

The Global Forum on **‘The authenticity challenge to the Participation Revolution’**, which will be jointly hosted by the CDAC Network and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) takes place in Bangkok on **22-23 May** ahead of the CDAC Network Annual Members Council Meeting.

The goal of the event is to spark discussion and find solutions on how we can best support the realisation of the Grand Bargain ‘Participation Revolution’ commitment to include people affected by humanitarian crises in decisions which affect their lives.

Two thought pieces have been prepared to help discussions. The first from Martin Dawes, CDAC Secretariat’s Communication and Advocacy Advisor and the second from Jenny Hodgson, Director of **the Global Fund for Community Foundations**, titled “Seeing the woods and the trees: the quiet rise of community philanthropy”.

Participation and Community Engagement; the challenge to make it Authentic

Martin Dawes, CDAC Secretariat.

Introduction

“A participation revolution: include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives...We need to include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient. We need to provide accessible information, ensure that an effective process for participation and feedback is in place and that design and management decisions are responsive to the views of affected communities and people’.¹

The ‘Participation Revolution’ is a catchy phrase. However, it will only take humanitarian action to a new level of effectiveness and engagement if it is truly a revolution. And that does not just mean “change”. It means “fundamental change”. The extent of the change, what this means in terms of changed power dynamics, and how international response can be ‘fit for participation’ is the subject of this meeting.

It is now something of a cliché to say that technology is giving birth to new opportunities and challenges. While governments, businesses and media have found new ways of working with individuals, communities and interest groups, this is not necessarily the case within humanitarian action. The Humanitarian Programme Cycle sets a template of actions to prepare

¹ World Humanitarian Summit, commitment 6 of “The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need”, Istanbul, Turkey, 23 May 2016.

for and deliver response, but how would this work in a more participatory environment? Do we have a shared understanding of the nature and necessary depth of participatory practice in the humanitarian sector? Would it be enough to expand assessment surveys and the involvement of government and local authorities? Or are new tools needed that embed a transformational approach to how response is conducted? Similarly, what does participation mean in a context where people are moving, taking advice off social media and local volunteers and social enterprises fund their food kitchens through crowd sourcing?

The CDAC Network is uniquely placed to consider these issues; with some of the experienced humanitarian organisations in the world who have long acknowledged the need for better communication, community engagement and the right of people to be involved in decisions that affect their lives.

One year on from the World Humanitarian Summit this Global Forum will:

1. **Explore** whether the 'Participation Revolution' should be the kind of transformative change that establishes new attitudes and procedures, or whether it can be achieved through the application of existing technical know-how and problem solving. In terms of language from business literature this is all about whether an organisation should go for 'adaptive' or 'technical' change. The first is the more dramatic. "Radical changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work" are undertaken in the face of recurrent issues to establish new ways of working. The alternative, 'technical' change approach, deals with issues on a day to day basis using existing tools. Organisational leadership in both is vital.²
2. **Envision** what 'authentic' community engagement and communication would feel like for individuals expected to benefit in emergency preparedness and response, and what would need to be put in place within humanitarian structures to make it happen. Issues for consideration in this section should involve languages, funding for translations, disability, minorities, social norms and exclusion. Can we learn, for example, from changes to models of 'citizen participation' over time in the development sector?
3. **Accept** that there is a connectivity revolution even if aid is still struggling with how 'participation' should work in emergency response and preparedness. Helping people to reconnect with their networks is a benefit widely supported in some contexts, such as through provision of internet or power banks. Communities are also proving to be highly innovative about renting mobiles and sharing power sources. But is there more that could be done as people are using social media and other ways to speak back, connect and speak out?

² A Survival Guide for Leaders', Heifetz, R., Linsky, M., (2002) Harvard Business Review.

The Challenge

A 'Revolution' marks a profound change. A definable watershed that irrevocably alters power dynamics, even if there is no iconic moment with palace gates crashing and a different flag waving before the masses. The World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain proclaimed such a defined change when it spoke of a 'Participation Revolution' and how this would involve efforts to include the views of vulnerable groups with consideration for gender, age, language and disability to 'create an environment of greater trust, transparency and accountability'ⁱ.

