



chapter 3

#3

Building mutual respect

#3
Mutual respect

Before you can build relationships based on mutual trust, you need to take an honest look at your motivations for adopting a participatory approach. The following questions should be discussed with colleagues and management.

Why am I adopting a participatory approach?

Is it to make my work easier? To facilitate needs assessment and targeting? To reduce project costs by introducing a cost-sharing mechanism (with beneficiaries), or by using cheap local implementing partners?

Is it to reduce the level of insecurity humanitarian personnel are exposed to by using local implementing partners?

Is it because the donor asked for a paragraph on participation in the project proposal?

Is it because your organisation believes that participation can considerably improve the short and longer-term impact of humanitarian action?

Is it because your organisation recognises that people from affected communities are not passive recipients of aid, but actors responsible for their own survival and future who have skills and aspirations?

Who will participate?

Who should my organisation work with? Individual members of the affected population? Local political structures? Grassroots/community-based organisations (CBOs)?

Should my organisation form a partnership with other organisations?

What are the risks of becoming embroiled in local power struggles?

What risk is there that those we are trying to assist suffer human rights violations or stigmatisation as a result of their participation?

How will I 'do' participation?

How do I reconcile the need to respect humanitarian principles with a participatory approach?

What can be done to make sure that those who participate are not subsequently discriminated against?

How should participatory activities be implemented so that they ensure, or even enhance, the safety of aid actors and members of the affected population?

In humanitarian responses, there is often an imbalance of power between the humanitarian organisation (as an aid provider that holds access to key resources) and the affected population (as potential aid recipients). Terminology such as 'beneficiaries', 'the locals' and 'downward accountability', imply a certain degree of condescension, or hierarchy. Furthermore, the situations in which aid organisations work and their ways of working often create distance with the affected population which does not help to build relationships which are based on mutual respect.

'Proximity: cornerstone of the humanitarian action of the future'⁶

Some aid workers are concerned that the attachment of emergency NGOs' to the humanitarian principles of impartiality and independence, the growing size of projects, political and security issues, and greater focus on 'technical' aspects to the detriment of 'the human dimension', has created a certain distance between humanitarian aid workers and affected populations. White 4-wheel drive vehicles, radios, guards, aid workers on short-term contracts moving from one crisis to the next, all form a barrier between providers and receivers of assistance.

Some aid workers have called for greater "proximity" to affected populations, which is one of the cornerstones of Médecins Sans Frontières' approach. Whether one uses this term or not, this means developing a relationship with the community even if this involves certain risks. This approach may mean abandoning the "protective rituals" which keep the local community at a distance. It also means refusing to act as a substitute for local initiatives, respecting the ability of the affected population to determine their own fate, taking care not to make moral judgements and being available and willing to listen.

⁶ Chevalier, E., «Le travail de proximité comme point d'ancrage du travail humanitaire de demain», Cuadernos para el Debate no. 5, (Barcelona: Medicos Sin Fronteras, 2001).

Participation in the provision of aid can often create a certain bitterness and mistrust both among aid workers and members of the affected population. Some of the arguments put forward for 'non-participation' tend to reveal a wariness between humanitarian actors and the affected populations, which limits the exchange of information.

Communication is one of the keys to building bridges between affected populations and aid organisations. It

Examples

"They only become involved if there is a financial incentive and will not hesitate to turn down an offer if they discover a higher bidder."

Aid worker in refugee camp, Guinée Forestière.

*"They tell us that repatriation is voluntary but they also inform us from a certain date that there will be no more help for us here. We don't really have a choice." (...)
"Here, all the decisions are made for us." »*

Refugees in Guinée Forestière.

is a two-way process which involves both giving and receiving information.

Chapter 4 looks specifically at communication techniques and how they can be used to support participation. Before using these techniques it is useful to reflect on two key elements of good communication:

- attitude and behaviour
- transparency and information-sharing

position vis-à-vis the population, how you may be perceived, and how you (with your appearance, origin, status, experience, personality, etc.) affect the process.

III.1.1 Outsider or insider?

Whether one is from the affected population or foreign to it will affect the relationship. Several characteristics can be associated with the status of 'outsider' and 'insider' that will influence a participatory process.

Insider: being very close to a community, or being from a community means having detailed knowledge and experience of how a community works and what it has been through. An 'insider' can see many things that are invisible to foreign eyes.

Furthermore, an 'insider' can be integrated in local networks, and already have established relationships of trust or distrust with community members.

Outsider: a newcomer in a community can bring a different perspective and ensure a greater degree of objectivity. An 'outsider' can help address problems without being influenced by local interests, or becoming emotionally involved in a way that may destabilise the project. An 'outsider' can mediate impartially when negotiations are held between different groups of the population. A newcomer can establish relationships without preconceived notions, thus avoiding conflicts and tensions that may be inherited from the past

However, the distinction between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' is delicate and many-sided. No one remains on the outside for long. Having arrived in a community, an "outsider" begins to have a role and to affect local social dynamics. The opposite can also be true. An 'insider' can sometimes be perceived as an 'outsider'.

