

Improving community engagement in humanitarian action: a practical agenda

Alex Jacobs's¹ speech at the conference "A Quest for Humanitarian Effectiveness?" held in Manchester, UK, 16th September 2015

Introduction

Last week I was in Berlin for a meeting of the task teams preparing for the World Humanitarian Summit, to be held next May². We were presented with a draft recommendation on enhancing community engagement. It read "Humanitarian actors [should] ensure the leadership and participation of affected people in the design, implementation and assessment of humanitarian action ..."

I didn't know whether to cheer or cry!

On the one hand, like many others, I'm delighted that this crucial issue is firmly on the table. Covering much of the core ground referred to as participation, 'communicating with communities' or 'accountability to affected populations', it continues to be recognised as a fundamental component of high quality humanitarian action.

On the other hand, haven't we been here before? And how many times? The same recommendation has been made dozens of times previously, including in standards that many agencies claim to have adopted, such as the Sphere Standards and the HAP Standard³. It is also central to the new Core Humanitarian Standard⁴.

Evidence consistently shows that, across the sector, practice continues to fall short of these commitments⁵. It's safe to say that general exhortations to improve practice are unlikely to achieve more in the future than they have in the past.

This morning, I would like to set out a short analysis of what 'community engagement' means, and why progress has been so limited to date, before laying out initial ideas for a practical agenda for the future. This naturally draws on the work of many colleagues across the sector.

Definition

First, a definition. I will use the term 'community engagement' to describe how humanitarian agencies engage with communities affected by crisis through three main activities⁶:

- a) Providing information to affected communities about their work.
- b) Listening to affected communities.
- c) Ensuring that agencies' decisions respond to the views of affected communities.

As many colleagues have pointed out, the term 'community' is contested, masking inequalities and internal power structures, for instance around gender⁷. Agencies need to understand local

power structures in order to avoid inadvertently making inequality worse. This is compounded by two further factors.

Firstly, 'community engagement' means engaging with local leadership. When it comes to decision making, agencies almost inevitably work with a few specific community representatives. As a sector, agencies have tended to focus on the narrow goal of enabling those people to participate in the decisions that they, the agencies, make. But, it would be more appropriate to ask how agencies fit into established mechanisms for public decision making, in ways that strengthen long term political leadership, capacity, inclusion and accountability.

This means supporting the leadership of host governments at the national and local level, where this is reasonably consistent with principled humanitarian action. As governments have primary responsibility for meeting humanitarian needs, they find this pretty obvious. For instance, following the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, the Indonesian Minister for Development Planning, told donors that coordination is not achieved by weekly meetings, but by "bringing donor funds into the budget under a well-formulated recovery and reconstruction strategy"⁸. Though for various reasons, in this case this did not ultimately happen.

To put it another way, 'community engagement' increasingly means 'community and government engagement'.

Naturally this is much more complicated during conflict, or where states are not committed to impartial humanitarian action. In extreme circumstances, leadership may be assumed by a UN Humanitarian Country Team.

This brings me on to the second factor. 'Community engagement' requires agencies to collaborate with each other in support of local leadership that oversees the collective response. It is just not feasible for community members or government officials to engage with dozens or hundreds of different agencies separately, on each agencies' terms. Agencies can only make local leadership and participation possible if they co-operate with a legitimate central authority, using common tools that are easy for people to use and enable co-ordination. For instance, this means using common formats to publish information and common communication methods, like hotlines. Of course, this does not mean renouncing all strategic independence; it means intentionally working to make joint operations succeed.

Barriers

I will now turn briefly to the major barriers to community and government engagement.

In 2014, Sinead Walsh published detailed research into so-called best practice 'downwards accountability' by an international NGO⁹. She concluded that "it is highly improbable ... that NGOs can be accountable to beneficiaries". Beyond the conceptual problem that NGOs hold almost all the power, and so cannot in practice be held accountable by their intended

beneficiaries, she identified a series of major practical obstacles. Her analysis has been reinforced by other recent research¹⁰ and the vast World Humanitarian Summit consultation.

