where the houses should be built. The panellist from CRS explained:

> We ended up giving out cash grants to the beneficiaries so that they could construct the house as they wished. The only requirement to receive the grant is that you use the DRR [disaster risk reduction] techniques that will help you build better. We explained the techniques that we ask them to use, but then everyone has complete freedom to design whatever they wish. (Kreuwels, 2014)

In this approach CRS and people affected by the crises engaged in a conversation, learning together and capitalising on both local knowledge and external expertise to identify the best solutions.

Similarly, in Sindh province in Pakistan, the affected groups – which were from different and sometimes feuding tribes – sat together and decided how the villages should be rebuilt. They did a site-planning exercise and decided on the layout.

Vera Kreuwels, Catholic Relief Services

'We come with the kit and the paper, but it's really the community themselves organising it.'

> Participants at the meeting shared examples of how they had engaged community members, particularly women – who are often marginalised – in disaster preparedness and advocating for policy changes.

Some interesting things that the community fed back to us after doing this exercise is that they very much appreciated that everybody participated. We're dealing with Purdah culture here with people from different tribes. Women are not allowed to interact with the men from other tribes. In this village, for example, there were three tribes, so what happened before is that they all lived mingled and the women were living in the houses. Now they've reorganised their village, and the people from one tribe all have their front facing towards each other. They've organised themselves around the three water pumps. This meant that the women in each area now are able to go outside. They're able to go and fetch water. So it's prevented a lot of conflict, and it's increased the safety and also the participation in the community. (Kreuwels, 2014)

CRS learned from these experiences and changed its overall approach:

From these meetings we learned that we had to change our management style and system. At first we were managing shelter, WASH and livelihoods and actually in these meetings they told us, 'It's not working. You're registering me five times and I don't know who to talk to anymore.' We shifted our managerial approach into an area communication approach, which was just one team for one area, dealing with everything. The other thing that the community was crucial in was the project implementation. They were responsible for the security of their materials. They were responsible for registering the beneficiaries. They were responsible for identifying the most vulnerable and actually cross-checking whether there was any fault. (Kreuwels, 2014)

In advocating for policy change

Participants at the meeting shared examples of how they had engaged community members, particularly women – who are often marginalised – in disaster preparedness and advocating for policy changes. For instance, after the 2010 Floods in Pakistan the government announced a compensation package that excluded landless and women tenants. A women's group that had been supported by ActionAid and one of its local partners mobilised and demanded that these people should be included in the compensation package. As a member of this group described at the meeting,

women's groups throughout Punjab launched a campaign to claim their rights and equal compensation in the package. We organised rallies and press conferences. That campaign resulted in the inclusion of women in the compensation package and 1,500 women were able to access the scheme. We got engaged in the community for emergency preparedness training session and response plans. This helped to organise activist and women's leadership to influence the government to initiate and implement flood rehabilitation plans, like an emergency alarm system, strengthening embankments and building spurs.
The group decided to take our demands to the capital, Islamabad. I had never thought of going there. It was a struggle for our rights so I didn't have a second thought of going there with the women's group. We wanted to go there to meet policy makers where we heard they made policies.

One of the activities we did was theatre to communicate our message more strongly. To have visibility, we thought of using an open truck with a clear message of our demands for women's inclusion and the flood rehabilitation. It was summer when we went to Islamabad, a very hot day but we never stopped. We were the commanders of our own little army of women. We went to the parliament, shouted the slogans we had created out of our passion and spirit.

Because of this movement, it contributed to securing compensation packages for women and widows, especially landless and tenant women. Our struggle didn't end there.

At the district level, government authorities made a contingency plan to deal with the predicted floods in the upcoming year. Despite several requests from women, the government did not share that contingency plan with the community. So we launched a campaign to put pressure on the government to share the plan and as a result, not only did the government share the contingency plan, they also made sure the recommendations were noted and included in the plan.

This is how, from an introverted woman, I reached a point where now I'm miles away from my village with you all sharing the atrocities of the massive flood and the struggles of being a woman, which doubled the struggle. (Ambreen, 2014)

This example highlighted an emancipatory approach that encouraged people to understand and demand their rights from their government. ActionAid, as

a rights-based and multi-mandate organisation, was more comfortable taking what some humanitarians would consider a more 'political' approach to address underlying vulnerability and structural inequalities. Participants discussed how this approach would not work in all contexts and is not one that many humanitarian organisations would take in order to maintain their impartiality.

In brief

- **Information provision and two-way communication are not simply an asset, but crucial when it comes to the effectiveness of humanitarian responses.** Dialogue – as opposed to one-directional communication – increases people's readiness to provide information themselves; tangibly augments the effectiveness of responses and programmes; and raises the feeling of ownership and the satisfaction/degree of identification with the action taken.

- **To effectively communicate, agencies need to understand how people access and use information, as well as how they communicate within and outside their communities**, particularly in hard-to-reach or insecure areas where aid agency staff may not be able to reach and monitor how information is being used.

- **In order for communication and accountability approaches to contribute to effective programming, affected people need to believe that they are being listened to and that their questions, concerns and problems are being addressed**; in many cases, particularly urban response contexts, this is difficult to achieve given that these communities are less cohesive.

- The use of engagement for accountability is often practiced well at project-level, where there are a number of examples of crisis-affected people engaged in providing input and feedback which is used to improve programmes; yet **there are few opportunities for them to engage on broader programme and agency or humanitarian strategies and principles.**

- **In order to change this *status quo*, humanitarian agencies need to start thinking of themselves rather as 'facilitators' than 'experts' and 'doers'.** A deeper understanding of the local contexts is also needed to identify how, when and to what extent to engage affected people best. This may require new approaches in which citizens of a country hold NGOs to account.

2.2 Levels of engagement

While a number of good examples of effective engagement practices were showcased at the Annual Meeting, the discussions and a recent report by ALNAP (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014) suggested that international agencies have some way to go before they can claim to meaningfully consult those who might potentially receive aid at the assessment, monitoring and evaluation phases of the typical project cycle. Another study goes even further and claims that in general, practice has been disappointing: 'Participation in large-scale responses has often been more exploitative than emancipatory, being used as a means to obtain cheap labour, reduce costs and acquire information' (Davis, 2007: 23).

The amount of consultation appears to differ from one phase to another, with the greatest amount of engagement tending to occur at the assessment phase, where aid agencies are gathering information on needs, but not always on existing capacity (Figure 3). Engagement drops off significantly during the design phase, when key decisions are made. While those affected by crises may be engaged during implementation (including by providing time, labour and feedback) and monitoring (again, by providing feedback), they are even less involved during evaluation.

The research from which Figure 3 derives was conducted in 2008, and since then several trends have emerged in the humanitarian system that may arguably have increased the number of ways in which international organisations engage crisis-affected people throughout the programme cycle. As the literature and the panel on communication and accountability highlighted, there has been a significant increase

> " New forms of participation – bottom-up, home-grown and involving a range of stakeholders (state, private sector, diaspora) or trade union-style demands for accountability – have blossomed. "

FIGURE 3. LEVELS AND TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT AT DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE PROJECT CYCLE

Project phase	Diagnosis	Design and preparation	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
Degree of engagement					
Type of engagement	Consists mainly of providing data	Very rare	Frequent in the form of in-kind contributions or labour	Rare	Extremely rare, although the current trend is to encourage more involvement
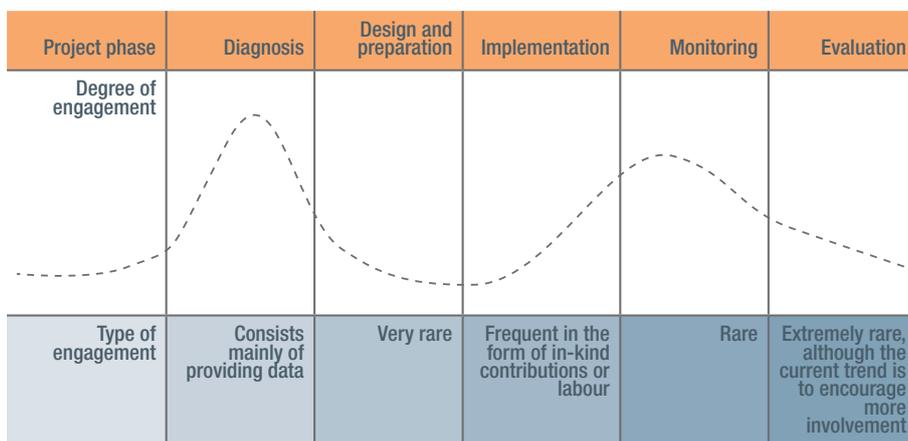
Source: Adapted from Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 8.

in the establishment of mechanisms for two-way communication between affected communities and agencies, with widespread experimentation and innovative uses of mobile phones, text messaging, social media, interactive voice response and other new technologies (Houghton, 2014; Chandran and Thow, 2013; Vinck, 2013).

Many agencies have established feedback and accountability mechanisms (Knox Clarke, Mitchell and Fenton, 2011; Bonino et al, 2014), even in very difficult contexts and where agencies use remote management techniques. There have also been a number of advances in participatory evaluation, most notably in the area of PIA (Cullis, 2014; Catley et al., 2013; SCHR, 2010: 15; Oxfam, 2012a).

