

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES IN HUMANITARIAN PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE:

PERCEPTIONS BY LOCAL ACTORS IN UGANDA AND BANGLADESH

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1. INTRODUCTION

This research was commissioned by Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA), a five-year project in Uganda and Bangladesh that advocates for a locally-led humanitarian system. ELNHA invests in building the capacity of local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs) to prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises, and to lead in humanitarian decision-making spaces.

ELNHA emphasises the empowerment of local actors and, through them, the communities they serve. It invests in redefining relationships between international and local actors towards more principled and equitable partnerships, fostering collaboration and complementarity instead of competition. It also invests in strengthening national and local systems of institutions and actors that prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises. In this way, it aims to institutionalize localization and support local self-reliance and sustainability. The elements of equitable partnership and institutionalization are reflected not only in relationships between international and local actors, but also among local actors and between them and affected communities.

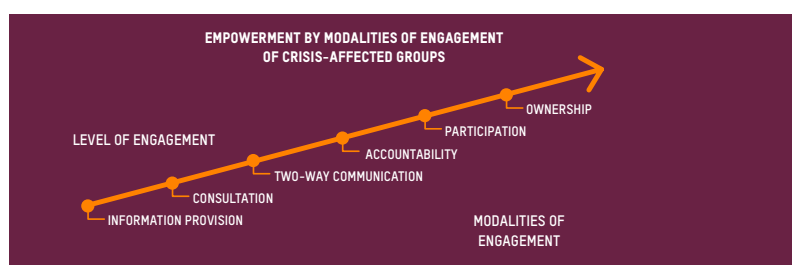
This research aims to better understand dynamics of the relationship between local actors and communities within ELNHA, based on the principles and logic promoted by the project. It examines how LNHAs from ELNHA engage the local community in their responses, empower them and forge bonds of trust among local stakeholders. It asks the following questions:

- How do local actors engage communities in humanitarian preparedness and response, and what modalities are most empowering?
- In what ways (beyond projects) are communities included in the local humanitarian system, to make their role more sustainable and empowering?

As this research initiative coincided with Covid-19, it also looks at the impacts of global and local restrictions on movement on the level and quality of engagement between LNHAs and affected communities.

The concepts of community engagement, inclusion and participation recur throughout the report.

Community engagement is understood as a flexible, context-appropriate approach to humanitarian preparedness and response that puts the affected community at the centre. It stresses that responses must be rooted in the needs, capacities and agency of the people most directly affected, enabling them to voice their needs and listening to them. Community engagement is expected to take place throughout the project cycle (OCHA, 2015). It focuses on the sustainability of response, looking beyond the first phase of an emergency – especially in protracted crises (Brown et al., 2014). This research looks into direct community – which entails the involvement of community members themselves – and indirect engagement, in which community representatives participate in humanitarian projects (Brown et al., 2014). There are different ways of engaging a community, and how this is done reflects the level of empowerment of communities in the project cycle and beyond. This research adopts Brown et al. (2014) model to analyse the level of engagement:



Inclusiveness: If engagement mechanisms are not inclusive, internal power dynamics might marginalize and silence some groups of people, putting them at risk. Community engagement prioritizes inclusivity, empowerment and leadership in the community. It is not one-size-fits-all – it is a continuous and contextually bound process that can be operationalized in various manners, depending on factors such as location and phase of response (Brown et al., 2014).

Participation is a modality of actively engaging the community in decision-making processes. It entails defining the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian responses in conversation with the community. Joint decision-making processes should include vulnerable and marginalized groups – such as women, girls and older persons – and occur through channels that are safe and comfortable for the beneficiaries (Brown et al., 2014).

Section 2 of this report looks at research methodology and limitations. Section 3 provides an overview of the humanitarian ecosystem. Section 4 analyses community engagement in the humanitarian governance system. Section 5 explores community engagement throughout the humanitarian response cycle. Section 6 assesses the impact of Covid-19 on community engagement, as perceived by interviewees. The study concludes with recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this research project took place between February and June 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on capacity to collect data and interact with the ELNHA teams: interviews had to be conducted remotely, and participants were harder to reach in the context of a global health crisis. Semi-structured remote interviews were conducted with 19 interviewees, by phone or Skype. Questions were sent in advance, and some interviewees provided answers before the interviews; in these cases, the interview discussed the answers. The duration of the interviews varied from 40 minutes to two hours. The interviewees comprised 17 representatives of local or national NGOs (L/NNGOs), seven from Bangladesh and ten from Uganda, plus a representative from a local authority and another from a community-based radio station, both from Uganda. Questionnaires are attached in the annex. Interviews were transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for validation.

The findings were interpreted with the insights of ELNHA project staff, and supplemented by a desk review of project documents and previous research on community engagement, which was used to complement the analysis and validate findings or assumptions. To triangulate information, conversations were held with international humanitarian experts from Oxfam who work on

localization and community engagement. Further insights came from participation in the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment event on 10 June 2020, 'Saving lives, building trust, and informing humanitarian action: How good practice and lessons learned from community engagement can help beat Covid-19'.

2.1. LIMITATIONS

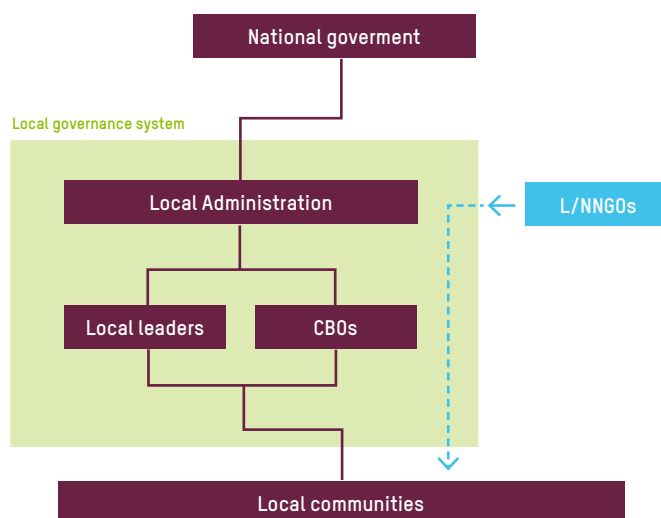
This report's findings should not be generalized nor taken out of context. Data collection was complicated by finding interviewees willing and able to make the time to participate; connectivity issues and language barriers; and the inherent limitations of remote interviews in terms of missing body language, difficulty building rapport, and lack of time to dig deeper and clarify.

The findings capture primarily the perspective of L/NNGOs, given the difficulty of reaching community and other local actors remotely. As a result, this report shows only a partial depiction of reality. The interviewees' statements should be read with caution, especially in contexts with displaced communities. Still, there is value in understanding the perspective of L/NNGOs in how they engage and build relationships at the local level.

