

Communication with communities: importance of listening and talking to people affected by disaster

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Under a systematic desk study, the paper reviews how community engagement has developed during the recent past and identifies reasons for which communication with communities has become indispensable in humanitarian action. Beyond the conceptual problem that NGOs hold almost all the power, major practical obstacles have been identified during the desk study. These obstacles can be summed up: too often, international humanitarian agencies act independently, with a focus on supplying a limited range of goods and services that they have already prepared; On the ground, operating practices are dominated by a ‘contract culture’ of winning and delivering grants. This limits the voice of affected people in decision-making. Statistics on community consultations for the World Humanitarian Summit states that 3/4 Syrians in Jordan report never being asked whether they have received the help which they needed. 1/2 conflict-affected Ukrainians have not received the assistance they needed because they were not aware of its availability. 9/10 of Syrians in Jordan have received assistance, but only 3/10 have found that assistance was helpful. Engaging with and being accountable to people affected by disaster and crisis is not a new proposition. According to the findings, it is rather stemmed in the participatory methods that emerged in the 1980s, and that were formalized as engagement and participation through system-wide initiatives such as Sphere, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People in Aid, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and, most recently, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability. The main finding of this ongoing desk study is that beyond one-way information provision and consultation, meaningful engagement is achieved when humanitarians ensure that public concerns are consistently understood, considered and addressed through ongoing dialogue or two-way communication

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