The panels and discussions at the meeting confirmed the multiplication and diversification of approaches to participation in the last few years. As mentioned above, new forms of participation – bottom-up, home-grown, and involving a range of stakeholders (the state, the private sector, the diaspora) or trade union-style demands for accountability – have also blossomed. These new approaches challenge the self-assurance of the traditional humanitarian enterprise and in some cases shift the locus of power towards affected communities and in others to the state and its institutions.

'This has made me think about voices differently.'

Mihir Bhatt, AIDMI

2.3 How people affected by crises view their engagement by humanitarian actors

The views of local people on the effectiveness of efforts to engage them in humanitarian responses vary, depending on the context and whether agencies are engaged in responding to rapid-onset natural disasters, conflicts, protracted crises or chronic vulnerability. They also differ based on the types of programmes and approaches, with more development-oriented approaches used in DRR, disaster preparedness and resilience programming, which tend to be longer term and focused on capacity development.

In a short film shown at the meeting entitled 'Refugee voices from West Africa', refugees from various countries in West Africa emphasised the importance of education and their desire to participate in and contribute more to society, particularly since many have been refugees for years. In contrast to humanitarian contexts with relatively more stability, Syrian refugees in another film shown at the meeting (Campbell, 2014) discussed how aid distribution methods were humiliating and that aid agencies were not taking the time to explain the eligibility criteria and how people are selected to receive aid, why certain things are being provided and others not, or how to have their concerns heard about what seem to be arbitrary decisions made by the aid agencies.

Perceptions of people who are chronically vulnerable in Borena, Ethiopia, which were shared at the meeting and reported in the 2013 Humanitarian accountability report also show that reality still does not match the rhetoric and that much more progress needs to be made in the areas listed below even in more stable contexts where agencies have worked for years (Darcy et al., 2013: 68-69; Geleto, 2014):

- On **information and transparency**: 'Communities lacked detailed information about organisations' backgrounds or expected staff behaviours, and were not adequately informed about the project life spans … communities also repeatedly and strongly emphasised the need to have fuller details regarding the purpose and intended impacts of projects before they are implemented.'

- On **participation**: 'Communities repeatedly highlighted the need for informed consent, agreement, discussion and participation before and during programmes, along with the importance of recognizing their context and culture.'

- On **complaints handling**: 'Members of some communities had to travel great distances to access suggestion boxes, while others who had lodged complaints noted that "follow-up is necessary. We give suggestions but there is no follow-up and the NGO did not even come back".'

- Organisations that visited the community regularly worked towards building a long-term relationship with communities, discussed projects, and sought their consent and approval before implementing them were viewed as the best ones. As one community member said: 'They should ask, discuss before implementing and understand the pastoralist way of life' and '[they need to] share information beforehand so we can be successful together'.

These views are not new and have been aired by other crisis-affected people in many different contexts and for many years. CDA's Listening Project found that most people in crisis situations do not feel they have been meaningfully engaged or included in critical decisions about the assistance they receive. Even though they may participate in various aspects of programmes and in consultations and different forms of engagement, they believe that much of the assistance has been predetermined, most decisions have already been made and few opportunities exist for them to have a real voice – much less choice – in the aid they receive (Anderson et al., 2012).

The Listening Project also showed that crisis-affected people feel that the rush to get things done and meet deadlines limits their participation and leaves them feeling frustrated and disrespected (Anderson et al., 2012). Additionally, the perceived arrogance and direct cultural approach of many humanitarians can discourage local people and cause them to disengage rather than participate in consultations and other participatory processes. And when they do participate, they feel that there often is no follow-up; some even feel used. As a Listening Project report from Ethiopia noted:

> Some people said they had participated in many assessments and projects but that they had never seen any of the reports that had been written by international agencies or donors. A few did not have much hope of changing the system and one person said, 'Why should we tell you what we suggest? No one ever listens to us. Even if you will listen, they won't, so why should we bother?' (Anderson et al., 2012: 73)

The discussions in Addis broadly confirmed the findings of the literature review. Many of the known constraints to effective engagement were reaffirmed, but a number of successful examples of and innovative approaches to engagement were shared by participants from a wide range of operational contexts and types of organisations.

Participants at the meeting discussed the need for humanitarian actors to differentiate among 'crisis-affected people' and to pay attention to 'who' was being engaged and whether they represented those who are marginalised and often most vulnerable. For example, the opportunities and ways to engage with women and youth in particular differ depending on the context and often need more deliberate attention than many of the standard approaches to engagement, which more easily involve men who are very often already in leadership positions. A woman involved in a women's group supported by ActionAid in Pakistan suggested that:

> Emergencies are the best time for women to be engaged. Engagement should be prioritised with women because at that time vulnerability is increased to the highest level. Men in that time can't understand or respond to the needs of women. For NGOs that have budgets or plans to engage with communities in emergencies, it's important to engage with women because the need for protection increases at that time. Women should be prioritised at that time. (Ambreen, 2014)

'Disasters are opportunities for women to work together. Women should be representatives or leaders, not just involved.'

Khin Zaw Win,
Community Fellow of
Kamma, Myanmar

Some participants suggested that emergencies can be seen as opportunities for engagement and change, since the *status quo* has often already been upset and existing norms and structures may not be functioning or working properly. People are in a problem-solving mode – both those who are affected and those who are responding – and this can create an opportunity to ensure that more people with different perspectives are brought into decision-making processes. In places where men have left and women remain to care for their children and communities, there is an even greater opportunity to engage them in directing the response and engaging with aid agencies and their government, as was demonstrated by women from Myanmar, Kenya and Pakistan (Wakhilo, 2014).

In brief

- **In recent years, there has been an increasing diversification and multiplication of new approaches to participation** that have the potential to shift the locus of power towards affected communities or to the state and its institutions.

- **However, crisis-affected people often perceive their engagement in the humanitarian assistance they receive as poor and not meaningful**, pointing to a need for humanitarian agencies to improve their follow-up and increase their contextual and cultural sensitivity through the programme cycle in order to minimise feelings of frustration and disrespect.

- **Humanitarian actors need to do better to differentiate among crisis-affected people and pay attention to whether the most marginalised and vulnerable segments of the population are being adequately engaged.** In fact, emergencies can offer opportunities for the engagement of typically marginalised groups, as the *status quo* has been upset and people are in a problem-solving mode, which leaves them more receptive to new approaches and ways of working.

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> The role of the state in engaging crisis-affected communities attracted a remarkable level of attention. In some ways this is a sign of a systemic change that is likely to have deep repercussions in aid agencies' conception of their role in crisis situations.
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2.4 The role of the state

The role of the state in engaging crisis-affected communities attracted a remarkable level of attention. In some ways this is a sign of a systemic change that is likely to have deep repercussions in aid agencies' conception of their role in crisis situations. As Box 5 shows, the involvement of the affected state in humanitarian response, both as an arbiter and as a responder, entails advantages and disadvantages that are largely context-specific. Historically, many NGOs working in humanitarian contexts have had a state-avoiding posture – while often paying lip service to state sovereignty and the objectives of national capacity development. But an increasing number of countries, particularly those that have more resources and are 'middle income', are ready, willing and able to take the lead in humanitarian response, or at least to establish transparent frameworks that define the obligations of external players and CSOs. In these cases the engagement of communities in the response will be a prerogative of the state, or at least take place within frameworks defined by the state. Other states may be willing, but not necessarily able, and tensions may arise when stakeholders are trying to agree on the responsibilities of the various internal and external stakeholders. At the other extreme will be situations where the state is either failed, fractured or hostile to the presence of external actors – and their principles – or set on marginalising segments of its population, or worse. These are likely to be the most difficult situations for humanitarian actors – but also, paradoxically, those that they may be more comfortable with in that they correspond to the can-do ethos of agencies at the Dunantist end of the spectrum.

To complicate things further, 'the state' is not homogeneous and covers a range of actors with different interests and agendas: the central government and parliament that set policies, but also the ministries, sub-national bodies and local authorities that are tasked with their implementation and may be themselves in conflict or tension with the centre. At the community level local leaders and elites with whom external agencies preternaturally interact may or may not be – or be perceived to be – representatives of the state.

In the final analysis the triangular relationship between the affected state, the external agencies and the crisis-affected people on the ground is about power. For the state it may be about regaining power over 'unruly' NGOs, but also about giving up some power through meaningful engagement with affected communities. For the external aid agency it may be about loss of control and visibility and perceiving the state as an intruder in its bilateral relationship with communities, but also about working with local institutions and strengthening their capacity. For the affected people it may be about the power to influence decisions that directly affect their survival and livelihoods – and sometimes about keeping the state and external actors at bay.

Many participants from the global South still stressed the role of NGOs in acting as a buffer between the people and the state – as in some of the examples mentioned above – or in helping communities or civil society at large to demand accountability from the state, as in the Kenyan NTA example (see Box 4). Some participants also felt that there were situations where communities could and should team up with the state to hold donors, UN agencies and INGOs to account for poor programming or improper conduct. In this context several participants referred to the perceived surfeit of aid agencies in the response to the recent typhoons in the Philippines. One seasoned aid worker who had worked closely with communities in the Philippines to do research was told repeatedly: 'We don't need international actors or the UN here, but they've come to help us; how can we be impolite? So we accept' (Jemilah Mahmood, Humanitarian Futures). Perhaps the real surprise emerging from Addis is how fluid these power relationships are, how they are more openly acknowledged, and how continuously they need to be analysed and renegotiated.