3. HUMANITARIAN ECOSYSTEM

The L/NNGO representatives commonly referred to their interactions with other actors in the local governance system as a way to engage the community and create bonds of trust. The local governance system consists of leadership structures that are formal – local administration and government institutions – and informal: individuals who have a position of power or play a role of influence even though they may not be part of the local administration, such as influential women in the community.

The figure below shows the local actors, links and leadership structures most often referred to by interviewees. It is a simplified depiction of the principal actors with which L/NNGOs interact for community engagement; they also participate in numerous other fora. Connections with local humanitarian actors were most commonly mentioned by the interviewees in relation to community engagement.



3.1. L/NNGOS

L/NNGOs are part of the humanitarian ecosystem and negotiate their projects and initiatives with the other actors. L/NNGOs forge bonds and strengthen interrelations, trust and empowerment around and in the local governance system to engage the communities in their projects. ELNHA interviewees described how, when they start an initiative, they consult with the local administration, leaders and CBOs. They cannot function if they do not coordinate with the local administration, as they require their approval to start projects. They also depend on local leaders and CBOs to access and communicate with the community. The L/NNGOs mentioned their interactions with various UN organizations. In Uganda, the UNHCR is a highly influential humanitarian gatekeeper in refugee settlements. In Bangladesh, the NGO community forms part of the humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCTT), together with UN organizations and international financial institutions.

The ELNHA interviewees associate a certain type of activity with community engagement and building stronger relations between service providers, communities and leaders. They agree that the activities that contribute most strongly:

- encourage actors to find local solutions to local problems by transferring knowledge and information to stakeholders and the community, such as capacity building activities, and certain preparedness activities such as awareness raising and sensitization;
- stimulate participation and leadership among all community members, including marginalized groups, such as projects on women's participation or group formation activities; and
- strengthen the local governance system, such as meetings, coordination and influencing.

Investment in relationship building, trust and empowerment is developed over time, not only during preparedness programs but also through development projects, as further explored in Section 4.¹ Development projects, which tend to be of longer duration and focused on resilience building, give L/NGOs more time to build rapport with other LHAs, and connect with the community and its leaders.

3.2. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

The interviewees mostly referred to the role of national government in Uganda or Bangladesh as coordinating, funding and strengthening local government capacity in disaster preparedness and response. Both countries' national policies refer to engagement of communities.

The National Policy for Disaster Preparedness Management of The Republic of Uganda (October 2010), for instance, talks about community involvement in cases such as environment protection and states the intention to include 'women, the youth and persons with disability in disaster preparedness and management decision-making', as well as to 'encourage public participation in disaster management programmes'. It touches on other goals of community engagement, such as the aim to 'develop capacity building measures to empower the communities in disaster management', to 'encourage public awareness and education for communities right from grass root level' and to 'develop and use traditional knowledge and practices in disaster management' (OPM, 2010).

The Ugandan National Policy for Disaster Preparedness Management (2010) also touches on the necessity for coordination and partnerships with other local humanitarian actors – such as national NGOs, civil society organizations and the private sector – in disaster preparedness and management. The role of international and national NGOs is described as 'pivotal [...] in mobilizing and sensitizing the masses about risks, hazards and disasters that affect their communities and how to manage them', especially for organizations that support 'more disadvantaged groups, such as children, women, persons-with-disability, the old and the youth'.

In Bangladesh the National Disaster Management Policy (2015) describes the role of the national government and refers to capacity building trainings to strengthen disaster management committees at all levels, from national to community. The national government has established guidelines for community risk assessments, but the document does not mention procedures for engaging or involving communities – it briefly mentions 'Collaborative Partnerships' but does not go into detail about these partners' roles.

3.3. LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

Most interviewees work closely with various local government bodies – district, county, sub-county, village or city. As these are formal institutions, their role in humanitarian preparedness and response is also more formal, especially in terms of administrative, monitoring and evaluation functions.

In Uganda, national policy involves local governments in preparedness and response activities including contingency plans, hazard mapping, data collection, and assessment of vulnerabilities in sub-counties and local authority areas. They get information by conducting interviews with community members, especially those who previously experienced disasters, and by looking at early warning signs that preceded previous disasters. In Bangladesh, local governments are involved in needs assessments, and provide information to local actors in emergencies. There is a distinction between urban needs assessments, in which the municipality or city corporation are the main institutions, and community needs assessments, realized by the Union Parishad. Local administrations also provide information to community members about disaster preparedness, for example Union Information Centres run by Union Parishads.

Local authorities consult local leaders in data collection activities, as well as representatives from community groups such as women, youth and persons with disabilities, according to the interviewee from a local authority in Uganda. Local councils are an example of indirect participation: administrative bodies that consist of local government officers and representatives elected by vulnerable community groups, such as women, youth and elderly people. In both Uganda and Bangladesh, committees are also set up by the national government to collect data and enable quick responses, such as Uganda's Disaster Risk Reduction Committee. Both exist on various levels, from district or upazila to village level. Councils and committees represent overlap between formal and informal leadership structures (see section 3.4.). At the village level, CBOs – some of which are registered – can stimulate community leadership, with NGOs playing a facilitating role.

¹ L/NGOs in the ELNHA project have a dual mandate that covers humanitarian and development work. In many cases, the activities and projects mentioned by the interviewees concern development activities. These are included in the research because there is a thin line between preparedness, resilience building and certain development projects, and because this research assumes that, before response, some a trust relationship with the community needs to be established, and this could happen during development projects, too.

3.4. LOCAL LEADERS

The interviewees described the role of local leaders – individuals occupying places of power, esteem and representation – as key to community engagement. Local leaders can be community leaders, officials, elders, opinion leaders, clan leaders, family heads, religious leaders or group representatives, among others. The roles of local leaders, local councils and community representatives are intertwined: people can hold both formal and informal leadership positions – there is ‘duplication in membership’, as an NGO interviewee from Bangladesh put it. When individuals are part of informal community leadership structures, their involvement in humanitarian action is not necessarily tied to policy.

The interviewees unanimously stated that involvement of local leaders is crucial as an entry-point to the community. They are key to establishing a bond of trust with the community: they are a trusted source of information for the community, and if they endorse a project, it will likely be supported by the community. Conversely, ‘local leaders having been left out of one intervention initially, were reluctant to join in later activities of the responder and had a tense relation with hygiene promoters trained by this responder’ (IMK, 2018a). Interviewees explained that they always try to forge a strong relationship with local leaders for mobilization, information provision, and their role in resolving conflict.