The obstacles can be summed up in four points:

- a) Too often, international agencies act independently, with a focus on supplying a limited range of goods and services that they have already prepared.
- b) On the ground, operating practices – and managers – are dominated by a ‘contract culture’ of winning and delivering grants. This limits the voice of affected people in decision-making. Its impact cannot be over-stated, in influencing practical decision making.
- c) It takes time, skills, trust and good judgement to build up dialogue with affected people and their representatives. Approaches have to be tailored to each situation, rather than taken off the shelf.
- d) Agencies are not effectively held to account for the quality of their work, by anyone. As a colleague put it, “no one shouts if an agency doesn’t meet the Sphere Standards”.

In summary, international assistance remains too supply-led, fragmented and paternalistic. Despite recent progress, community engagement can still be characterised as more of a voluntary activity, dependent on the goodwill of individual managers, than a consistent core practice. All the field teams I have worked in, or met, have been horribly over-worked. Is it any wonder that, in these circumstances, community engagement falls by the wayside?

A new agenda

This analysis points towards a new practical agenda that has the potential to drive real progress, and make aid more relevant, effective and respectful as a result. It can be grouped into three areas.

Firstly, and in response to my first obstacle, humanitarian agencies need to establish a substantial high-level orientation towards a demand-led, responsive approach that supports local leadership. This is very different from saying “we save lives”. Instead, agencies should explicitly describe how they provide assistance to those who have responsibility for ensuring needs are met, and to affected people themselves. As some definitions of ‘humanitarian accountability’ put it, this is a commitment to use power responsibly¹¹. Others, such as Irish civil society, have promoted the principle of ‘subsidiarity’ as a way of achieving this¹².

However done, this commitment needs to be made seriously at the highest level, and reflected in foundation documents such as organisational missions and values. Agencies need to expect to compromise in support of the collective good. Otherwise, the operational points mentioned below will continue to be swept away by the tide of agency ambition, donor-orientation and short-term delivery.

Secondly, agencies and donors need to build together on good practices, in four operational areas:

- a) Ensuring consistent leadership for community engagement and accountability for leaders' performance in this area. This is crucial to keep attention on the issues – for instance in order to build up effective dialogue, addressing the third obstacle I mentioned above. It includes ensuring leadership within each humanitarian response, both at the highest level collectively (for instance, the AAP Co-ordinator played this role for the Humanitarian Country Team in the response to Typhoon Haiyan), and at the agency level (for instance, World Vision has made impressive progress on this)¹³. Leadership naturally needs to be backed up with resources.
- b) Ensuring consistent good practice during humanitarian operations. This should build on common tools and standards, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard. It includes systematic transparency to all stakeholders, and dialogue with and regular feedback from affected people that is used to improve humanitarian action. As discussed above, it requires collective approaches and common platforms where possible, like GroundTruth's work in the Ebola response, the Common Feedback Project being piloted in Nepal, and the joint hotline in Iraq¹⁴. It also involves investing in partnerships with local organisations that have experience of communicating with communities, such as local NGOs and media.
- c) Ensuring consistent good practice in funding humanitarian work. This includes another long list of activities such as: systematic transparency to all key stakeholders, simplified and harmonised grant management processes that reduce bureaucracy and emphasise community engagement, resourcing community engagement activities, requiring strategic and operational plans to be regularly adapted in the light of stakeholder feedback, and encouraging collaborative action by grantees. Just to emphasise two practical points, operational practice would be transformed if donors required all plans to be regularly revised during operations, and all grantees to report community satisfaction using common tools.
- d) Developing new ways to assess and report performance at the project level. This addresses the second and fourth obstacles identified above: the dominant contract culture and associated lack of real accountability. The process of reporting to donors is enormously influential, as it is the tap that keeps funds flowing. Currently, reports tend to focus on describing how well agencies have completed the activity and spending plans agreed when grants were first negotiated. This can provide a basic level of assurance that money has been carefully spent. But it cannot provide confidence that useful results have been achieved. It encourages an independent, rather than collective, approach, and makes it difficult to adapt activities in the light of changing realities. So this reporting method actively prevents community engagement. Progress depends on developing new reporting methods, that enhance accountability for results and incentivise collaboration and community engagement.