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In brief

- **The increasing attention around the role of the state in engaging crisis-affected communities points to a systematic change that is likely to have deep repercussions for how aid agencies conceive of their role in crisis situations**, including working through governments rather than directly with affected people.

- International standards, frameworks and methods for communicating with and being accountable to crisis-affected people have been developing slowly but these processes have so far lacked the participation of crisis-affected states, societies and organisations.

- In some situations states may be challenging humanitarian responses and limit people's participation, whereas in others they take an active role in leading humanitarian action themselves and engaging affected groups. **The relationship between the state, aid agencies and affected groups can thus be thought of as a triangle of relationships, in which power is constantly renegotiated, shared or retained. This also suggests thinking of engagement as a trilateral rather than a bilateral relationship between aid agency and affected people.**

- **The discourse on engagement implicitly tends to assume that 'more is always better'. This is not necessarily the case.** Instead, more attention is to be paid to the quality of engagement rather than to its mere quantity.

- **Preparedness is crucial.** Humanitarian responses tend to be more successful when they build upon relationships between international organisations and local actors that had been established before the crisis.

BOX 5. SHIFTING TRIANGLE: THE STATE, EXTERNAL AID AGENCIES AND THE PEOPLE

What is the role of states in humanitarian response and, more specifically, in engaging with affected communities? This question was the subject of a panel response (Mahmood, 2014), but also crept into many of the plenaries and into discussions in other panels and in the corridors. There are little or no hard data on the question. A proxy indicator quoted by one of the presenters at the panel on the role of the state (Hofmann, 2014) gives a rough idea: out of a total of 29 Humanitarian Country Teams in 2012, only one had national government participation. In contrast, all Humanitarian Country Teams have INGO representation, but less than half have national NGO representatives, while more than 65% have donor representation.

Various participants mentioned the role of National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs). Their capacity varies a great deal, but there is a clear trend towards strengthening them, even if the rhetoric of national ownership is sometimes stronger than the reality. INGOs and UN agencies have perhaps not sufficiently adapted to this paradigm shift – reference was made to the Philippines and other crises where a disaster was followed by a 'tsunami of aid agencies' whose presence was felt to be an unnecessary burden. Recognition of the fact that international aid agencies often substitute for or undermine government responsibilities is nothing new, but the tensions around this issue seem to be increasing rather than diminishing.

Two questions stand out:

• What should be the role of external aid agencies when government authorities are willing and able to orchestrate the response? One INGO representative put it in stark terms:

> In a situation where we have sophisticated national systems and the government has clear policies and programmes, should we even be talking to the affected communities? Or is that the role of the government and its services, and our responsibility is just to talk to you? (Eleanor Monbiot, World Vision)

Some government representatives, including those from the host, Ethiopia, thought this was the way forward. Others were more nuanced and recognised that in some situations INGOs and national CSOs were in a better position to promote community engagement. Also, views differed on whether affected groups would prefer to engage with the government rather than aid agencies.

- While government engagement with communities in disaster response seemed a generally desirable objective, what happens when the government is part of the problem either because it denies access, politicises the response, promotes odious social practices or, as one person put it, 'is the enemy of the people'? This tension between sovereignty and humanitarian principles is, of course, not new, but there was a sense that it was now appearing in starker relief – especially around issues of protection – because of the more robust expressions of sovereignty and ownership in many situations (often with supported from donor countries), as well as because of the greater capacity of governments and NDMAs.

Whether it is the responsibility of the government or the aid agency, engagement with affected communities is about sharing power (an issue to which we return later in section 3). Throughout the Addis meeting there was a sense that despite much rhetoric, not enough power was being transferred to people in affected communities. This was summed up by Robert Chambers' pithy 'Yes they can!' exhortation. The discussions in Addis clarified that the issue of engagement should be conceptualised as a triangle – state/aid agency/affected community – rather than as a bilateral relationship. The shape of the triangle and the flows of power through its angles will be context-specific. And how these flows evolve needs to be carefully watched, especially with regard to humanitarian principles and protection.

2.5 Conclusions from the Annual Meeting

The presentations, panels and discussions at the meeting highlighted a number of issues related to the degree to which crisis-affected people have been engaged in humanitarian programmes:

In most emergencies there are currently elements of engagement, but much more should be done to match the rhetoric: there should be deeper engagement across the programme cycle and more common approaches, where possible, between actors. The humanitarian imperative and need for speed are too often used as an excuse for not doing more in this regard, even in protracted crises and other humanitarian situations. As one participant said, 'the more protracted the situation, the more you should listen and engage' (Misikir Tilahun, Africa Humanitarian Action).

- There is a need to make greater distinctions between the types and phases of crises that humanitarian agencies are responding to in order to determine the most appropriate and meaningful ways to engage with those who are most affected. Participants in many panels noted the importance of understanding the local context and how 'one size does not fit all'. The presentations on Syria, for example, reminded us of the narrow and hazardous paths aid agencies have to follow, where engagement is secondary to delivering a modicum of life-saving aid. Conversely, many protracted drought or urban slum contexts allowed for much more constructive relationships with communities, including on matters of decision-making.

Increasing numbers and types of stakeholders and actors are engaged in humanitarian responses. Two processes of change stood out at the meeting: the emergence of a wide array of national and local actors that are ever more active or at least more widely acknowledged as important actors – leading to questions about the role of 'traditional' humanitarian players, the degree and ways in which local civil society wants to engage with these actors, and the increasing role of the state in a relationship that was/is usually conceptualised as one between the 'outsider' aid agency and the 'insider' affected community.

- There is a need to adapt international and organisational frameworks, standards, and methods at the country and community level. There were suggestions to discuss the types and levels of engagement (information, communications, accountability, participation, partnerships, etc.) at interagency cluster meetings, with donors, and in meetings with governments at all levels to ensure that it is seen as a priority. Participants emphasised that

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> Participants in many panels noted the importance of understanding the local context and how 'one size does not fit all'.
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engaging crisis-affected communities is not sector specific, but rather a cross-cutting issue related to all sectors and to the overall quality, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

- In general, engagement approaches currently give affected populations some control over specific humanitarian programmes. However, they do not provide affected people with much leverage over broader organisational policies or strategies. This is an area where further work is required.

- While there were many good examples of the use of various frameworks, tools and methodologies, engagement is a process that should not be reduced to 'technical' solutions. For some it requires a mind-set change and, as several participants pointed out, the skill sets and competencies needed to meaningfully engage with those who have been affected by crises may well be valued by aid workers, but are not necessarily rewarded in humanitarian programming.

- Much was said in the presentations about the degree to which affected groups engaged or participated in response activities, with an underlying assumption that 'more' is always good. Much less attention was given to the relationship between engagement and effectiveness. Some assumed that this relationship was linear, but others made the point that the quality of the engagement is more important than the quantity. As will be discussed in the next section, the tension around the question of evidence to document the benefits of engagement in terms of effectiveness is still unresolved.

- Preparedness is key, particularly in establishing relationships and partnerships before crises occur. Many of the successful examples of engaging with crisis-affected people were based on pre-existing relationships that international aid agencies had with local communities, organisations, media, government officials and businesses. This enabled them to connect with existing structures and plans and to respond to and engage with people affected by crises faster and more effectively.

3. The main obstacles to engaging with crisis-affected people

Challenges facing humanitarian actors seeking to engage with crisis-affected people fall into two main categories: operational and conceptual.

3.1 Operational challenges

Practitioners, academics and crisis-affected people all seem to agree that international humanitarian organisations do not consistently or systematically engage with local people. This failure occurs despite numerous commitments and standards to increase engagement, and despite the committed efforts of many individuals and organisations, as were highlighted at the meeting in Addis.

The problem is not simply a lack of willpower on the part of international humanitarian agencies, although some dragging of feet still occurs. The obstacles to engagement are real and significant, and in some ways growing with the corporatisation of many humanitarian organisations. The following summary lists some of the challenges that are most often cited in the literature and which continued to be discussed and expanded on at the Addis meeting.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian contexts and programming:

- **Cost.** 'Participation is priceless but comes at a cost' (Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 4). In rapid-onset disasters some argue that engaging with those affected can slow down emergency responses and divert staff time from life-saving activities. The balance between getting the job done, getting it done well and getting the principles right is often skewed by urgency. Those affected by crises often feel disrespected and left out of the process when they are not informed, consulted or able to participate because aid agencies say they do not have the time to involve them. In protracted crises this sense of urgency is less apparent, and the cost is less one of time than of financial and human resources. As highlighted above and in many sessions at the meeting, often aid agencies do not allocate the resources needed to engage consistently and effectively. However, not investing in effective means of engagement can be more costly and inefficient in the long run if the wrong people are targeted, the wrong types of assistance are provided, people do not get information that is critical to their survival or recovery, or the motivations of humanitarian aid

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> Transparency is a key ingredient of engagement. But security and transparency are often conflicting goals: providing information can bring unwanted attention or put staff and partners at risk. At the same time it can enable affected groups (and non-state actors) to better understand how the aid enterprise functions, and they can use this information to demand accountability.
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agencies are questioned. While participants noted that costs should not be looked at only in financial terms, budgets and funding have an effect on the effective engagement and support of people affected by crises.