The role of the local leaders is complex. Various interviewees stated that they might be unpredictable, maintain their own agenda or have political interests. In such cases, communication strategies might need to be modified; various interviewees stated that only their experienced staff deal with these individuals. This

may also complicate humanitarian initiatives by younger and smaller organizations, which they may not have built rapport with the local leaders. Many interviewees stressed the need for local leaders to be properly informed so they can function optimally as information channels. Some interviewees emphasized the need for capacity building:



Most of the community leaders are full. They sometimes feel the tiredness. Without money or support, they [help their] community, and sometimes [experience a lot of pressure in doing so...] We need to enhance their capacity and orient them more towards the responsibilities of what they can do for a community people and why they do this. This link doesn't work sometimes.

- (NGO representative, Kurigram, Bangladesh)

3.5. THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The interviewees commonly referred to the local community as a heterogeneous group, consisting of numerous sub-groups with varying vulnerability. They distinguished between beneficiaries of the projects and the wider community, sometimes referred to as ‘indirect beneficiaries’. Some stated that they directly engage the wider community in their decisions, project design and activities, while others interact mostly with representatives, possibly in the presence of the wider community. The interviewees may use direct or indirect participation approaches depending on the project and their ideas.

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

Since the Grand Bargain, the creation of platforms within the humanitarian governance system has been advocated to boost both community engagement and communication: the CDAC Network (2019) calls this the ‘collective approach’, as engagement has ‘the objective of catalysing communities’ ability to connect, access information and have a voice in humanitarian emergencies’. To this end, a range of humanitarian actors need to cooperate and coordinate. Capacity building activities and coordination among local actors are essential to achieve effective information sharing, communication and community engagement. This section examines how ELNHA L/ NNGOs strengthen community structures and the humanitarian governance system.²

4.1. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES FOR GREATER PARTICIPATION AND OWNERSHIP OF PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

As means of strengthening the local humanitarian governance system, ELNHA interviewees mentioned the formation of community structures, capacity building and coordination activities, information sharing and communication approaches.

4.1.1. FORMATION OF COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

Strengthening community structures by creating groups or through projects can help L/ NNGOs to engage effectively in capacity building on community level. Interviews showed there are pronounced differences between Bangladesh and Uganda in how community leadership is stimulated. In Bangladesh, interviewees explained that they tend to facilitate the creation of groups, teams or committees that include community members or representatives, and use these groups to encourage participation and leadership, foster sustainability of projects, and create empowerment and ownership. As one NGO representative put it, ‘the group will still be in the field [after the project ends], they will continue their response’. The interviewee detailed the example of a gender task force in Barguna district:

² In conversation with an Oxfam humanitarian expert.



The gender task force team [...] has 30 members. Most of them, 16 to 18 persons, are female, and 12 men. These people are very prominent, active women in that area. They are raising their combined voices for children and women for the purpose of ensuring gender-sensitive response. In the group, there are teachers, civil society, elite people, men, women and some political people. They are working with different development sectors, so their participation is everywhere. [...] I think it's a very strong team, and they are doing very well.

The creation of these groups can positively affect participation and community ownership by serving as a platform for the community to hold service providers and governments accountable for their actions. L/NGOs should ensure that members have the skills and vision necessary to represent their respective groups in the community.

Another example is the formation of CBOs in Bangladesh. Some CBOs are organized and registered by the relevant government department, and have savings in a bank account. CBOs can be used as a channel for communicating about issues and challenges faced by a community: 'the CBO leaders then share it with the community and other stakeholders, like with the government departments, other NGOs', said an NGO representative from Bangladesh. Interviewees describe the CBOs as community-based leadership, with one NGO representative saying: 'I think CBOs are the right platform to promote leadership, but we can give some support for capacity building for community leadership'. CBOs are also regarded as a successful way to promote female leadership, as women are encouraged to take up positions of power. CBOs are comprised of individuals from across the community: as one NGO interviewee described, 'the middle class, the high class and lower class, elderly, women, children, youth, every group participates in the CBO'. Nonetheless, internal power dynamics can form an obstacle to effective participation. L/NGOs can play a facilitating role in ensuring that all voices are heard.

Interviewees in Bangladesh mention establishing a committee to be responsible for implementing a humanitarian response project:



Sometimes, we initiate a project implementation committee (PIC). There's always people from the community in the steering committee to handle the implementation, like teachers, imams, women leaders, youth leaders, local government leaders, and other community leaders take part. Sometimes we call this a CBO, sometimes PIC. [...] We provide to them orientation and training. We try to transfer responsibilities to the CBOs after getting a training and orientation from our part and they look at the community accordingly.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh)

Some organizations in Bangladesh stimulate beneficiaries to form groups to involve them in decision-making processes, especially in humanitarian and development projects of longer duration:



After the selection of the beneficiaries, they form a group and [...] have monthly or bi-monthly meetings where they sit together and share their present activities, look at upcoming action and jointly look at the betterment of the project. [...] There are 20 to 25 people in these groups. [...] They make an action plan for upcoming meetings, and dialogue with each other about how they can move forward and what their shortcomings are.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh)

Although establishing a PIC or beneficiary group can be engaging and empowering, it exists only during the lifespan of the project. To ensure sustainability, these groups should be longer-lasting and the skills of their members should be built so they can function as a platform for community members to voice their needs.

One interviewee from Bangladesh explains how they try to insert local people with leadership ambitions into formal governance structures. They first organize 'a meeting to see who has the skills to be able to participate, and who wants to be a leader so we can promote them', then:



We take them to advocacy meetings, lobby meetings with government representatives and local representatives. We also provide some leadership training, [...] we try to enrol our group members in different committees, so they can participate in the committee meetings. We also invite them in national-level programs in big conferences.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh)

L/NGOs should take great care in selecting these potential leaders, as some might try to access leadership structures for personal ambition or gain. However, inserting community members into formal leadership positions could potentially stimulate community leadership and ownership: if these individuals are appropriate for the position – motivated by ambitions for the common good – they could become vital communication and participation channels.

In Uganda, projects promote empowerment through group formation. These projects tend to have a development objective. Some aim to empower certain groups within the community – for example, an NGO interviewee mentioned an emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods project that engaged farmers during a drought. It was especially empowering as it entailed creating harmony between refugee settlements and the host community, who speak different languages. This required a lot of dialogue among service providers, including L/NGOs and humanitarian actors, but it has the potential to overcome friction between the refugee and host communities and achieve a sense of ownership.

Another commonly mentioned activity is the creation of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA). This is often a community initiative, with members of the community – or certain groups within the community – coming together to ask for training in the VSLA approach. L/NGOs play a facilitating role in creating VSLAs, according to an NGO representative in Uganda, and it is very empowering when community members themselves take the initiative. On the other hand, as the members make the rules including criteria for access and compliance, this could perpetuate cycles of exclusion and marginalization. To counter this possibility, L/NGOs could include training and monitoring on inclusive participation.