Thirdly, we need to enhance accountability at the highest levels.

To a great extent, progress depends on the actions of a relatively small number of influential donors and operational agencies. Commitments have previously been made to improve their practice, for instance through the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative¹⁵. However, at the risk of repeating an old tune, progress has been voluntary and variable. A few years ago, an independent initiative called the Humanitarian Response Index¹⁶ reported publically on donors' progress on Good Humanitarian Donorship. It is now sadly defunct, though many other similar indices flourish, like the Aid Transparency Index and the Commitment to Development Index.

In the modern world, donors and agencies will face increasing scrutiny. None of us can expect to operate for public good from behind closed doors. Nor can donors expect to offload all the risk they face on to operating agencies. There is an opportunity for the sector as a whole to get on the front foot, by re-creating something along the lines of an updated Humanitarian Response Index. This has the potential to encourage more good practice at the most influential level, creating an enabling environment for community engagement that drives learning and improvement across the sector.

Conclusion

To conclude, community engagement remains a fundamental driver of effective humanitarian action. As a sector, we can only improve our practice in this area if we address the barriers that actively inhibit it. To an extent, good practice in community engagement can be seen as a property that emerges from a complex system: we need to make sure that the system actively enables and encourages good practice, rather than discourages it.

We need our most senior leaders to orient their agencies around supporting locally led collective action, rather than working independently. We need to reform the internal processes and priorities that focus more attention on donors than the people we exist to help – in particular reforming the contract culture. This is an acid test for any reform effort: does it reform the contract culture? And finally, we need to strengthen accountability for the good practice by donors and agencies alike that enables high quality, responsive programming.

None of these reforms can succeed on its own. As a sector, we need to come together around a common agenda that takes a systematic approach to the major points of all of them. The World Humanitarian Summit is a unique opportunity to do that – bringing donors and operational agencies together around a powerful, mutually reinforcing package of reforms.

Many colleagues are already working on practical initiatives to solve these problems. The challenge to all of us is to work with each other on solutions to the highest priority issues, that we can live with even if they are not perfect, so we see real progress in the decade ahead.

We owe nothing less to the people in whose name we raise funds and draw our salaries, and who we seek to help when they face desperate need.

¹ Alex Jacobs is the Director of Programme Quality for Plan International. He has been seconded part-time to the WHS Secretariat, as focal point for community engagement. Email: alex.jacobs@plan-international.org

² See <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/>

³ See <http://www.spherehandbook.org/> and <http://www.hapinternational.org/what-we-do/hap-standard.aspx>

⁴ See <http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/>

⁵ For instance, see CDA's 2012 book "Time to Listen", HAP's 2013 "Humanitarian Accountability Report" or ALNAP's 2014 report "Rhetoric or Reality".

⁶ This definition draws on the large body of work around "accountability to affected people" and participation, for instance as promoted by HAP International and ALNAP.

⁷ For instance, see "The Myth of Community" by Irene Guijt, Practical Action, 1998

⁸ Quoted in "Reconstructing Accountability after Major Disasters" by Owen Podger, ADB, 2015

⁹ "The improbability of accountability of NGOs to their intended beneficiaries: the case of ActionAid", Sinead Walsh, LSE PhD thesis, 2014

¹⁰ For instance, see "The Good Project" by Monika Krause, University of Chicago Press, 2014

¹¹ For instance, this definition has been promoted by HAP International and now taken on by the Core Humanitarian Standard.

¹² See <http://www.dsaireland.org/blog/2015/07/> accessed 15 September 2015.

¹³ Described in "Who's Listening: Accountability to affected people in the Haiyan response" by Margie Buchanan Smith et al, Plan International, 2015.

¹⁴ See "Monitoring citizen voices during the Ebola crisis", CDAC, 2015; and "Inter-agency common feedback project", Humanitarian Country Team, Communicating with Communities Working Group, 2015; and <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/un-agencies-launch-call-centre-provide-displaced-communities-across-iraq-information>

¹⁵ See <http://www.ghdinitiative.org/>

¹⁶ See <http://www.ghdinitiative.org/>