- **Access.** It is hard to engage with those affected by crisis without access and presence. As an INGO Country Director in Khartoum noted when discussing the formal feedback mechanisms the organisation has established in camps in Darfur, 'If we had enough staff and were closer to the ground regularly in the camps, and implementing our programmes in a more participatory manner, we wouldn't need a Beneficiary Accountability Officer' (Jean and Bonino, 2013: 9). In volatile contexts attempts at remote management have been made in order to maintain programme implementation, but with mixed results. There is also a trend towards the increased use of remote management technologies for needs assessment and feedback. These technologies have obvious negative impacts on engagement by external agencies (Donini and Maxwell, 2014), although they may in some circumstances give local people more influence over programme implementation. While some international humanitarian agencies work with local partners who do have access, they still face challenges in monitoring the local context and relationships, and cannot provide the support that their partners often need when working in their own very challenging contexts – and in some cases at great risk. As one INGO participant said at the meeting, 'Nothing can replace presence and proximity'.

- **Information.** Transparency is a key ingredient of engagement. But security and transparency are often conflicting goals: providing information can bring unwanted attention or put staff and partners at risk. At the same time it can enable affected groups (and non-state actors) to better understand how the aid enterprise functions, and they can use this information to demand accountability – but also, unfortunately, to manipulate aid for non-humanitarian purposes. Participants discussed whether there should be limits to transparency; for instance, agency staff may share the overall budget for a project and the source of funding, but should they also divulge their own salaries? At the panel on engagement and information, one participant remarked that she had asked her headquarters about this and was told 'it isn't "British" to give this information' (Swithern, 2014). To which a donor representative retorted: 'We essentially ask beneficiaries all the time what their salary is, what their income is, what assets they have. We may as well tell them as well what we're earning' (Claire Devlin, DFID). Obviously, information and knowledge are key to power and it is often difficult to separate agency reluctance to hand over some of this power from concerns about security, privacy or cultural sensitivity.

- **Replicability and scaleability.** Given the differences in history, context and types of humanitarian emergencies, and the different mix of actors involved in humanitarian action, some approaches may not be replicable or scaleable in other places. Indeed, it may be very difficult to scale up from a pilot project where staff time was devoted to 'getting the engagement right' to a programme involving the same activities on a larger scale where the effort needed to engage effectively may not seem commensurate with the task at hand. As the example from CRS above highlights (Kreuwels, 2014), building 50 shelters in a relatively peaceful or predictable environment is not the same as setting up a camp for thousands of IDPs in a conflict setting or a rapid-onset disaster. Often there will be trade-offs between meaningful engagement and the need to 'get the job done'. Pressure from donors and short project funding time frames always carry the risk that the latter will trump the former. Many crisis-affected people have criticised predetermined projects and approaches and note that aid agencies need to familiarise themselves with the situation and the local culture to know how to effectively engage with local people. For humanitarians who often move from emergency to emergency, learning how to engage people effectively in each place can be a daunting and time-consuming task.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian staff:

- **Skills.** Effectively engaging with crisis-affected people requires a range of interpersonal skills. Listening, communication, facilitation, empathy, humility, curiosity, conflict management and collaborative problem-solving skills are often not prioritised during recruitment and do not come naturally in the heat of an emergency. Providing training and support to staff and partners requires resources, time and a longer-term commitment:

> Listening is a special skill and you cannot assume everyone can do it appropriately in all contexts. It needs to be nurtured instead of assumed. This has implications on training and on the need for awareness of how our way of listening is based on our assumptions about the world and our way of working. (Anderson et al. 2012: 131)

A Haiti real-time evaluation noted, 'Participatory approaches and consultation with the population and local institutions should be seen as a must, not as a constraint' (Grunewald and Binder, 2010: 60).

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> Some constraints to engagement of crisis-affected people are related to humanitarian staff. They have to do with the skills, attitudes, behaviours and the short-term nature of certain posts.
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- **Attitudes and behaviours.** As several studies on perceptions have noted and many participants at the meeting acknowledged, aid workers are not all necessarily perceived as benevolent or competent. While humanitarian principles and solidarity may be generally accepted and understood, the personal behaviour, cultural baggage, management style and perceived arrogance of some outsiders are often problematic. Participants at the meeting discussed how engagement does not require a technocratic approach, but rather a 'human' approach. Those engaged in humanitarian action need to reflect more on how they see their roles and the roles of others, and on how affected people see them. As one participant noted, 'the biggest challenge is us'. The language that aid agencies use – 'beneficiaries', 'participant', 'aid recipients', 'crisis-affected populations', etc. all send implicit ethical messages and affect the ways in which agencies and their staff approach and talk about engagement.

- **Short-term assignments**. Although these are common in emergencies, they do not enable staff to interact and develop relationships with those affected by crises. The constant turnover and changing management styles of international staff send confusing messages and undermine the confidence of national staff and partners, who are often on the front lines engaging with communities. 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. Short-term assignments often mean international staff are not recruited for their knowledge of the context or their interpersonal or language skills, but rather for their technical or managerial capacities.

Some constraints are related to humanitarian structures and procedures:

- **Projectisation.** There is a tendency in the humanitarian sector to 'projectise' or set up new initiatives to address new challenges rather than conducting more wholesale systematic, organisational, or procedural change (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Anderson et al., 2012). This is certainly evident in many of the approaches to engagement discussed at the meeting. To more effectively engage with local people, humanitarian organisations may have to rethink how they are structured, funded and evaluated, not just start a new project or initiative.

- **Institutional changes.** Several participants noted that institutionalisation, specialisation and – especially – the increased 'proceduralisation' of humanitarian activities too often worked against engagement, which requires adaptation, patience, time and an understanding of the context. A variety of changes in humanitarian organisations – including the increased use of electronic communications and distance technologies, compliance with anti-terror legislation, and security and insurance concerns – arguably result in a more risk-averse international aid community, with operations more centrally managed and more determined by set procedures. As a result, international humanitarian actors on the ground in many cases have less agency and are less able to engage with local communities (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Collinson and Duffield, 2013).

- **Evidence, measurement and reporting.** It can be hard to measure the various effects of engagement, particularly the longer-term impacts on social structures. Currently only limited evidence is available on the results of using participatory approaches in a humanitarian context, although there is significant evidence from development sectors. Discussions in Addis showed that humanitarian actors were still sharply divided on this issue, with some arguing that more evidence is needed to demonstrate the value and benefits of engagement, while others believed that a lot of practice just needs to be documented and evaluated to better understand what works. Some – including, not surprisingly, those from the academic corner – called for more evidence, noting that studies on what works in different humanitarian contexts were few and far between. Others hinted that the call for evidence was a cover for lack of political will to change. As Robert Chambers put it, 'There is a huge amount of evidence and I'm not sure that any more evidence is needed. I think what is needed is continuous learning and improving – and that generates its own evidence as it proceeds.'

- **A 'supply-led' paradigm.** The current structure of the humanitarian system (top-down and externally driven, with a focus on rapid action and short-term project and funding cycles) does not provide incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people. Participants discussed how the 'corporatisation' and consolidation happening among many of the larger international NGOs in particular is putting even more distance between decision-makers and crisis-affected communities. Mainstreaming meaningful and active (as opposed to rhetorical and passive) approaches to engagement requires a substantial change to the funding mechanisms, current ways of working and incentive structures in the humanitarian system.

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> Who is engaged matters, and it is important for external agencies to take the time to understand who wields power and how this may affect whose voices are heard and influence decision-making.

Having a participation strategy should theoretically mean being participatory at every stage of the operation. But it is difficult to find humanitarian operations which are participatory at every stage, unless there is a real paradigm shift: It's not the population that participates in the agency's project but the agency which participates in the population's project ... engaging with the population throughout the project cycle, especially at the design and monitoring phases, can be like opening a 'Pandora's box' and turning the humanitarian sector's priorities upside down. (Grunewald and de Geoffroy, 2008: 8-9)

A participant at the meeting noted that 'we can build engagement into business as usual. But the donors need to build flexibility into business as usual too.'

Another set of constraints is around **power** and its use and abuse:

Many participants in the Addis meeting highlighted how power affects the relationship between outside actors and affected groups – as well as the triangular relations with the state and its local representatives. A recurrent sub-theme in the discussions were the power imbalances among well-endowed and dominant donors; UN and international agencies, who often set the scene and the standards for humanitarian action; and their local partners, who are often from the affected communities themselves. Three dimensions of power were underscored and discussed:

- The **power relations in the local context** and how to manage them were identified as a problem. Cultural sensitivity and conflict analysis were stressed as important in better understanding local actors and power dynamics, including the power inequalities in affected communities. As was pointed out, aid workers are always at the risk of mythologising 'communities' and their role in them. Who is engaged matters, and it is important for external agencies to take the time to understand who wields power and how this may affect whose voices are heard and influence decision-making. The increasing capacity of state and local authorities to become involved in the management, control and sometimes instrumentalisation of humanitarian interventions was seen as an area where international humanitarian agencies also needed to pay more attention. Some suggested that international aid agencies should be preparing for a more limited role – advisory rather than operational – if conflicts around issues of sovereignty, nationalism or the perceived hidden agendas of agencies were to be avoided.