Interviewees mentioned projects that stimulate women's participation and leadership. These projects also target men in order 'for them to appreciate that women can also do the things that men can also do', in the words of an NGO representative in Uganda, and to avoid the men feeling left out. The interviewee explains that this intervention was effective, as shortly afterwards women stood in elections at the refugee camp: 'It was very good for us, because [that is] the moment women realize what they can do. We know that we have empowered them holistically.' L/NGOs should try to ensure that individuals who seek leadership ambitions have the skillset to represent their community and do not merely act for personal aspirations.

4.1.2. CAPACITY BUILDING

Interviewees see capacity building and coordination activities as stimulating the resilience and sustainability of interventions. These activities also ensure that the roles and responsibilities of different humanitarian actors are clear during a crisis. They mentioned capacity building at various levels, among the community as well as in leadership structures and other implementing partners. Capacity building activities conducted by L/NGOs have ranged from content training to functional skills such as leadership training.

To build capacity in the local community, interviewees organized trainings about disaster risk reduction management, including precautionary measures for rapid-onset disasters such as floods and cyclones in Bangladesh. Preparedness activities such as simulations are also popular with community members – for example, a simulation in a school context so students know their roles and where to go in case of a disaster. This knowledge can be lifesaving, as it enables the community to react swiftly during a crisis.

Some interviewees indicate that they try to capacitate and empower people on the ground who 'can respond immediately, like in schools (primary schools, high schools) teachers, guardians and such', in the words of one NGO representative in Bangladesh. Interviewees see training volunteers on the ground, and village-level or community-based staff, as strengthening relationships with the community. These volunteers act as intermediaries and information channels, allowing culturally appropriate communication with the community. Local institutions are also targeted for capacity building, so that 'after completing our project the learnings will continue'.

Absorbing capacity building activities into interventions can be effective to strengthen local actors. The IMK Report (2018a) states that community member participants 'did note capacity strengthening taking place in one particular case: when local actors had been targeted by the intervention, e.g. training programs for Animal Health Workers, Peace Committees or water user committees'. The IMK report (2018b) adds: 'Almost all individual interviewees (84%) stated that local actors such as the union parishad members and chairmen, other "elite persons",

local volunteers, and staff members of the cash distributing organisation, had improved their skills, capacities and efficiency through being part of the cash grant response.'

Various interviewees said that the capacity of community leaders requires improvement. As a Bangladesh NGO representative put it, 'We are trying to build their capacity and skills. We are organizing different types of leadership trainings, so that they can get some idea about their roles and responsibilities.' For many interviewees, it is key to empower local leaders by strengthening their capacities to ensure that they are able to occupy a strong position in humanitarian response.

Communities generally prefer 'hard' activities, that address their material needs, to 'soft' activities such as capacity building.³ One interviewee in Bangladesh recounts that when they set up activities that aim at building capacity, the community can be 'demotivated' not to receive more material benefits. Nonetheless, the IMK Report (2019) notes one case in Uganda in which the local community appreciated capacity building: 'With the knowledge and skills we the women have received during the handcraft training in making reusable sanitary materials, we can now make our own reusable sanitary materials to use when we are menstruating and it has improved our hygiene greatly'. It would be interesting for further research to examine whether the community perceives these 'soft' activities differently when they are implemented by L/NGOs as opposed to INGOs.

4.1.3. COORDINATION

Interviewees organize opportunities for local humanitarian actors to look together at locally available resources, skills and knowledge, building coordination and communication to enable a swift response:



We try to sit and share with each other [local humanitarian actors] what they have and what they don't [...] We are creating a communication and linkage mechanism, so that people can take support from one another. Interestingly, most people do not know the support they can get from this type of organization.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh)

³ In conversation with an Oxfam humanitarian expert.

L/NGOs aim to forge partnerships among local actors and train them to make use of local resources, to empower them to work towards the common interest of responding to crises. This is necessary because at local level response is often ‘scattered’:



Different people [LHAs] end up doing the same thing, because every person is responding during a flood. So, we do a capacity building to co-ordinate amongst them. We arrange workshops and we invite all the stakeholders who are helping in a response time. We create small committees to see if any time a disaster comes they can sit and make a decision on who does what, so that on a local level they are more constructed and organized for the response.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh)

These coordination activities strengthen the local governance system: assigning roles to the various humanitarian actors enables them to respond more swiftly during an emergency, and can boost their relationships and build their capacity to effectively communicate with and engage the community.

4.1.4. APPROACHES FOR INFORMATION SHARING AND COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Information provision, consultation and two-way communication are progressive steps towards greater empowerment, as pointed out by the CDAC Network (2019). Community engagement starts with providing correct and relevant information about a crisis, through clear communication lines with service providers and other LHAs. For a community to be empowered to make informed decisions about their lives, they require information as much as fulfilment of their basic needs (OCHA, 2015). Put another way, ‘communication is aid’ (CDAC Network, 2019).

Interviewees mentioned mass gatherings and community meetings as ways to provide information, communication, awareness and sensitization activities in advance of a crisis. These events have the potential to be empowering and inclusive as they are open to the entire community, including marginalized groups. In practice, however, marginalization and social pressures might hinder some segments of the population from participating. Local leaders can exclude some parts of the population from communication channels (IMK, 2018). Some interviewees from Uganda mentioned the need to hold several meetings to obtain participation from all groups – for example, separating men and women, as women may be less likely to speak when men are present. L/NGOs play an important role in identifying to what degree participation happens, and stimulating participation from all groups. Interviewees commonly use focus group discussions to ensure views are incorporated from across a community.

Cultural activities, such as theatre and songs, can support the inclusive sharing of information and participation of local people participate. In both Uganda and Bangladesh these activities are used to portray disasters, as a way of raising awareness. This approach is seen as more empowering as it creates ownership over information, which can be adapted to local reference points.

Lack of continuous information sharing and communication can cause issues in engaging and empowering communities. The IMK report (2020) describes a case in Bangladesh in which beneficiaries were only partially informed about the support they would receive: ‘The day we got the grant, we only got to know details about the grant in the morning around 10 AM. We had no concept of the kind of assistance that would be provided. We

were not informed anything beforehand.’ Partial information can be detrimental to a project by preventing recipients from making informed decisions.

Constant communication is key to effective community engagement (CDAC Network, 2019). The IMK report (2019) illustrates potential repercussions of a lack of communication could be: ‘[Name of local actor] involved us in decision making when they selected our enterprises. However after the training, we were not involved and not even communicated to.’ Participation goals could be achieved only partially or not at all due to design issues in the response. Without complete and correct information sharing and continuous communication, an activity cannot achieve its empowering goals.

In practice, in Uganda information sharing and communication between the local community and service providers is commonly conducted through community structures and leaders such as parish chiefs and local councils (RTR Lite finding reports Uganda, 2018). The indirect nature of such communication can cause various issues, as the middle person might not pass on the information correctly. Yet it can also have benefits, as the local authority interviewee from Uganda explained: as the community ‘understand[s] their elders and leaders better to involve them at that level to provide information and for them to have more capacity in terms of response’.

