



chapter 4

#4

Communication techniques

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Communication

Effective communication is the fundamental building block of participation, and central to designing a strategy for participation. This chapter looks at formal and informal ways of communicating with crisis-affected people. Formal communication takes place through meetings, focus group discussions and so on, whilst informal communication is more opportunistic, for example simply chatting to people whilst you walk through a community. There are advantages and disadvantages to both types of communication: informal communication is often anecdotal and therefore can be biased, but is also less constrained and people are much more likely to say what they really think. However, it is easier to control communication in more formal settings. Both aid agencies and communities are more accountable for what they say during meetings when an official record is often kept. It isn't necessary to choose between one and the other – both should be part of your strategy.

The way in which you communicate – your attitude and behaviour – is as important as the method you choose, and is the key to successful participation. Your origin, status, gender, age, profession, experience or knowledge of the area all affect how you are perceived. See chapter 3 on building mutual respect.

IV.1 Informal communication

It is important to take the time to speak informally with people. Opportunities to engage with people on a casual or informal basis are often missed, yet they constitute a rich source of exchange, which can complement formal events like focus groups and community assemblies. They are opportunities to gather information, to increase your understanding of the community and to be better accepted – in fact you may be thought “standoffish” if you fail to take up these opportunities.

There are many situations that offer the opportunity for informal communication:

- stopping at the bar or tea house
- going to the market and speaking with people in the street, or even just being seen there
- going to the bath house or washing point – both useful places for female aid workers to talk to women and girls
- attending public events, such as religious ceremonies and village gatherings
- taking advantage of minor incidents: fixing a flat tyre or repairing a car, for instance, can lead to an informal gathering
- speaking with the driver and with cooks or waiters/waitresses in restaurants
- stopping by the road and talking with farmers in fields or with herders at water points.

Formal communication with communities gives an opportunity for leaders and spokespeople to present information, policy or opinions to the aid agency. Often the people you communicate with on a formal basis will

have some official position or status within their community (village leader, government official, head of a women's group) or will be part of a formal structure of some sort such as the camp management team or the village council. Much of this section is about formal communication, but a great deal of it is also relevant to informal and casual communication methods.

Formal means of communication include:

- structured interviews
- focus groups
- traditional assemblies

In many situations, if you start to converse with one or two people, you will find that others join in, and that a 'focus group' will take shape spontaneously. In a humanitarian crisis social dynamics change so look for new opportunities to communicate with different groups.

Tips & Warnings

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IV.2 Formal communication methods

- organised discussions with targeted audiences like women's groups and children

Tips & Warnings

In humanitarian crises, new leaders may emerge. When dealing with formal representatives of a population, try to find out how they gained their position and the basis of their authority. Were they democratically elected or self-selected? Have they discussed the issue at hand with the people they intend to represent?

You can consider using many different types of 'meetings' as part of your participation strategy including focus groups, large assemblies and smaller meetings or interviews. Whether formal or casual, all opportunities to exchange with people should be taken seriously. They are a means of gaining information, developing understanding and building mutual respect and they allow people to both influence you and hold you to account.

Planning meetings with groups

There are already many resources for guidance on facilitating meetings, running focus groups and using techniques such as participatory rural appraisal or participatory

learning in action. The aim of this handbook is not to repeat prior information, but to underline the main elements relevant to participation in humanitarian situations. Additional resources can be found in Part 3.

Although each meeting, interview, or event will differ in terms of objectives and participants, a number of basic principles and general guidelines should be followed:

Deciding on the purpose of the exercise

What do you want to achieve and how will you ensure real mutual communication between you and the people you talk to, rather than just extraction of information? In order to decide how you will communicate with different individuals and groups, it is useful to discuss this in advance with those concerned.

Gathering background information

In order to prepare for a group session you will need to collect some background information about the situation via key informants, observation and informal discussion. It is important to understand the security situation and the

potential risks to your team and the participants, to be aware of local social dynamics to avoid excluding or marginalising individuals or groups of people and to be informed about any political issues that might cast doubt on your independence, neutrality and impartiality. In humanitarian crises the situation can change very quickly - be prepared to update your knowledge on a regular basis.

Planning events with the community

Preparation is important for a group session such as a community assembly. Knowing in advance what methods you are going to use, where the event will take place and who the participants will be will help you to achieve your objectives for the meeting. Preparation can include a preliminary field visit to a possible venue and discussion of the purpose of the exercise, how it will be carried out and who should attend.

Keeping a record

Whatever your purpose or method, you are likely to want to take notes to help you remember what was said and to ensure accuracy later on. It is important to explain why you are doing this. Some people may be suspicious about what later use will be made of the notes, especially if they are concerned about their personal security. Avoid such worries by explaining how the notes will be stored, and how you will ensure confidentiality, for example, by not using real names or other information that might be used to identify individuals.

Their time...