- The **power relations in the humanitarian activity** itself and the tensions between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' constituted a further issue. The critique of the unequal power dynamics in humanitarian action is, of course, not new and many participants repeated concerns about arrogant behaviour, opaque practice and procedures, lack of transparency on budgetary matters, lack of cultural sensitivity and the like. As already mentioned, tensions arose around the question of whether 'empowerment' should be an overt objective of humanitarian action – an idea that naturally appealed most to participants and agencies approaching this objective from a rights-based perspective. Moreover, some felt that a more radical questioning of these power relationships was necessary because, fundamentally, the normative precepts and standards of outside agencies work against collaborative bottom-up approaches. Indeed, as the humanitarian community becomes less Western and more diverse, it may be more difficult to find common approaches. Some even asked whether it was true that humanitarian action worked best when it was collaborative, i.e. when a critical mass of actors worked together towards a more or less agreed set of goals. Experience from Syria and other recent crises did not seem to bear this out.

- Finally, and interestingly, there was much debate on **power inside the aid agency** and how it could be better managed. Many concerns were raised both around power in the institution and personal attitudes to power. Headquarters-field power relationships came in for criticism from both ends, particularly the tension between institutionalisation – if not bureaucratisation – and the individual agency of staff in the field. Attitudes, personal mind-sets and organisational culture were seen as areas where more progress was needed if the humanitarian enterprise was to renew itself and retain its relevance. While this was largely an issue for international aid agencies, the organisational and national cultures of local and national organisations also play a role in their approaches and effectiveness in engaging with crisis-affected people. Elitism, tribalism, traditions, and other factors can also affect internal decision-making structures and processes. This adds another layer of complexity for international organisations working with local partners whom they expect to engage effectively with affected communities. Related to this, Robert Chambers, among others, raised the issue of the decline of the generalist and the surge of the specialist in humanitarian operations and their respective 'bedside manners' in interacting with affected groups. There was a feeling that the latter were often less apt than the former and that the increase in training of staff did not necessarily address the 'attitude' issues.

3.2 Conceptual challenges

The challenges facing engagement are not exclusively practical or operational. Some critiques challenge the idea of engagement itself and its relevance (specifically, the elements of participation and ownership) to humanitarian activities. Three of the most relevant critiques focus on technical, political and philosophical issues.

The technical critique

The technical critique argues that in rapid-onset disasters top-down approaches save the most lives, at least in the first few days or weeks, because they allow the unencumbered use of technology – everything from military-style emergency medicine to humanitarian drones – by the military, government, local authorities, media, businesses, and local and international aid agencies. At this stage, time and technique are of the essence and centrally managed approaches allow the best mobilisation of disparate response efforts. Moreover, certain humanitarian activities – for example, triage, emergency surgery, nutritional feeding of the malnourished, and search and rescue – are guided by technical standards and neither lend themselves to participatory approaches nor require much consultation.

Elements of this critique can certainly be challenged: command approaches may neglect important aspects of a humanitarian response, such as protection, and effectiveness may be diminished by setting objectives that are not shared by the people affected by the disaster. But the main point of the critique – namely that in some situations participation is neither feasible nor advisable – deserves consideration.

Dunantist agencies are more likely to be sympathetic to the notion that humanitarian action is about saving and protecting lives in the here and now. Often the emphasis is on getting the job done, and sometimes this means 'going it alone' with little consultation with other players. Dunantist agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and a few others would traditionally fall into this category. For these agencies the empowerment of communities is not a goal that is normally high on their agenda and engagement tends to be more instrumental than an end in itself or a valued objective. Unfortunately, the Dunantist contingent was small in Addis and these issues were not debated. Subsequent meetings with ICRC and MSF staff provided a more nuanced perspective on the issue of engagement with communities.

MSF in particular is mindful of how it is perceived and the misunderstandings that may arise about its role and objectives (Abu-Sada, 2012). However, both agencies mentioned that they sometimes 'feel on their own' in conflict contexts and seem to be debating the advantages and disadvantages of 'going it alone' vs. engaging with a wider set of stakeholders (Brauman and Hofman, 2014).

The political critique

A second, politically focused critique argues that development and humanitarianism have different objectives and thus different approaches to politics, and that the participatory approaches derived from (and important to) development work are not necessarily appropriate for humanitarian action. Because it pursues change (social transformation), development is intrinsically political. Participatory approaches – at least, those that aim at empowerment – are political tools: they aim to change the balance of power. 'In addition to being a fundamental right, active participation demonstrates respect for affected populations, helps develop skills and confidence and contributes to capacity building of stakeholders and local institutions' (Brookings Institution, 2008: 11). Ultimately, participation may lead to a better-educated public, increased civic participation, the empowerment of local people, and increased gender and social equality.

Some humanitarian agencies explicitly recognise these potential benefits in policy and programming. For example, World Food Programme policy calls for the use of participatory approaches to bring the poorest and marginalised people into its assistance programmes, strengthen their representation in community structures and overcome gender inequalities by creating opportunities for both women's and men's voices to be heard. (WFP, 2000)

However, while participation is political, humanitarianism is (in theory at least) apolitical: aid is given on the basis of need alone. Thus, 'purist' humanitarians would argue that activities with the goal of empowerment challenge fundamental humanitarian principles because they require an agency to take sides.

This presents not only a theoretical challenge, but also a practical one. Engaging with affected people may wittingly or unwittingly involve outside aid providers in local power dynamics, controversies and divisions. An understanding of the context and local relationships is needed to ensure that agencies do not unintentionally strengthen the strong rather than the weak and amplify the role of brokers, translators and gatekeepers. This requires time, analysis, resources and skills that often do not exist in humanitarian agencies working in rapid-onset emergencies.

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As a result, attempts at engagement can have unintended negative consequences, for example further marginalising people (such as women and members of low castes) who are not included in community groups targeted by the engagement effort or disempowering local institutions. For example, in the Haiti Earthquake response the participatory approaches of external actors resulted in the marginalisation of state structures, some of which (such as elements of the health services) had at least some capacity to respond (Schuller, 2012).

There are a number of responses to these arguments. The conceptual difference between development efforts (seen as more political and transformative) and apolitical humanitarian action often seems less important to the people affected by crises than it does to (some) humanitarian workers, since people in many crisis-affected societies do not distinguish between different types of assistance and often experience disasters and conflicts as a normal part of their long-term development process (Anderson et al., 2012; Scriven, 2013). At the meeting participants from Pakistan, northern Kenya, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and other places discussed recurring disasters and crises such as flooding and droughts that have now become a normal part of life and which are being addressed through both relief and developmental interventions.

The practical challenges inherent in working with local political institutions may be outweighed by the damage that can be done by not working with them and leaving an institutional vacuum. One recent analysis noted:

> In contexts of protracted crisis like Darfur and Eastern DRC, aid organisations have tended to continue the same short-term responses over many years. Given the inevitable tendency of protracted aid programmes to become part of the local political economy, with potentially damaging effects, organisations whose programmes fail to evolve or to include plans for effective transitions should surely be held accountable. (HAP, 2013: 8)

The same can be said about humanitarian activities in Afghanistan, where many programmes have been running for more than 20 years (and where, under the Taliban, many rehabilitation and small-scale development activities had to be labelled 'humanitarian' in order to comply with donor policies against doing capacity development that might have benefitted the Taliban). One of the complicating factors is that, as already mentioned, humanitarians and development actors use much the same language, even if their activities are quintessentially different.

Whatever one's position on the overall value of the empowerment approach, this critique provides a good reminder of the challenges and tensions that exist when attempting to provide humanitarian relief in politically sensitive situations where societies are not homogeneous, authority structures may not represent the interests of the most needy, and there are huge power imbalances between the humanitarian organisation and the people it seeks to help.

The philosophical critique

A third – more philosophical – critique argues that the engagement approach has lost its innovative edge and too often serves to mask rather than resolve power imbalances. While the call for more participation was originally a backlash against the role of the omnipotent outside expert (usually white and male), engagement has now become the new orthodoxy, embraced by the World Bank and even multinational corporations. What was initially a radical critique of top-down development has become a staple of international development practice and – more recently – of humanitarian practice (Cornwall, 2000). But critics see participatory development as flawed, idealistic and naïve. A key articulation of this view is *Participation: the new tyranny?* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), which challenges the notion that participation is a universal good. It argues that in practice, participation has not promoted the liberation and redistribution of power in the aid relationship that its rhetoric suggests, but rather largely maintains existing power imbalances and masks them with the rhetoric and techniques of participation.