When L/NGOs rely on contact persons within the community for communication, participation and feedback during response, they need to be properly capacitated to function as communication channels (IMK, 2019). If local leaders do not have access to complete and correct information, they can spread partial or incorrect information, putting lives at risk (OCHA, 2015). One interviewee from a Ugandan NGO said local leaders currently ‘don’t have the capacity in terms of airtime, knowledge on crisis intervention, so that they can better support their community’. L/NGOs should invest in making information and communication mechanisms functional in peace time, and monitored and supported local leaders accordingly (RTR Lite finding reports Uganda, 2018).

A HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS APPROACH IN ENGAGEMENT OF COMMUNITIES

Combining capacity, information and coordination can support not only preparedness but also resilience in development projects, and prevention through de-escalation. The interviewees incorporate a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach in their engagement of communities, aiming to strengthen resilience in the long term.

In slow-onset disaster, such as drought in Uganda, disaster risk reduction tends to take the shape of longer-duration developmental trainings. NGO representatives from Uganda gave the examples of resilience building in livelihoods projects that engage 'the farmer groups in making them grow vegetables during dry season' and cash-for-work 'income generation, as another way of making them more resilient'. Such projects empower local people by providing them with means and knowledge to generate income and grow food, and they allow the service provider to build relationships with the target groups through frequent contact and interactions. It can build trust over time to involve groups not just in preparing or reacting to crises, but in supporting their livelihoods and longer term well-being.

Building trust, sharing information and creating a space for dialogue has many benefits, notably reducing tensions and conflict with and between communities, and improving social cohesion. Interviewees shared that in protracted crises, such as the refugee crisis in Uganda, local NGOs play a facilitating role in de-escalating tensions between host and refugee communities, building on their relationships with local leaders and offering suggestions to mediate in the conflict:



Sometimes we find a conflict between the refugee and the host community over water sources, land, community access to roads or firewood collection. [...] So, we have to use dialogue meetings for them to look at themselves as human beings and try to solve the conflict. To do this, we usually start with the leaders before going to the community meetings. [...] After having agreed with them on certain matters, we go to the wider community. [...] When the host community and the refugees end up conflicting, we advise for the plantation of mango trees. When the mango grows up and is able to generate fruit, both the refugee and the host communities' children can eat it.

- (NGO representative, Bangladesh).

De-escalation activities require strong participation, which is achieved through relationships with local leaders and communities, frequent dialogue and communication. The interviewee's example of symbolically planting mango trees together is one way to stimulate harmony and joint ownership between the communities. But without the right level of information and consultation, interventions risk heightening tensions. In an example given by the IMK report (2019): "[Name of local actor]'s activities have also promoted tension amongst the refugees and citizens [in the host communities], especially those who missed out on [name of local actor]'s activities". Continuous support, communication and maintaining good relations with communities is essential for L/NGOs to effectively conduct activities.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PROJECTS

There was consensus among the interviewees that the community needs to be involved from the start of a project, and at every stage of the humanitarian programming cycle: needs assessment, beneficiary selection, service provision, complaints and feedback mechanism, and monitoring and evaluation (OCHA, 2015). This section looks at how L/NGOs encourage participation and empowerment and strengthen their relationships with the community during the lifespan of humanitarian and development projects.

5.1. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The interviewees were aware that projects and activities should respond to people's actual needs, requiring needs assessments with strong participation from the community. When asked about empowerment and transferring ownership to the community, various interviewees answered that this is mainly achieved by incorporating the community at an early stage in needs assessment. 'It's better if the community takes the decision, because there is a lesser chance that we make a mistake', says one NGO representative from Uganda. Interviewees explain that this community ownership makes a project more sustainable, as the community is more likely to continue with the activities after the project ends.

The first contact with the community tends to take place through local leadership structures. L/NGOs often rely on the information available in these structures, both formal (data collected by local authorities) and informal (conversations and meetings with local leadership figures). As the entry point to the community, local leaders give the aspiring service provider an overview of people's needs and vulnerabilities. Generally, their approval and understanding is needed. These consultations are followed by either meetings with representatives or mass gatherings with community members, to ensure that the project reflects the necessary nuances and avoids bias in the choice of activities.

By orienting a project towards people's actual needs, consulting the community during the needs assessment is an improvement on the service provider creating a project based on their own agenda. However, it is not fully empowering as it is still the service provider that approaches the community: in this approach, the community has not yet reached a level of ownership of their own situation, or the empowerment to call upon LHAs for support during crises. Some interviewees aim to turn these dynamics around:



Community participation departs right at the design of the project. It is actually having community involvement through community-based initiatives. We let the community think about what's best for them to solve their own problems within the community.

- (NGO representative, Uganda).

Another interviewee from Uganda mentions an empowering approach to needs assessment that aims to change the attitude of affected communities, using game-like tools and activities to empower them to pinpoint their needs with the aim of making them realise that 'at the end of the day, [...] it is them that need to address their problems. We [L/NGOs] can only support their process in addressing their problems'. This interactive approach puts the service provider in a facilitating role and encourages the community to take the initiative with a positive outlook on solving their problems.

The service providers should make sure that response activities are empowering. For instance, a common response activity to flash floods in Bangladesh is the distribution of cash. This has been found to be empowering, as it increases the recipient's self-efficacy and confidence, which could lead to positive effects on people's actions and behaviour to cope with the crisis (IMK, 2018b).

A higher level of engagement results from community members themselves being able to take the initiative to offer their ideas for projects to service providers and jointly design a project. During an emergency, this is often not possible – but it can be done in longer-term activities, such as humanitarian preparedness and development projects. With a response project, at least there can be agreements along the lines of what type of support would be provided in the event that a certain type of disaster happens. Another challenge commonly cited by interviewees is that the demands that come out of the needs assessment are higher than their organization has the capacity or funding to meet.

L/NGOs need to take care to stimulate participation from all groups in the community, including those that face discrimination, to avoid cases like this: "[Name of local actor] did not address our needs of divorced girls since we are disadvantaged and discriminated among our age groups and nicknamed prostitutes" (IMK, 2019). L/NGOs could create an inclusive feedback mechanism that would encourage even the most marginalized groups to respond to their actions and choices.

Interviewees agreed that the needs assessment procedure can be quite lengthy, and 'there are always emergencies where there is no time to do all of this', in the words of a Ugandan NGO representative. In cases of rapid-onset disaster, L/NGOs mention that they draw on data from previous projects and the information gained from local leaders. Some do involve the community in rapid needs assessments:



During a rapid needs assessment, for example, a fire has happened. We do the rapid needs assessment with the community. We do the identification of which activities that a community would need. We identify who are the most affected with the community.

- (NGO representative, Uganda).

