

# Preamble

## I BACKGROUND

Involving affected populations in operations to ensure their survival is one of the most difficult challenges confronting the humanitarian world. Despite the rhetoric, and enshrinement of the notion in the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, the participation of affected populations in humanitarian action remains, for the most part, extremely limited.

Although it is a well-established concept in the development sphere (in practice and in the literature), it has proved far from easy to operationalise in the humanitarian field. In certain circumstances, the simple act of participation can put in jeopardy the lives of affected populations and actors in the field and can compromise humanitarian principles.

There are few recorded examples of affected populations participating in humanitarian action and little guidance material directly related to the humanitarian sector. According to the literature, the risks associated with employing participatory approaches in crisis-affected contexts often overshadow the benefits. Furthermore, vigorous criticism has been levelled at naive approaches to participation.

Yet, evaluations have highlighted many positive outcomes of enhanced participation: from sharper analysis and adapted programming to more effective implementation and increased accountability in project management. The engagement of affected populations in programmes that concern them creates linkages between relief, rehabilitation and development. Most importantly, it demonstrates respect for members of affected populations, as social actors, with insights on their situation, and with competencies, energy and ideas of their own.

It is against this background that the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) in Humanitarian Action commissioned 'The Global Study on Consultation with and Participation by Affected Populations in the Process of Planning, Managing, Monitoring and Evaluating Humanitarian Programmes', which has the following objectives:

- to assess consultation and participation practice in a range of emergency contexts;
- to identify examples of good practice, and gaps or inadequacies in current practice and contributing factors; and
- to improve understanding of consultation and participation.

Five country case studies (Afghanistan, Angola, Colombia, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sri Lanka) were central to achieving these aims. The findings are contained in five separate monographs. The case studies were complemented by extensive analysis of English, French and Spanish literature on participation.

The lessons that they reveal on good practice in regard to participation, as well as potential benefits, constraints and risks, are presented here in the form of a handbook for humanitarian practitioners.

## II OBJECTIVES AND TARGET AUDIENCE

This handbook is designed for **practitioners**; front-line humanitarian field workers are the primary audience. It is they who have direct contact with affected populations, local authorities and, in complex emergencies, parties to the conflict. It is they who make daily judgements and decisions that impact on affected populations. Yet, it is questionable to what degree they do so in a participatory manner.

The practitioner audience includes both expatriate humanitarian personnel, and professionals working in their own country, for either

international or national aid organisations. This handbook, however, is targeted particularly at expatriate staff and international aid organisations, since a commonly observed weakness of humanitarian action is the former's tendency to undervalue and to fail to stress, mobilise and enhance the capacities of national stakeholders. The main goal of the handbook is to assist them in this endeavour, providing guidance on how to adopt participatory approaches and how to avoid associated pitfalls and risks.

The handbook also targets those in positions of influence, who can impose a vision or an expectation in regard to participation. These actors include donors, who play an important role in stimulating, imposing or constraining participatory approaches, colleagues from Head Quarters, Managers of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and staff responsible for daily desk management. The latter influence and guide field workers in relation to participation, often seen as too time and resource consuming or just too 'difficult'.

Numerous handbooks on participation have been written for development practitioners. Consequently, this one does not seek to reproduce the same content, but, rather, to address specifically the issues that fashion, restrict, and support the involvement of affected populations in humanitarian action.

It contains a set of reflections and highlights the entry points and tools that can assist contextual analysis and decision-making, observing when interaction with affected populations should occur and how the process can be improved. It details a range of participatory processes, outlining the advantages and the limitations of each, as revealed by the five country case studies.

This is not a recipe book that promotes tools for social engineering; it is a handbook that is intended to stimulate thinking. It should be seen as a reference work for use on mission.

### III CONTENT AND USE OF THE HANDBOOK

The handbook has been structured to be an accessible, user-friendly 'field tool'. It is organised in four parts.

**The introduction** raises essential questions pertaining to participation of crisis-affected populations in humanitarian action, and **defines** the key terms used throughout the publication: 'participation', 'crisis-affected populations' and 'humanitarian action'.

**Part 1 is essential reading** It lays the foundations for your strategy to involve affected populations in humanitarian action. Chapter 1 offers guidance in designing such a strategy, exploring factors, relating to the context, the affected population and your organisation, that will affect participation. Chapter 2 presents prerequisites for successful participation: communication and transparency. It proposes basic guidelines for formal and informal communication, which are vital for using the participatory tools presented in following chapters.

**Part 2** proposes a series of tools and approaches to help put into practice a participation strategy, relative to the various phases of the project cycle. It offers guidance on the potential risks of participation, and underscores the importance of taking into account at all times the following cross-cutting issues: the security of all of those engaged in the activity, including personnel, partners and members of the affected population; the threat of exclusion and/or stigmatisation of minority groups; and the impartiality and legitimacy of your organisation.

**Part 3** takes a sectoral stance, presenting examples of tools for, and approaches to, participation in various intervention sectors common to humanitarian aid: food security and nutrition; health; shelter; and water and sanitation. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but it illustrates how the general methodology outlined in this handbook can be applied in different domains.

The handbook concludes by supplying guidance on how to **evaluate the participation strategy** that has been put in place.

The handbook is conceived as a modular publication: after completing the introduction and part 1, readers may navigate at will, according to their particular areas of interest, referring backwards or forwards between the project-cycle stages and sector-specific chapters.

## IV FINAL TIPS

Involving affected populations in humanitarian action in a crisis context is a challenging undertaking, which can seem dangerous and complex, or even impossible due to evident constraints. If handled with care and skill, though, it is more than likely to be a richly rewarding experience for both you and the people you are looking to assist.

Beyond the tools presented in this handbook, successful participation relies first and foremost on the attitude of those engaged in humanitarian action. The core messages in this handbook can be summarised as follows:

- **BE AWARE** ... of the local context and its social and cultural dynamics, of political divisions and lines of power, and of the stakes and potential pitfalls. Being conscious of this enables one to be cautious without being suspicious, to tailor one's expectations to current realities and to avoid undue disappointments. It is central to gaining the respect of those whom you seek to engage.
- **LISTEN, OBSERVE** ... with your eyes and with your ears, but, also, with the eyes and the ears of those who you are trying to understand, and assist or protect. Bear in mind that affected populations have a holistic and integrated view of their own needs and strategies, and that the earlier you involve them, the greater their motivation to engage in a joint venture. Empathy

and reflected understanding can go a long way to making a complex process manageable.

- **PAY ATTENTION TO THE HUMAN FACTOR** Despite all efforts to develop and apply methods to improve the process of participation, successes and failures can often be attributed to the presence of the right person with the right attitude, understanding and skills, being in the right place at the right time. Pay utmost attention to the composition of your team, and allow time to breathe and to deliberate.
- **ENJOY!** At the heart of participation is a meeting of different individuals, cultures, skills, beliefs and values. This is an opportunity to learn and to share experiences; humanitarian aid workers can benefit as much as affected populations. Only an enthusiastic team can stimulate successful participation.