Participation: the new tyranny? (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) challenges assumptions about the ability of top-down development organisations to transform themselves into bottom-up facilitators of locally grounded processes. How, it asks, can local knowledge and capacities transform and transcend bureaucratic organisations whose primary stakeholders are not truly those affected by crises and disasters? In practice, the participation of local people in processes designed by outsiders often simply lends credibility to decisions that have already been made. As a local business owner and grassroots activist in Ecuador told the Listening Project, 'This is how the verb "to participate" is conjugated: I participate, you participate, they decide' (Anderson et al., 2012: 69).
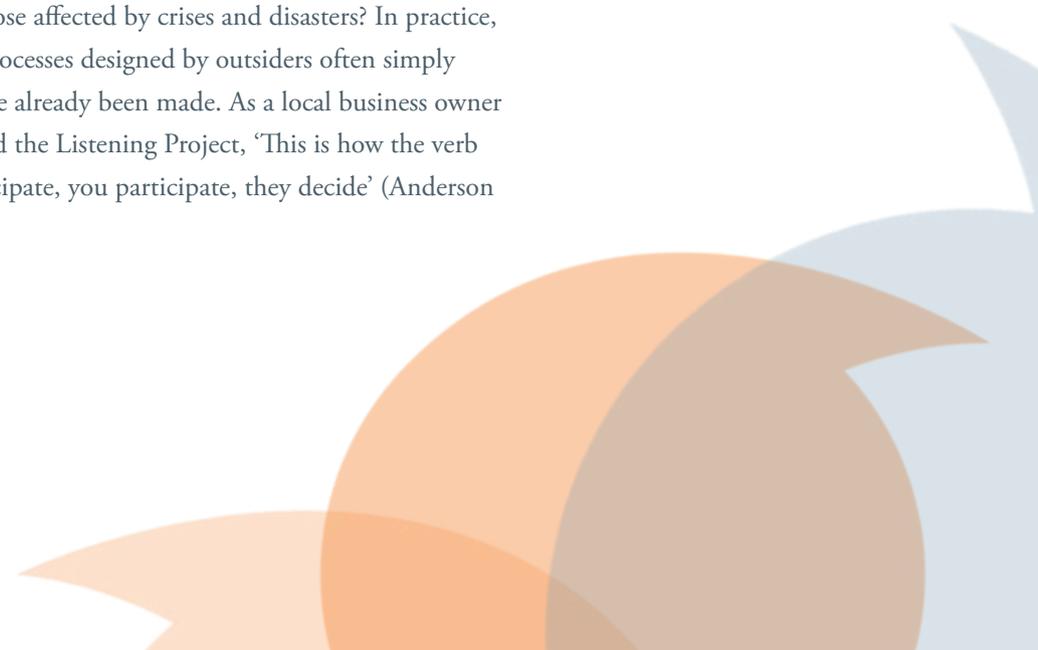
This critique suggests, ultimately, that current participatory approaches to engagement may be at odds with the way in which the humanitarian system is structured and funded, and may not be compatible with the architecture of the system. From this perspective it is meaningless to talk about engagement unless we are prepared to completely overhaul the system and the power imbalances that currently underpin 'a relationship without reciprocity' (Fassin, 2010: 11; Donini and Walker, 2012: 246). As a panellist presenter on the panel on making space for the voice of communities suggested,

> as long as emergency response consists of people from the North showing up and handing out goods … then asking affected people what they think about it, we will never be accountable to them. Building local capacity as part of an effort led by disaster-affected countries is the future. But if the core model has the same power dynamics, how can we meaningfully talk about accountability [and other means of engagement]? (Alexander, 2014)

In brief

- **Humanitarian agencies seeking to engage with crisis-affected people can face challenges on both an operational and a conceptual level.**

- Operationally, the key constraints to engagement arising out of **humanitarian programming** include: the costs of using engagement and the perceived trade-off between 'getting the job done' to save lives and getting the principles right; accessing affected populations or being able to adequately monitor those who have access; balancing the desire to provide information against concerns for security, privacy or cultural sensitivity; and trying to deal with huge variations in context that inhibit the ability to scale up from successful pilot projects.

- Staffing issues can also result in operational constraints: the lack of necessary interpersonal skills across response staff and the lack of appropriate trainings to build these skills; the presence of attitudes and behaviours that convey a top-down and technocratic approach to crisis-affected people; the frequent use of short-term assignments, which mean that international staff lack contextual knowledge and move on from a community quickly.

- Operational constraints to engagement can arise from **humanitarian structures and procedures** as well: the tendency in the sector to 'projectise' or set up new initiatives rather than attempt more wholesale systematic change that would enable more meaningful and empowered engagement; institutional practices that restrict what humanitarian actors are able to do on the ground in terms of engagement; and the lack of incentives within the supply-driven model of humanitarian assistance for engaging with crisis-affected people.

- **While some in the sector feel that there is a need for more evidence on what works for engagement in different humanitarian contexts, others argue that the call for evidence is a cover for a lack of political will to change. Continuous learning from the practice of engagement generates its own evidence as it proceeds.**

- The current structure of the humanitarian system itself does not provide incentives for engaging with crisis-affected people. Being top-down and externally driven, focusing on rapid and short-term action, and tending to projectisation and institutionalisation, **a fundamental paradigm shift of the humanitarian system would be needed in order to mainstreaming meaningful approaches to engagement.**

- **Engagement in humanitarian action is truncated by power relations at different levels and needs to be addressed** with greater attention to power imbalances and the underlying attitudes and assumptions amongst aid workers that contribute to these imbalances.

- On a conceptual level, there are three main critiques that challenge the idea of engagement and its relevance to humanitarian work: technical, political and philosophical.

- **The technical critique argues that top-down approaches save the most lives in emergency situations because centrally managed approaches enable the most effective mobilisation** of disparate response efforts and resources, and many humanitarian activities are guided by technical standards that do not require deep levels of engagement.

- **The political critique argues that participation, as a process that seeks change, is inherently political and thus is alien**, if not opposed, to the principles and aims of humanitarian action.

- **The philosophical critique maintains that engagement has become a means to reinforce rather than resolve power imbalances within the humanitarian/development sector.** This critique suggests that the engagement debate is useless unless there is a readiness to question and tackle the fundamental structures of the humanitarian system.

4. Where do we go from here?

4.1 Some key points to consider

The discussions in Addis highlighted both the progress in mainstreaming the principle and value of engagement and the use of various approaches throughout the sector, but also the challenges, blockages, resistance, and limits to meaningful engagement. Some questioned whether engagement has now reached a plateau and whether we can realistically expect more substantive gains to be made. In the immediate future the increased engagement of affected people in humanitarian responses may be driven as much by changes in the external environment as by approaches advocating for improved communications, accountability, participation or engagement. Gains in global development coupled with more frequent operations in urban areas, where people usually have better access to information and technology, may increasingly lead crisis-affected communities to demand higher levels of engagement in decisions that concern them. This was a point stressed in numerous panels at the meeting.

The dynamics and language humanitarians use to talk about engagement will likely change as 'citizens' rather than 'beneficiaries' demand accountability and redress from national authorities, including via the ballot box. And while situations may well continue where national authorities or non-state actors are unwilling or unable to uphold humanitarian principles and where international humanitarian agencies will continue to play a key role, the tolerance for sub-par services and arrogant behaviour will diminish.

At the same time, as more middle-income countries develop their national capacities to prepare for and respond to crises, the role of international humanitarian agencies is bound to change and may well become more advisory and less operational. Some have suggested that the impact of INGOs will rest on becoming 'humanitarian brokers: facilitating, supporting, and bringing together local civil society' (Cairns, 2012: 3). The examples that international and local NGOs shared at the meeting showed that there is indeed still a role for them to play, but that these changes may have profound impacts on the size and approach of their organisations and on how they engage with those affected by crises.

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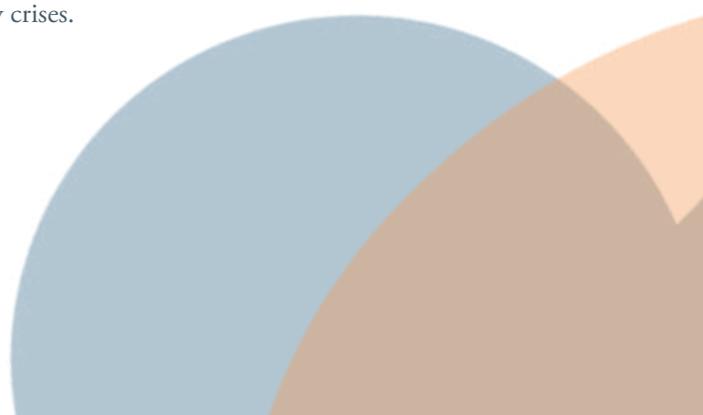
Related to these political and economic changes, innovative uses of communication technologies are increasingly enabling crisis-affected people to organise their own responses and to publicise their views and demands for accountability (Chandran and Thow, 2013; Buston and Smith, 2013). Examples from the Philippines, Syria, and other places showed that people are communicating and organising themselves and that many aid agencies are still playing 'catch-up' to the discussions and racing to meet expectations and explain their approaches, given the access to information and social media that many people affected by crises now have.

At a more programmatic level, increases in unconditional cash transfers will provide people in crises with more control over how they access resources and rebuild their livelihoods and thus more of over their recovery. And in conflict situations further restrictions on international agencies' mobility and access to crisis-affected people, and the resulting use of remote management approaches, may lead to an increase in the power of grassroots and civil society organisations at the point of delivery.

However, we cannot expect that all of these changes will necessarily lead to more effective engagement – or, indeed, more effective humanitarian action. Increased remote management, for example, is shifting some power to the grassroots level, but it also means that the chain of intermediaries between funders and affected communities that are the subjects of humanitarian action is becoming longer and more remote. The growing institutionalisation of the system and the multiplication of standards, coordination processes, and reporting requirements combined with the implications of anti-terror legislation and insurance concerns are resulting in an increasingly risk-averse and 'bunkerised' posture by the international humanitarian aid community. This is clearly the case in volatile situations such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Darfur, where remote management technologies have blossomed (Donini and Maxwell, 2014). The temptation to resort to untested intermediaries and chains of subcontracting agreements, as highlighted in the panel on Syria (Mitchell, 2014), in lieu of a more robust and principled negotiation of access and presence of international actors (as the quote below shows), also carries risks for substantive engagement and the quality of humanitarian work, in particular with respect to protection.