One interviewee explained that it is crucial always to have up-to-date information on what is happening within communities, as things can change very fast and there may be too little time to encourage direct community participation. Indirect participation is more common, but may pose issues related to ownership, empowerment and the participation of all groups. For these reasons, the process of engagement, information sharing and expectation setting prior to a disaster is beneficial for building ownership quickly during the response – when continuous information sharing, maintaining communication channels and feedback mechanisms can also help.

Once this information is obtained, L/NNGOs design their projects, sometimes in collaboration with leadership figures or community members, and present these to authorities for approval and to potential donors for funding.

5.2. BENEFICIARY SELECTION

With a concrete plan for their humanitarian projects, the L/NNGOs move onto the selection of beneficiaries. Most interviewees cited using a participatory structure, in which an initial list of potential beneficiaries is provided by local authorities and leaders. This list is then crosschecked with the wider community to avoid bias. Once this list is corrected, it is often verified through door-to-door visits. This is a lengthy process, which in Uganda is completed mostly for longer-running projects. In the words of one interviewee:

“ The precise procedure [for the beneficiary selection] really depends on the time available for the project. If the project exceeds three months, we take it up with the community and do the verification and validation of the beneficiaries. When the time frame for the implementation of the project is very short, the verification and validation stops at the level of the leaders. This can be very biased, because the beneficiaries that the leaders suggest may not be in benefit of the wider community; the wider community would not approve. It's very important to see whether the wider community approves the selection of beneficiaries. Leaders are also biased and end up selecting relatives or people for whom they would also benefit so we check them by taking the approval to the wider community.

–(NGO representative, Uganda)

In Bangladesh, however, these checks are also done in short responses such as quick cash distribution. This procedure seems appropriate: although the service provider needs to select a certain number of beneficiaries, the community is engaged by getting the opportunity to check for bias and contest the beneficiary list once it is published.

To ensure that projects target the most vulnerable, the L/NNGOs set out criteria depending on the project's objectives – for example, if it is targeted towards a certain group, or extremely vulnerable households in general. Women and children are commonly most vulnerable, both in Bangladesh and Uganda. The actors also look at groups with disabilities or special needs, such as widows, orphans and children out of school. Local councils and the Refugee Welfare Council in Uganda, and local government institutions such as the Union Parishad or municipality in Bangladesh, play an important role in identifying potential beneficiaries. In refugee settlements in Uganda, the UNCHR also provides a list of most vulnerable individuals who are registered upon arrival. Here again the role of local leaders is to mobilize and provide information; these individuals serve as the trusted communication channels between organizations and communities.

Beneficiary selection is a common topic of complaints. Community members tell service providers that they are, in their opinion, just as vulnerable as the selected beneficiaries and wonder

why they have not been selected. As an NGO representative in Bangladesh recalled, 'one complaint was when the beneficiaries were selected, somebody called saying that they were a similar type of man but wasn't taken as a beneficiary'. Humanitarian responders find this a tough question to deal with, as there may be many vulnerable people in a community. They may do another check of the beneficiary list, but often they need to disappoint the complainant – and themselves, as with more funding and capacity they would be able to include more people on the beneficiary list. The fact that the community can contest the beneficiary list gives them decision-making power and, to a certain extent, ownership of the project. It may help to prevent friction in the community between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

While this way of selecting beneficiaries is engaging for the community, L/NNGOs should be careful to include all marginalized groups to avoid community-wide bias and discrimination. If care is also taken on an individual level, this method provides grounds for strong and direct community engagement and participation in decision-making processes.

5.3. SERVICE PROVISION

Interviewees generally stated the importance of the participation of community members in decision-making about distribution, which needs to be both convenient and appropriate to local norms, avoiding situations such as this: 'A female interviewee recounted how when she went to the distribution centre, the people working there didn't ask her permission for taking her picture or holding her hand for taking fingerprints' (IMK, 2020). Here is an example of where distribution is adjusted to local norms and needs:

“ In all upazilas, informants stated that measures had been put in place to cater for people's particular needs: separate queues had been formed for men and women, elderly people, sick people, disabled people, pregnant women and people who had travelled a long distance had received the money earlier.

–(IMK, 2018b)

Local leaders function as intermediaries between the community and the organization. They can ensure that benefits are distributed safely to the correct beneficiaries. L/NNGOs should encourage communication with the community and local leaders, as well as creating moments for their participation in decision-making processes.

Many interviewees mention the importance of providing a platform where community members can discuss their concerns and ask questions directly. These community dialogues can be formal meetings or informal conversations. They empower community members by allowing them to interact with leadership figures, both formal and informal, and service providers, and hold them to account.

In Uganda, a community-based radio station facilitates discussion between community members and local leadership figures: ‘We make sure that everyone participates – women, men, and children – and that they use the platform to discuss and express their views’, says an interviewee from the radio station. They record this discussion and broadcast it to the community. The format allows local leaders to listen to community members and respond to queries, though not necessarily immediately:



But when it comes to the local government sometimes, they’re like [laughs]... sometimes they find it challenging to respond to each challenge. The good thing is that they listen to the issues and, later on, respond to them.

- (Representative community radio station, Uganda)

5.4. COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK, AND MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Mechanisms for complaints and mechanisms are essential for community engagement (OCHA, 2015). Together with monitoring and evaluation, they allow the community to hold the service provider accountable and verify if they accomplish their promises. This may help to prevent the community losing trust in the service provider (Van Praag, 2019; Slim, 2019).

5.4.1. COMPLAINT AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

L/NGOs should ensure that community members know where and how to lodge a complaint, and that their information remains confidential. Interviewees described various types of complaint and feedback mechanisms. Many have installed suggestion boxes in their office or in an accessible public place, and display hotline numbers for people to lodge complaints. Research finds that these mechanisms do not always function well. In one example, ‘it is unclear where to lodge complaints (for example: with the responder or with the local government), or if informants know where to go, they do not know how to lodge their complaints’ (IMK, 2018a). In another example, from Bangladesh:



this responder had apparently kept the complaint box at the distribution centre only on the day when the money had been given. In this short time span, many people had probably missed the complaint box. An informant for that responder noted that many people had wanted to lodge a complaint, but they had not received the opportunity.
- (IMK, 2018b)

L/NGOs should ensure that there are no impediments for community members to make their opinions known and hold the service provider accountable, as this helps with empowerment and ownership by giving them some say in how the project affects them. In one example from Bangladesh where a mechanism worked well, a beneficiary did not receive enough sanitary napkins in their hygiene kit, and was able to obtain the missing items through the complaints mechanism.