This is a time then for radical reassessment and involve not only how things are done but also the organisational culture of agencies and organisations active in the humanitarian infrastructure of the future. The paper 'Time to let Go'ⁱⁱ from the Humanitarian Policy Group based at the UK's Overseas Development Institute argued that the humanitarian sector is facing a crisis of legitimacy. The report said in the first instance *'that UN and large international NGOs need to let go of power and control, to enable national and local aid organisations to lead crisis response. Second, the humanitarian system needs to let go of the incentives that place organisational drives for greater resources and visibility above the needs of crisis-affected people. Third, the humanitarian system needs to let go of its own exceptionalism and accept that different forms of relief – from development organisations, religious organisations and private sector companies – can co-exist and can be equally legitimate.'*

International aid rarely operates on an empty field. Of course there will be local and national NGOs as well as government. The CDAC Network and Start Networks through the UK funded DEPP project have gained experience on the challenges for international agencies when working to help build capacity for communication with communities through national responders. Civil society though, and those engaged with local resource mobilisation will, in the vast majority of cases of disaster and risk reduction, be part of the existing fabric and may be responding. It's just they do not 'fit', and are often ignored. This is certainly one area where change will have to happen.

Having a truly authentic relationship with communities may not be possible in the ways that have become familiar through adaptation within existing systems and structures. Appointment of people with roles that have 'Community Engagement' in the title will almost certainly in most cases not be enough. The logic of a true 'revolution' is that there would need to be deconstruction of existing systems, and change within the culture of organisations that ensures far more emphasis on horizontal approaches. This might mean new systems for accountability, governance and ownership with local actors and clear indicators that establish legitimate participation such as through representation at the policy level and the giving of funds.

The question is, can the sector reform itself to an extent that finally brings about the kind of changes where there is equality, dialogue and full participation?

The test

The realisation of the Participation Revolution will have to face a crucial test. It will be passed if affected people know that something different is happening and that are engaged in a much more equitable way that results in a demonstrably more inclusive response during emergencies. A positive indicator would be if those who might have once been lumped together as 'beneficiaries' or 'communities' state that they are part of the solution and can tell how they are contributing through expertise and assets.

This goes to the challenge facing aid at all levels. If the humanitarian infrastructure is to be judged by even the recent past, then there would be questions about whether it has the organisational culture or ability for an authentic 'participation revolution'. It would be wrong not to acknowledge there has been a sea change within international responders resulting in far more recognition of the principle for community engagement. However there have been recent examples, such as the response for 2016 hurricane in Haiti, where there was little evidence of such activity. That lack was particularly eye brow raising as there was considerable community engagement and communication work there, with clear results, following the 2010 earthquake.

The response for the Ebola crisis in West Africa turned a corner when there was more understanding on cultural issues around the death of family members. With this came engagement to find ways to make people part of the solution through changes in behaviour and messaging that was not apocalyptic. Similarly one would have to search for examples of when international agencies responding to a crisis have sought out the assistance of civil society and those closest who could make a substantial contribution through skills, knowledge and funding.

Ways forward will demand creative and dynamic ways to engage people as fully as possible in the process and to make sure they 'own' as much as possible. This will require organisational and cultural change within agencies, NGOs and the humanitarian system which should involve recognition and equitable involvement of where 'aid is happening without us' with civil society and community philanthropic organisations. Only through a development of structures in a much more horizontal manner will there be local leadership within a humanitarian response involving international agencies.

Any sector purporting to provide vital services in critical times is dealing with people who have the right to be engaged in an authentic, honest and transparent way. Aid should not be the poor relation in this. It is too dangerous not to have the ability to do this in a global world where public health threats have a proven ability to feed off misunderstanding. It would be unconscionable if the ability of people to act positively to resolve issues in their own tragedy and are ignored.

‘Authenticity’? Is that the new ‘sustainable’?

Authenticity is not a word used to any great extent in the ever expanding aid lexicon. Perhaps this is because it is likely to be used in a context about relationships, and that lack of usage may itself be indicative of the scale of challenge posed by the Participation Revolution. It is a word though that is being increasingly used in business, and businesses in particular that are in the service sector or otherwise keen to build trust.

It would be a mistake to ignore this trend, and see it as something related to brand or tacky Public Relations. Actually, what we are referring to when asked to create ‘an environment of greater trust, transparency and accountability’ in terms of community engagement is quite literally ‘public relations’.