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Civil society in the absence of a state and in the presence of anarchy is trying to fill the role of the state, particularly with the collapse of the infrastructure. That's why the role of international agencies was to come in and support these new organisations to build and support their systems they're trying to push, and enforce policy. When you have a partner organisation from the international community that comes in and says, 'We're going to work with you, but you're going to work in this way' the local organisation is going to work together to enforce those humanitarian principles. With the absence of the international agencies, then it gets messy, that's why we need international agencies to come in and support Syrian civil society. International agencies and actors need to be creating true partnerships, to mentor, to develop civil society, otherwise the cost of doing so will be far greater in the long term. We have to invest unconditionally and impartially in what exists, and to try and map these organisations that are working on the ground. (Marwa Kuwaider, Human Care Syria)

This raises the important question of what sort of engagement humanitarians are aiming for. Is the objective to ensure that people are more supported in their own response efforts (which might herald a very limited role for international agencies), or is it to ensure that people are more engaged with humanitarian action initiated by aid agencies? From this perspective, questions about the aims and value of engaging with crisis-affected people highlight fundamental questions about the role and value of international involvement in humanitarian responses. If anything, the panel discussions highlighted the diversity of humanitarian contexts and the dangers of a one-size-fits-all approach that is disconnected from local realities.

Across the humanitarian system there is widespread support for the engagement of crisis-affected people in response activities. This desire is demonstrated both by the large number of resolutions, commitments and guidelines on the subject, and by the many initiatives on the ground. There is also a general consensus that international agencies are not doing enough to engage people in their programmes or to otherwise facilitate popular engagement in emergency preparedness and response. At the same time, the Addis meeting showed clearly that more needs to be done. In order to move forward, agencies might do well to consider more closely what they expect to achieve through engagement – a question that is closely related to how they see their role in future humanitarian responses. They also need to consider and address the conceptual challenges to engagement that have been outlined above, as well as the more practical, operational constraints.

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To some degree, the position that an agency takes on these issues will be determined by its organisational mission, values and role. One size does not fit all: Dunantist, Wilsonian, solidarist, rights-based, developmental and faith-based agencies may well come to different conclusions on their rationale for engagement and on the degree of engagement that they hope to achieve. It is possible to imagine a future, more competitive humanitarian arena in which people affected by crisis are well informed and technologically connected enough to understand the potential sources of aid – local and international, state and church, free and with obligations attached – and decide whom they want to help them, in what ways and for how long.

The nature of engagement in any given response will also depend on the specific context, the nature of the crisis and the phase of the programme. In the first weeks of a rapid-onset disaster agencies may well focus on immediate life-saving activities, including ensuring access to information and two-way communications at a minimum. As the situation stabilises more opportunities will arise to actively involve people in affected communities in decisions concerning their future. Similarly, in volatile or fragile environments, where access may be limited and there are high levels of inter-group tension, engagement modalities will be different from those in protracted, relatively stable situations where outside agencies are working with more homogeneous communities, often for longer periods of time.

For example, while an agency might generally aim to be transparent about its plans, in certain situations (such as Syria today) a high level of transparency would put staff and crisis-affected people at risk, even though, as discussions on the Syria crisis in Addis showed, principles – and not abandoning their promotion – remain important (Mitchell, 2014). Agencies must ask themselves 'how much transparency is reasonable and at what cost' (Heller et al., 2011: 53) as 'sometimes keeping a certain distance can be a real strength' (Abu-Sada, 2012: 68). In some situations, emphasising an international profile can be a better strategy for creating access and engagement than relying on local staff or partners; in other cases it is the other way around. Decisions on how transparent and open to be – and on what issues to engage with those affected by crisis – must be grounded in fine-grained assessments that include the perspectives and desires of those who want to engage with humanitarian agencies.

The nature of and approach to engagement should also take into account cultural norms about power. Various authors and participants at the meeting have pointed out the cultural and linguistic divides in the humanitarian system, including on accountability (Heller et al., 2011) and other forms of engagement. The act of speaking up and engaging directly with people in positions of power or leadership is valued differently across cultures. In some, challenging the views of foreigners or people in authority is not sociably acceptable. In others, people may fear losing assistance if they are too critical of it. If engagement does not occur on the community's terms, misunderstandings or worse can ensue.

Approaches to engagement are also determined by how various stakeholders understand the relationship between giver and receiver. Is this relationship inherently disempowering, because it is fundamentally an unequal exchange between powerful agencies and vulnerable crisis survivors, or could it tend towards equality (Anderson, 2008)? Perhaps recognising that crisis-affected people do their utmost to survive and protect themselves and are not as dependent on the largesse of relief agencies as commonly thought would be a good place to start in reconsidering power balances. Participants and speakers at the meeting both talked about the need for humanitarians to act with more humility and more 'humanness'.

Another way to challenge power imbalances might be to re-envision the humanitarian relationship as a contractual one rather than as an unequal exchange. In a contractual relationship all sides know what to expect – what will be done in exchange for what – in a deal without sentimentality or rhetoric. Since participation has too often been romanticised and crisis-affected communities mythologised, adopting a more contractual approach to the humanitarian relationship will not address the asymmetries of power inherent in the relationship, but it might help clarify what both outsiders and insiders can expect from one another.

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4.2 Lessons from the ALNAP Meeting

There is substantial evidence that humanitarian action often fails to meet the expectations, needs and priorities of crisis-affected people. The ALNAP Meeting provided an opportunity for humanitarian actors and representatives of communities affected by crises to consider fundamental questions and to share experiences of what works and what can be improved. Participants at the meeting and others who want to see stronger engagement between assistance providers and those affected by crises may wish to consider the following lessons, suggestions and questions for further discussion:

- Humanitarian agencies need to make greater distinctions between the types and phases of the crises they are responding to in order to determine their roles and how to engage with those who are most affected. There are significant differences between the rapid-onset disasters, protracted crises, conflicts, chronic vulnerability, disaster preparedness, risk reduction and resilience that humanitarian action currently addresses. The political and cultural contexts in which humanitarians operate differ, so one size cannot fit all.

- The roles, expectations, priorities, capacities, and power of crisis-affected governments and local civil society actors also differ, and this will affect the role that international agencies play in engaging communities affected by crises. In some cases they may engage more directly, while in others they may play a supporting or facilitative role. In certain places international humanitarian agencies may have to take a more activist stance to ensure that the rights of those affected by crises are respected and that they are even allowed to engage. This is particularly important in terms of the protection of at-risk groups and minorities, especially if the state is inimical to certain groups. International humanitarian agencies have to be clearer about the roles they expect to play and need to structure themselves appropriately to adapt to the various contexts in which they may work.

- Issues of power cannot be ignored and need to be confronted if more progress is to be made. There is too often a lack of transparency on who makes decisions and how they are made, as well as on budgets – which often point to who has power and influence in programmes, agencies and governments.

- There is no consensus on either the goals of engagement or the 'terms of engagement' across humanitarian actors and among crisis-affected people. This diversity of views and approaches should be seen as a good thing. What is important is for agencies to clearly articulate their values, principles, approaches, and decisions regarding the types and levels of engagement they are aiming for – and to adapt these based on the context they are working in. At the same time humanitarian agencies also need to understand and respect how crisis-affected communities themselves want to engage with those providing humanitarian assistance.

- While discussions at the meeting highlighted how the approach and degree of engagement depend on a number of contextual factors, most agreed that all actors engaged in humanitarian responses – international and local – need to be accountable for their roles and effectiveness. There was not a lot of discussion about what happens to organisations that do not live up to standards or commitments, particularly on accountability. There still are no clear sanctions or ways to reward the good and punish the bad and those who may do harm. There is a need to look more at the sticks and not just the carrots that have largely been used to drive the progress seen so far, and what the roles of donors and funders may be in ensuring as much accountability to crisis-affected communities as they have demanded for themselves.

- Humanitarians need to recognise that people in crisis-affected communities do not necessarily make the distinctions between humanitarian and development actors and programmmes and that their expectations of engagement are often the same. Participants discussed how humanitarian agencies could rethink their organisational structures and approaches to bring in more expertise and experience from development programmes that have engaged with local people, structures, and organisations and have lessons to share. Many frameworks and guidelines are available for analysing power relationships, context and conflict analyses, and for institutional and capacity development, participatory methodologies and other relevant issues that can be useful to humanitarians. This could be led by multi-mandate organisations, both

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international and local, some of whom are not 'siloed' between humanitarian and development staff and programming (although many still need to 'mind the gap' that exists between humanitarianism and development).

Some participants suggested that opportunities are also available to build on the resilience agenda and increasing emphasis on DRR to better connect relief and development concepts and activities. This may require more 'reaching out' by humanitarians to their development colleagues, who, as Robert Chambers acknowledged, also have some lessons to learn from humanitarians (Chambers, 2014b). At the same time, it is important to recognise that in some conflict situations and volatile environments more traditional humanitarian principle-based approaches and more transparency as to which actors are Dunantist and which are more development-oriented may be important to the effectiveness of all humanitarian actors.