Mechanisms for complaints and feedback can be indirect, such as talking to local council members or landlords during visits (RTR Lite finding reports Uganda, 2018). Indirect mechanisms’ can also lead to some issues:



Some respondents mentioned that the way they can submit complaints is through having it passed through a leader. However, one respondent regretted: “Complaints are not forwarded by the leaders”. As a consequence, if he had a complaint he wouldn’t bother submitting it. And he feels he cannot bypass the leaders for submitting a complaint.
- (RTR Lite finding reports Uganda, 2020)

This example shows that the interference of leaders can be an obstacle to the functionality of a complaints mechanism in holding the service provider accountable. Similarly, the IMK report (2018a) shows that when communication passes through leaders, beneficiaries would not ‘want to ask too many questions, as they feared to be excluded from the responder’s activities’; in one example, ‘When I requested for more poles to construct my latrine, I was answered either to take what is provided or leave it, because there are many people who want it’ (IMK, 2018a). L/NGOs should train leaders to value their role in supporting the community through a complaints system, and support and monitor the leaders in passing along complaints.

The attitude of the community towards complaining can also be an obstacle, as in this example from Bangladesh:



Nobody makes any complaint against anyone. If anyone made any complaint against anyone they could blame us, or the situation could be worse or we have to face any pressure. That’s why nobody made any complaint. I don’t know how to complain and I would never make any complaint against anyone to be someone’s enemy.
- (IMK, 2020)

It should be possible to lodge complaints anonymously, and people should be made aware that this is an option – though it may make the investigation less effective, as no follow-up questions can be asked. Complaint and feedback mechanisms may need to be accompanied by raising community awareness that their aim is not to assign blame, but rather to improve the project.

Interviewees explained how they handle complaints: by registering them, and researching what caused the issue and what could be done to resolve it. They note that not all complaints are well founded: sometimes, for example, community members who are not eligible for the beneficiary list complain as they want to be included. Feedback on complaints should be given quickly and direct-ly, as shown by an example from Uganda: ‘According to informants these local authorities and hy-giene promoters responded late or not at all to informants’ issues, because they did not receive an incentive from the responder’ (IMK, 2018a). L/NNGOs need to build the capacity of local authori-ties, leaders and volunteers to deal with complaints, through a training and monitoring system.

Service providers need to regard these mechanisms as an opportunity to listen to the challenges and problems of community members and beneficiaries. One interviewee from Bangladesh men-tioned an interesting way to monitor community opinion: ‘Very recently, we introduced another feedback mechanism which is a mood meter. We set up a mood meter in the community and peo-ple can express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction on the mood meter.’ Making clear in public that community members are dissatisfied may encourage service providers to resolve complaints more quickly.

Anticipating problems can prevent complaints. One NGO interviewee from Uganda explains that when activities cannot proceed as planned – when there is a delay in funding, for instance – it is vital to communicate this to the community: ‘It’s normally a mixed reaction, as dealing with human beings is a bit difficult. How you present it is key. [...] The way you present it to the community is actually how you make the community understand and believe in you.’

When complaint and feedback mechanisms function well, they can build community trust:



[R]esponders with a positive track record in the area, who have been delivering good quali-ty services to the informants, who have shown to understand the local context, or who en-sure easy communication can count on high levels of trust. Yet in that same logic people’s trust will erode when feedback is slow or complaints are not addressed at all. Overall, all re-sponders were trusted by informants, with only a few informants making reservations for three responders because of slow feedback or complaints not being addressed.

- (IMK, 2018a).

5.4.2. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation can enable the community to hold service providers accountable, stimulating their participation, ownership and empowerment. Various actors tend to be involved, such as local authorities, local leaders, the beneficiaries, the wider community, and sometimes third parties or the donor. As an NGO interviewee from Uganda explained:



We also try to involve wider stakeholders in monitoring, now that involves attracting some costs because it involves moving leaders to the project location – this has some financial implications for them. It is important to involve them for them to see what the project is doing and interact with the beneficiaries. This way they also see what needs to be corrected for the project implementation team to act on.

Involving local authorities can be challenging: they tend to be extremely busy, so organizations need to put in a lot of effort to get them to come and monitor. Another NGO representative from Uganda explained:



To make sure that leaders know how things happen at community level, we usually take some of these people to the communities to see for themselves how the materials are being used. For example, with the agriculture; we make them see how things work during dry season, we show them the technologies that they’re using.

Successfully involving different local actors in monitoring can improve ties between them, and provide a platform for beneficiaries to interact with other stakeholders in the humanitarian ecosystem.

Evaluation, like monitoring, tends to involve local authorities, leaders and beneficiaries. It seems to be perceived as a more formal procedure that requires expert skills, as its findings inform a report that is shared with local leaders and the donor. An NGO interviewee from Bangladesh explains:



We engage the community also in the review and evaluation process. We do this when our people go to the field. They ask the community people what their view is of the project that we’re implementing. They can write down their observation. They also ask the beneficiaries what they thought of the projects, and what gaps arose and the next action. They go in conversation with the people.

When a project is ending, exit meetings may be arranged to discuss it. These involve small groups which usually comprise, according to an NGO interviewee from Bangladesh, ‘people from the community, CBO leaders, community leaders and the project staff, and sometimes government authority’. Incorporating a wide variety of actors can bolster their relationships: the stakeholders can hold each other accountable, as well as listen to the community members, and vice versa.

6. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

During the period of conducting this research, the Covid-19 pandemic rendered traditional community engagement mechanisms obsolete. Lockdowns made it impossible to spread information, distribute support and work on the ground in the usual ways. Interviewees described how it became almost impossible for L/NGOs to go into a community and have face-to-face interaction with community members, so they were forced to fall back on indirect community engagement via local leaders and authorities. It was important for trust and relationships to have been established already.

As one NGO interviewee from Bangladesh put it: ‘Presently, it’s a very challenging event to involve the community. But we can try our very best to maintain the social distancing and secure the safety of everyone in the community’. Another notes the difficulties of depending on secondary data and local leaders: ‘If the local leaders are not strong, and have ideas, the response systems will collapse. I think there is a lot of opportunity to improve and involve the local communities even more.’

Interviewees describe how they experienced an information crisis during Covid-19 (ECOSOC, 2020). The local authority interviewee from Uganda said: ‘I believe that local communities don’t have adequate information and knowledge on this pandemic and how to

prevent it’. L/NGOs supported and complemented national-level efforts to spread information through phone calls, leaflets and posters. In Bangladesh, an NGO representative noted that social media was a useful communication channel due to its reach and popularity: ‘particularly Facebook. More than 80% of the people in Bangladesh are using Facebook’. Radio was a popular mechanism in Uganda, where mobile task forces also disseminated information by driving around with a megaphone.

The pandemic made it more necessary than ever for communities to be in charge of the response (ECOSOC, 2020). Interviewees described how trust was key for local populations to listen to life-saving advice, and avoid violence even when lockdown enforcement was draconian. They explained that their organizations relied more than ever before on people on the ground: community-based volunteers, CBO members and local leaders – although some NGOs tried to do door-to-door verification, maintaining social distance. Contributors to the ECOSOC meeting (2020) agreed that local community workers and volunteers were essential to adapt measures to local contexts, and argued for an inclusive approach as women are most vulnerable. Interviewees also noted the importance of women’s role in ensuring that measures were implemented in the household.