Time is a precious resource, especially when people are struggling to survive. By informing people of what you are doing,

In large, formal group sessions individual participation is determined by power relations within the group. Socially marginalized people such as ethnic minorities, disabled people or women may not feel they can contribute freely. By planning other smaller events or meetings you can provide these groups with an environment where they feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

Tips & Warnings

Ask some of your key contacts for advice on how formal the meeting should be and any other cultural tips. Dress and behave as is necessary to be taken seriously and show respect to the participants.

Tips

and why, they can decide whether meeting with you is a priority. People affected by crises have needs that they hope you may be able to meet, and may be impatient of long drawn out processes for relatively simple and obvious matters.

Consider whether you can carry out joint exercises with other agencies to reduce the time-burden on the population and to make sure that they are not subjected to a stream of meetings and consultations.

Make sure that you don't plan meetings at inappropriate times such as during prayer hours, and think about who might be excluded at different times of the day because of their other obligations.

...and your time

Participatory processes seem time-consuming in the initial stages, when a speedy response to urgent needs is called for. However relationships built at the beginning can make the humanitarian response more effective and accountable. Even

fairly limited involvement of affected people at this stage is useful in building later participatory approaches.

Try to strike a reasonable compromise between your need to respond to the crisis and respect for the participants' rhythm. Without losing sight of the need to achieve results in terms of meeting their needs, try not to pressure them into making decisions.

As humanitarian crises move and change rapidly, you will have to be flexible about your time. Unexpected events often crop up and the people you hope to meet with can suddenly have another, greater priority. Likewise you might find yourself unable to attend a meeting at short notice, in which case try to send a message and apology by whatever means available and make a follow-up visit as soon as possible.

Example

An aid organisation wished to conduct a focus group in a Guinean village, and had agreed on a meeting time with the village elders. When the team arrived, somebody had died in the village, and the funeral was to take place at the same time as the meeting. Elders started dividing the participants who were present between those who would attend the funeral and those who would attend the meeting. But the aid worker proposed to postpone the meeting to enable all the villagers to attend the funeral. Grateful for the team's consideration and respect, the whole village held an assembly to meet with the aid organisation after the funeral.

Group size

The size of a group will determine the dynamics of the discussion. There are advantages and disadvantages to different types of groups (see Table 2) - some people may be more comfortable in a large assembly, while others will prefer smaller gatherings. In larger groups the most vulnerable and socially marginalized may not feel comfortable speaking.

	Large assemblies	Smaller groups
Advantages	Allow all stakeholders to meet each other in one place	Can be very specific and focussed
	Useful to communicate general information about the project and participatory exercises	Allow marginalised groups to speak out more freely
	A good forum for giving feedback to the local community	Give each participant more opportunity to speak
	Create a sense of transparency	Can be used to cross-check information gathered in other circumstances
	Allow debate between different sections of the population	
Constraints	Less chance for each participant to speak	Possibility of someone monopolizing the debate
	Some participants more reticent about expressing themselves in front of a lot of people	May go off at a tangent
	"Voiceless groups" may not be heard	

Table 2
The roles and constraints of different group sizes

When first engaging with a community, it may be useful to organise a large assembly, where all are welcome, in order to present yourself, explain the reasons for your presence and outline how you are going to spend your time with them. You will be able to respond to any questions the population may have.

One seldom has control over the number of people who show up at an open gathering, particularly in the early stages of an emergency, so it is important to be flexible and to adapt to the number of participants present.

In large public events that 'encourage the expression of what is general and normative to the detriment of what is specific and real'⁹, you can expect an emphasis on generalised statements. Make sure that you organise other smaller meetings or events to communicate on more specific issues.

Facilitating meetings

Be aware that your origin, status, gender, age, profession, experience or knowledge of the area all affect how you are perceived, and determine your legitimacy as a facilitator. The success of the discussion is often determined by the quality of the relationship between you and the group. As *de facto* facilitator you have a key role in ensuring the discussions and interactions are fruitful and positive, and enable maximum participation, especially that of socially marginalized people.

Keep the discussion to the point. However, if participants' main concerns lie outside the stated objectives and other important issues arise, do not be

afraid to stray from your planned agenda.

Remember - you do not hold the truth! Acknowledge participants' experiences and their knowledge of their own context and the crisis they have undergone. Show respect for their opinions (even if you do not necessarily share them).

You will almost inevitably find yourself at the centre of the meeting space. As this tends to be the focus of authority, be careful about how you use your status.

Dealing with sensitive issues

In every culture there are issues that are difficult to discuss openly, and this is often exacerbated in times of crisis when situations can be very politically charged. There are some topics that shouldn't even be raised until you have built up a good relationship with a community or population. Some issues will create tensions between different groups or may marginalize some individuals, and in extreme cases can compromise people's physical security. Your key contacts should be able to give guidance on what these sensitive issues are and how and when they can be approached.

Managing group dynamics and conflicts

Social dynamics inevitably change in crisis situations, and often the context becomes very politicised. If certain participants block the discussion or create tension in the group, encourage the group to solve the problem so that you do not get involved personally.