- Staff recruitment, training, development and evaluation are key. Participants at the meeting suggested that the humanitarians of the future will need to be stronger listeners, facilitators, brokers, collaborators and mentors to engage those who are affected by crises, and to not just see themselves as direct deliverers of aid or implementers. Of course, in some contexts and at certain points in crises agencies may need to put the bulk of their resources into direct delivery and implementation, but in most cases they need to approach their work from a different perspective and see themselves as being there to support local people and institutions who are dealing with the crises and, too often, preparing for future ones.

- While much humanitarian action is funded and organised for the short term, humanitarian actors need to think longer term. Donors and funders need to also plan and fund programmes for longer periods of time to allow operational agencies and governments to make the necessary investments and engage with those affected. Some suggested that business drivers and processes will need to significantly change in organisations and that agencies need more

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flexibility to change based on the feedback and community input they get, even within short project time frames. Others noted that it is important to better understand the short- and long-term costs and benefits of engagement to convince donors and managers of the value of engagement among many competing priorities.

• Preparation is key – there is much more that agencies can do before disasters or crises strike, particularly in places prone to natural disasters, but also through development programmes to prepare people and institutions to be more engaged once disasters occur. The example of women's groups in Pakistan who had become aware of their rights and were able to advocate for attention and assistance from the government after the 2010 Floods is a good example of what can be done in advance and when agencies link humanitarian and development approaches and programming (Ambreen, 2014).

• The use of new technologies offers new ways to communicate and engage with people affected by crises. People can now gain access to information – both correct and false – in many more ways, and humanitarian agencies need to do more to monitor local and social media and engage in discussions about the situation, the response, and the roles and effectiveness of international actors. This increase in access to information will continue to increase the demand for accountability by crisis-affected people, and humanitarian agencies would do well to get out in front of the curve and explore new ways to engage, while also focusing on more 'traditional' and personal approaches to engagement. Personal approaches are very often preferred by members of communities that have been affected by crises and who want a relationship with those who aim to support them through their crises.
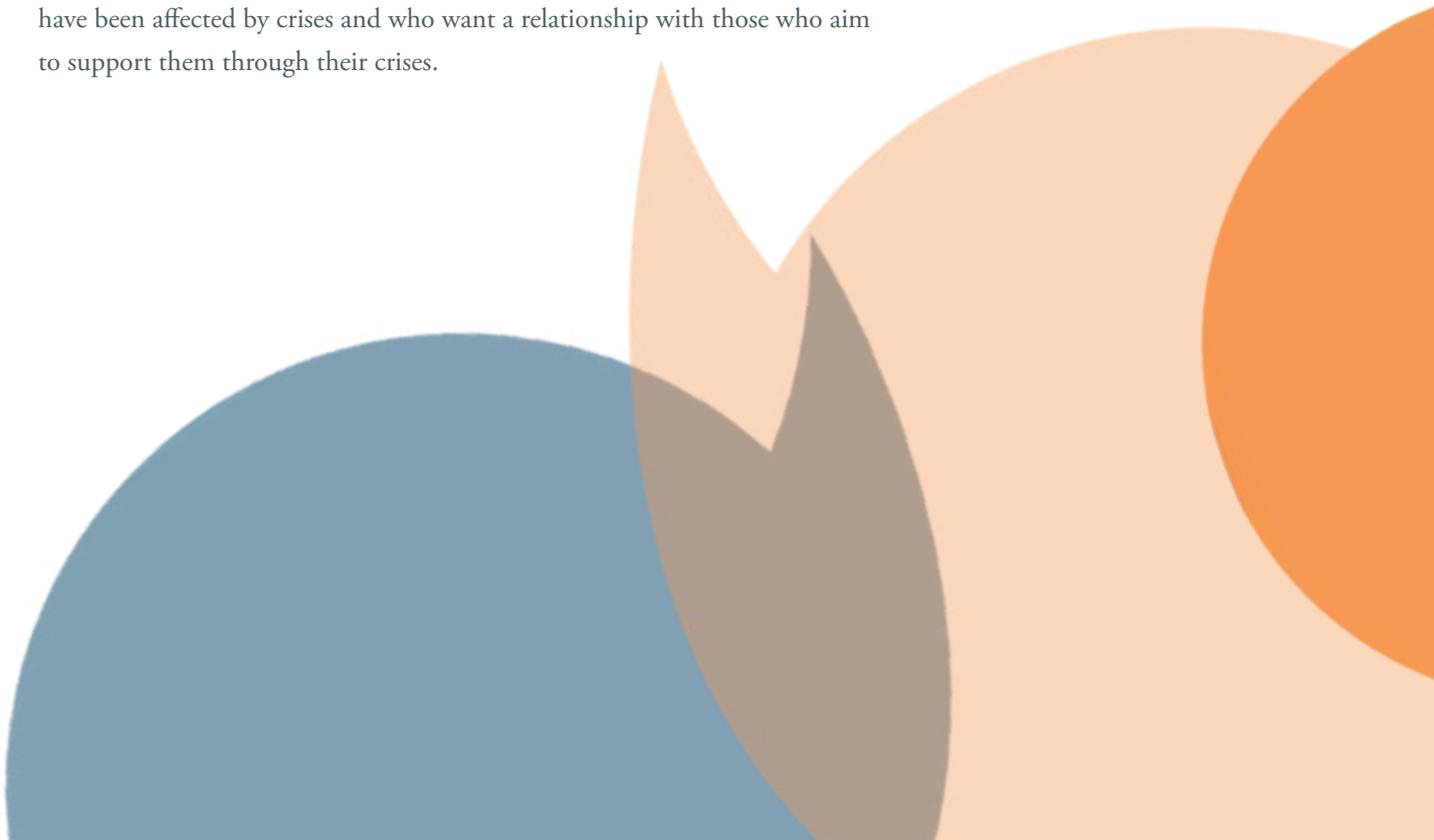
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- Humanitarian actors need to continue to gather and share evidence, lessons and failures. Some still see the need to prove the business case and to show the impacts and cost-effectiveness of making investments in staff and methods to improve communications with and the engagement of crisis-affected people. Community satisfaction surveys and impact evaluations show some evidence that these investments do lead to more effective programmes, but more evidence on the long-term impacts and sustainability of these approaches will help to improve policies and practice. There is much to be learned from emerging 'collective' approaches to engagement and how they impact the overall effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Additionally, participants suggested that it is important to go beyond asking 'what works?' and to look at and document 'how engagement works'. For example, we can ask 'do vaccines work?' which is different from asking 'how do we set up systems for regular vaccinations?' When we look at engagement it is critical to ask how these processes work and how they are sustained, what is needed, where, when, and for how long.

- While discussions largely focused on how to engage, it is also important to look at how and why agencies and people affected by crises 'disengage', and what happens when trust is broken and people feel disempowered or do not see impacts from their efforts. In places like Syria, Somalia or Afghanistan, participants noted, engagement may not always be a good idea: it can put communities at risk, draw unwanted attention from belligerents or undermine local coping strategies. In the future it will be important to support, value and use locally driven research on and approaches to engagement, as well as approaches to action learning.

- More reflection is needed on how humanitarians see themselves, how they see others and how others see them. Some participants suggested that the focus should be on how crisis-affected people are already engaged and how they want to engage with outside agencies who aim to support them (whether international, national, local, government, civil society, business, etc.).

- Lastly, we want to share a few key pointers from a range of participants at the meeting:

  – Keep it simple, but understand and embrace the complexity.

  – Be present.

  – Be humble.

  – Be nimble.

  – Stay alert.

  – Take risks.

  – Disempower yourself.

  – Don't forget the 'human' in 'humanitarian'.

  – Attitudes, personalities and skills matter.

  – Listen.

  – Smile.

  – 'Ask them. They can do it. Yes they can.'

In brief

- There is a general consensus and support within the humanitarian sector for engaging crisis-affected people in response activities. In order to do so, **agencies need to get clearer about what they want to achieve through engagement, and how, to what extent, on what levels and with which approaches they want to do so.** They also need to develop approaches to engagement that are sensitive to context and cultural norms about power.

- **New technologies offer new possibilities for interaction and engagement with affected people.** At the same time, the increased access to information will increase crisis-affected people's demand for accountability from aid organisations.

- **Local civil society organisations and crisis-affected people might gain more power/control over recovery. Conversely, growing institutionalisation and trend towards remote management may also lead to a risk-averse attitude by international agencies.** This poses severe questions to meaningful engagement and the quality of humanitarian work.

- **There is a need to establish clearer sanctions for humanitarian actors that do not comply with their commitments**, especially with regard to accountability.

- People affected by crises do not necessarily distinguish between development and humanitarian work with regard to their expectations of engagement. **Development and humanitarian actors can do much more in terms of building relationships and preparing people and institutions to be more engaged** in order to make response more effective and participatory once a crisis occurs.

- In order to improve policies and practice, **there is a need for humanitarian actors to continue to collect, exchange and learn from data regarding current engagement approaches with affected people and their long-term effects**.

- Besides the current focus on engagement, more attention should be paid to why, how and to what effect crisis-affected people disengage with humanitarian actors.

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