One NGO representative in Bangladesh described a new Covid-19 distribution model for food and hygiene kits:



all the donors and partners have agreed upon this model. With this model, we can try to distribute to the beneficiaries to help them maintain all the hygienic measures, like the social distancing. Now, people can stay in distribution centres considering the 6 ft distance.

An interviewee in Bangladesh explained why NGOs’ Covid-19 responses needed to be informed by the priorities of the community, rather than donors:



We need to prioritize the community people’s perspective. [...] We are still prioritising our plan over their needs, and the donors’ plan. In this Covid situation, people need food assistance, but some of the donors come with hygiene kits. Hygiene kits are needed, but they’re not essential. The food is essential for the community.

Another NGO representative in an urban area of Bangladesh noted that food packages were ‘much more essential to the community, because they have lost their income sources they cannot go to their trade or business so they need food’. Food distribution was prioritized over cash as the price of food had risen.

Complaint and feedback mechanisms were challenging to maintain during the pandemic, as information, awareness and communication sessions are usually held in person. Research in Bangladesh found that complaint mechanisms were still operating, though at a very limited scale and ‘people are not strongly aware’ of them – but they were still able to resolve some complaints (Remote RTR Lite of COVID-19 response Bangladesh, 2020).

Community perception of the disease is key to overcoming the pandemic (ECOSOC, 2020). Some interviewees mentioned that they aimed to address social stigma on Covid-19. As one NGO interviewee from Bangladesh put it: ‘Stigma always influences the people collectively so it becomes another disaster at community level’. Interviewees from Bangladesh noted that the government also focused on not creating panic and stigmatization. In Uganda, however, an NGO interviewee described that there was already stigmatization:



When they [people that were quarantined] reach their home, almost everyone noticed that nobody wanted to associate with this person. [...] The stigma and discrimination with Covid is almost at 99%.. [...] We have to find out how we can address the stigmatization around Covid for our brothers, our sisters, and our children.

The pandemic has shown that indirect community engagement is not as effective at empowering people or providing information: it makes participation more difficult and accountability mechanisms harder to operate. It demonstrates the value of having trusted relationships in which communities themselves have the capacity to communicate their needs and own the response.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has explored the relationship between local actors and communities within the ELNHA project by examining how LNHAs engage the local community in their responses, empower them and forge bonds of trust with them and among local stakeholders.

Interviewees described how they engage communities in humanitarian preparedness and response throughout the project cycle. L/NNGOs communicate and connect with the community through meetings with representatives or mass gatherings. They see incorporating the community into the needs assessment as essential to prioritize the community's needs and transfer ownership to community members. Interviewees generally use participatory approaches to beneficiary selection, as another way to include the community in decision-making processes.

ELNHA L/NNGOs keep open communication channels with the community during service provision. Some do so by organizing community dialogues through community radio, others use face-to-face meetings. The interviewees described the need for a functional complaints and feedback mechanism, and to incorporate community perspectives into monitoring and evaluation. These are opportunities to empower community members by enabling them to hold humanitarian actors accountable.

Information can be shared through meetings, newsletters and dialogues, both face to face and via radio talk shows. A number of interviewees stressed that such platforms can gather feedback quickly and effectively. They also use leaders, volunteers or other local actors to gather feedback and manage misinformation that can affect effective community engagement – but they must take care that these individuals are capacitated accordingly,

and possess the correct information. The interviews show that information sharing and communication should be continuous processes.

Interviewees noted that activities of longer duration, which tend to be oriented towards development or disaster preparedness, make it easier empower the community as they offer time to forge bonds. They described how they insert communities in the local humanitarian system through capacity building, coordination activities, stimulating community leadership and reinforcing community structures. They agree that a functional humanitarian governance system, with mechanisms for LNHAs to communicate swiftly, is key to both community engagement and response. Community structures can be strengthened either by facilitating the creation of groups, such as CBOs and VSLAs, or through projects that target certain groups in the community and transfer leadership to members of these groups. L/NNGOs should be careful with local power dynamics, however, as such processes may exclude certain groups or individuals.

The Covid-19 crisis has shifted emphasis from direct to indirect community engagement, as the interviewees attempted to adjust their distribution models and communication channels in response to lockdown situations. Indirect engagement does not achieve the same levels of community empowerment. The crisis has shown the need to bolster relations within the humanitarian governance system and capacitate communities to communicate their needs and own the response.

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ANNEX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR L/NGOS

The following actions are considered necessary by the HAF steering committees and the ELNHA team to further strengthen the HAFs and ensure the sustainability of this mechanism.

1.
 - a) What humanitarian response projects are you currently implementing? (Include also Covid-19 activities, if any.)
 - b) What preparedness activities are you currently implementing? (include also Covid-19 activities, if any.)
2. When do you engage communities in different stages of the humanitarian project cycle?
3. What mechanisms are you using to ensure crisis-affected people (men, women, and children) are involved in the projects and preparedness activities?
4. What activities are communities participating in?
5. How have communities been part of the following:
 - What kinds of channels do you use to provide information to the affected community?
 - What kinds of mechanisms do you have in place for community consultation?
 - What are recurrent problems you experience and how does the community communicate them to you?
 - How do you handle and provide feedback on the submitted complaints?
 - How do you include people from the community in decision-making processes?
 - How do you ensure transparency in your humanitarian projects/initiatives?
6.
 - a) How are community leaders currently involved in community consultations, communication and decision-making processes in your humanitarian projects?
 - b) And how do you think this involvement could be improved?
7. What could you do to ensure that people from the affected community take a more active role in humanitarian response and preparedness activities? What are some of the active roles they are taking? What are some of the limitations to crisis-affected people's active involvement in the activities?
8. Would you like to receive a transcript of this interview? If so, kindly provide your email address.

OTHER QUESTIONS:

9. What are your views on localization and ELNHA?
10. What are your ideas on Covid-19 response, what do you envision as potential effects?
11. Is there something you would like me to know about community engagement in the ELNHA project?
12. What are your suggestions to improve community participation?
13. What is your drive to engage the communities?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR OTHER ACTORS (CBOS, MEDIA, LOCAL AUTHORITIES):

1. Could you tell me a bit about your organization and what you do?
2.
 - a) What kind of humanitarian response projects have you been involved in?
 - b) What preparedness activities have you been involved in?
3. How are you involved in the design and implementation of humanitarian response and preparedness activities?
4. How do you see that your views are incorporated into the design and implementation of the humanitarian projects?
5. In your opinion, where do you think there is room for improvement?
6. Would you like to receive a transcript of this interview? If so, kindly provide your email address.

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