A driver for ‘authenticity’ in the business world is undoubtedly the rise of social media and the change in power relationships this has created. A misstep is punished, severely at times, with years of crafted image being trashed on social media, while a quick and effective response brings credit. In that sense social media acts very much as a barometer as to whether an organisation is actually doing what it says, maintaining its own standards and has a worthwhile relationship with those with whom it is engaged.

Humanitarian agencies will be subjected increasingly to such a trust barometer, and this assessment will almost certainly become calibrated by communities and civil society in the countries where they engage. ‘Authenticity’ will matter. And the judgement will rest more and more with new partners.

Seeing the woods and the trees: the quiet rise of community philanthropy

Jenny Hodgson, Director of the Global Fund for Community Foundations,

What then, might a new system of humanitarian support that truly reflected the spirit and resolve of a “Participation Revolution” look like? Over the last two decades, another, rather quieter, revolution has been taking place in communities around the world, largely beyond the radar of “big aid.” The rise of community philanthropy has much to offer to any serious attempts to turn the current aid system on its head and to shift power closer to ground to give people greater control over their destiny.

Community philanthropy organizations, which include women’s funds, community foundations, environmental funds, grassroots grantmakers and other public foundations, are as diverse as the contexts in which they emerge. However, they all share some common core characteristics which unite them as a distinct group and set them apart from other parts of civil society.

Firstly, they emphasize local resources and local accountability: even if external money makes up part of their funding structure, they all seek to grow a culture of local philanthropy as an essential strategy for building local ownership and local participation, as well as for flattening power dynamics by breaking down notions of who is a “donor” and who a “beneficiary.” Secondly, rather than run multiple projects themselves they deliberately seek to support others - local community groups and organizations– to address the issues that affect them, through small grants. And thirdly, by getting money and other resources moving through and across communities, they are building trust – trust in institutions as effective and accountable instruments of change, trust in communities as agents of their own destiny, and trust among those that give that their contributions will make a difference.

In short, these organizations offer communities an important kind of resilience, responsive to different local needs as they emerge and identified and imbued with both a “horizontal” accountability across and within communities while also being equipped to manage the challenges of “vertical” accountability of donor aid.

Community philanthropy organizations in the Global South are increasingly finding themselves on the front line of local responses, whether natural disasters or violent political conflict (or both), the “boots on the ground” that are already there, or the “community anchor” that local people know, trust and turn to first.

Evidence collected by the Global Fund for Community Foundations, which supports and promotes the idea of community philanthropy around the world as a critical part of the development landscape, suggests that locally based community philanthropy organizations have considerable potential to complement humanitarian efforts and interests through:

- Mobilizing and distributing local resources to networks of trusted partners in the immediate aftermath of a disaster using tested and accountable systems;
- Mapping and deploying existing local community capacity and assets (in particular, where external resources can build on local capacity rather than displace it);
- Supporting the voice and participation of affected peoples and communities because of pre-existing relationships of trust;
- Promoting disaster/emergency preparedness as part of regular community grants and development programmes;
- Managing funding programmes for external donors that can contribute to long term community reconstruction and resilience and that can reach the most marginalized and remote parts of communities;
- Managing funding programmes that can underpin efforts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation where local insights and relationships are critical;
- Acting as a bridge or convenor between and among communities and other stakeholders around key issues in disaster-affected contexts.

Community philanthropy has not been part of mainstream development and humanitarian aid and has often emerged despite rather than with the support of external actors. As a sector, its

resource base is still slim and its promise is in the form of a proposition. However, things are starting to change: there is a growing infrastructure of local organizations in place with deep relationships in local communities and a long-term commitment to their well-being and resilience, that also have the skills and capacity manage different kinds of funding in an accountable and transparent manner. And there is a growing interest among donors (such as the Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy, a collaborative of six funders that includes private foundations as well as USAID) in understanding how this field, which challenges many of the assumptions of “how aid is done” by daring to think about long-term well-being of communities (beyond the time-bound project), values money not just as the means to an end but also as an indicator of trust and an equalizer of power, and challenges the strait-jacket of an “issue-based” approach, can be understood as the cornerstone of a new system for aid that shifts its focus, and its power, much closer to the ground.

ⁱ The Grand Bargain: A shared commitment to better serve people in need.

https://consultations.worldhumanitarian summit.org/whs_finance/hlphumanitarianfinancing

ⁱⁱ <https://www.odi.org/publications/10381-time-let-go-remaking-humanitarian-action-modern-era>