Example

An aid agency carrying out a participatory assessment in a Liberian village had previously announced that a meeting would take place to encourage the villagers to participate. They were so successful in gathering people that they feared the size of the group would be too large to manage and carry out focused discussions. When they suggested that some villagers went home, the villagers insisted that they wanted to participate, arguing that the agency had said they would be able to.

After initial presentations, explanations and discussions, the facilitators managed to split the assembly into smaller groups for focused discussions, and they gathered again afterwards for feedback and conclusions.

⁹ Delville, L. Mathieu, M. and Sellamna, N., "Living up to Ambitions: For a More Rigorous Practice of Participatory Appraisals and Enquiries", *Scientific Directorate working paper no. 28*, (Paris: GRET -Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Techniques-, 2001).

The facilitator for group sessions in Afghanistan was a relatively young expatriate woman, while the group of villagers was mostly composed of Afghan elder men. Despite her experience of the area, her status as a young woman made it difficult to obtain the respect of the elders. She asked a male Afghan colleague to replace her as facilitator, as her position was constraining the interactions and discussions. It was only at a later stage, when mutual trust and respect had been established between the agency staff and the villagers that she was able to engage in discussions with the elders.

Example

In many societies, older women can provide very useful information on issues that younger women cannot speak about, such as feminine hygiene and sanitary needs, or sexual violence. However the power dynamics within families, particularly between mothers and daughters-in-law, may mean that the interests of older and younger women do not always coincide.

Tips & Warnings

Tips & Warnings

Make a point of observing how people interact during the conversation; this can help manage the group dynamics, and could provide interesting information on social relations within the community.

If a meeting has reached stalemate, if there is growing tension, if people are monopolising or sabotaging the discussion or if it simply is not moving forward, try changing the group configuration. Not every meeting will be successful. If nothing works, you can always call for a break and address the problem directly with the people involved.

Do not 'take sides' in a discussion but provide information if needed, and help "unblock" situations. Stay calm, even if you disagree with what certain participants say. If you think people feel threatened by a subject, change it, but

try to learn something from what happens as this may be relevant for your work.

Responsibility and expectations

During group discussions with crisis-affected populations, individual or collective wounds, traumas, and conflicts may re-emerge. Be ready to manage such situations if they arise. If you feel unable to do so, try to avoid sensitive subjects. Remember that, though your stay in a village may be short, it will have lasting effects.

Find out in advance where to refer people for more specialised information or support as you might not be the most qualified person to manage issues that have arisen, or your organisation may not be able to deal with needs or issues that have been brought up during your meeting.

Bringing people together to discuss issues that affect their lives – and especially their practical needs – is likely to raise expectations. Explain clearly what you can and cannot do, particularly with regard to the delivery of aid supplies.

Cross-checking information

The social and political dynamics among participants can sometimes mean that you get conflicting information from different sources. The triangulation of information, whereby you cross-check information collected in different

ways and from different groups of people, is essential. Work out the reason for any differences in your information as this can often give an insight into social dynamics and power relations. In conflict and disaster situations information is often manipulated in order to control, unduly influence or instil fear in people. Take this into account when communicating with people affected by a crisis.

Using technical tools and methods

Be careful not to overwhelm people with sophisticated high-tech equipment, as these devices can create an undesirable distance between participants and yourself. Use what you find on the spot, including sticks, stones, sand and drawings on the ground.

Taking photos during the sessions and showing participants photos of themselves can be a strong motivating factor. However, make sure people feel comfortable with this. Also, be aware that a camera changes the dynamic in a meeting, which may not be helpful. Carrying a camera in conflict situations can also create a security risk for you or the people you meet.

There are many ways of collecting information on a single topic. Be ready to adapt your tools to suit participants. Let individuals express themselves in their own way according to their own practical experience and usual forms of dialogue. Some planning tools and methods may also create a distance – see what tools people already use and are familiar and comfortable with before introducing your own.

Quote

'I have observed you when you use your calendar chart. I don't feel very comfortable with that tool. Please ask me questions directly, and I will explain to you everything that is happening on my farm.'

Guinean farmer.¹⁰

¹⁰ Quoted by Boulier, F., 'La diversité des stratégies paysannes dans la zone de Koba (Guinée)', in Delville, L. et al (eds), *Les Enquêtes Participatives en Débat*, (Paris : Karthala, 2000).

Closing

Before moving on, summarize and clarify what has been said. This can be done by you, a participant, or collectively. Acknowledge the positive contribution of the meeting, interview, or event and let people know how they can continue to participate in the project and what will happen next. Take care to ensure that communication remains a two way process by letting people know how they can contact you in future, or when you will next visit them.

Chapter 4 summary Communication techniques

- 1 Good communication is the basic building-block of participation
- 2 By using both formal methods and taking informal opportunities to communicate with people you will be able to improve your understanding of the situation and build the kind of relationships needed for successful participation.
- 3 Communication is a two-way process and involves listening, learning and adapting on your part.
- 4 Your personal behaviour and attitudes will determine the quality of the communication and your relationship to the people with whom you are communicating
- 5 Why, how, when and with whom you communicate should all be part of a participation strategy