The UNHCR in Guinée Forestière had recruited refugees living in camps as 'focal points'. Even though these individuals were locals and lived among their relatives they were perceived as 'outsiders', and participants were reluctant to speak openly about their needs and concerns when the 'UNHCR staff' were present.

Example

III.1 The importance of attitude and behaviour

Participation is an encounter between individuals, cultures, values, beliefs and skills. Its success depends on the ability of those involved to understand and respect one another.

This means questioning one's own behaviour and, more profoundly, one's attitudes and mindset. Am I really ready to listen to what people have to say? Am I ready to review and possibly change our priorities? Am I paying sufficient attention to the projects, ideas and concerns of the affected population?

But also: Do people know me? Do they understand why I am here and what I am doing? How am I going to deal with the inevitable inequalities between myself and the affected population?

For all the importance of mandates, organisational strategies etc, individuals are at the heart of a participatory process. The personality, background, experience, and behaviour of those involved, and the way they interact is bound to shape the process. It is therefore important to be aware of your

Example

In a training workshop on participatory methods organised in Liberia, many local participants happened to be former teachers, and were known as such by the population. This affected the behaviour of the participants in that a hierarchical teacher-student relationship tended to be reproduced, the teachers being considered as a form of intellectual elite.

III.1.2 ⊕ How does my status, experience and expertise affect my relationship with the population?

Regardless of whether we are considered 'outsiders' or 'insiders', our relationship with the population will be affected by issues of status, gender, age, past experience and expertise as well as the roles and responsibilities

that we have had. Being aware of how our own position and status affect the participatory process makes it easier to identify potential bias and pressure which may reduce the possibility of establishing open dialogue and trust.

III.1.3 ⊕ How do other people see me?

While not necessarily being aware of it, humanitarian aid workers send out many signals, both verbal and non-verbal, which can create a distance between themselves and the affected population, and which can undermine mutual respect and trust.

Particular signals are sent out by behaviour such as driving fast in 4-wheel drive vehicles, using expensive technology ostentatiously (HF/VHF radios, mobile phones, laptop computers etc.), wearing certain types of clothing and using technical jargon and acronyms. The population may also have some pre-conceived ideas or prejudices about people from your country or place of origin, or based on your accent or physical appearance.

Example

In Guinée Forestière, attempts to involve Refugee Committees in planning activities ran up against their lack of familiarity with the terms and tools frequently used by humanitarian actors (e.g. Logical Framework). Furthermore, while aid organisations worked mainly in French – the official language in Guinée Forestière – Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees spoke mainly English.

The first step is to be aware of the kind of behaviour that creates distance and the kind that builds bridges and strengthens relationships.

As well as enabling communication, language can also create barriers if jargon and technical terms are used. These barriers should be overcome by adapting one's vocabulary, by working with translators, or even by providing some basic training on the terms commonly used in the humanitarian sector.

Even using tools intended to encourage or facilitate participation can result in members of the affected population feeling ill at ease. People are easily dazzled by high-tech procedures. Participants in workshops and focus groups may be embarrassed to speak or afraid of appearing ignorant or less 'knowledgeable' than aid workers, or they may simply not dare to contradict them out of respect.

Simplicity and respect are essential to creating space for communication and participation. You will often be asking people about many aspects of their lives, families and communities in the course of your work. Make sure that you also tell people something about yourself. People relate more easily to individuals they can identify with, and asking after each other's family members is a common part of greeting friends and acquaintances in many cultures – it is difficult to do this if you don't tell people about yourself.

Breaking down barriers involves adapting one's behaviour and dress to the local context and customs. This is a visible demonstration of respect. Try adopting traditional forms of dialogue and social interaction, and telling (culturally appropriate) jokes and anecdotes as a way to build relationships.

Do not be afraid to recognise your mistakes, or *faux pas*. They can offer an opportunity to enter into dialogue and to assess how errors are made and how they can be avoided in future. A community that gets to know you better as a person, rather than just as an aid official, will be more willing to forgive errors and mistakes, and in turn may feel more able to admit to errors on their own part.

KEY
QUESTIONS
16: The
importance of
attitude and
behaviour

- 1 How does my position or status affect my relationship with the population?
- 2 Does the population have preconceived ideas about people from my country or culture? How can I work to overcome negative stereotyping?
- 3 Is my behaviour creating distance or improving the relationship? What do I need to change?
- 4 What should I be doing to make people feel comfortable and respected?

III.2 Working with a translator or an interpreter

The terms 'translator' and 'interpreter' are often used interchangeably. In general a translator will work with written texts and provide an accurate, if not *verbatim*, rendering of written text from one language

to another. An interpreter provides an oral translation usually in real-time and therefore there is an element of interpretation of what exactly each party means. It is the interpreter's responsibility to translate the particular nuances of each language to the other party.

Professional interpreters are aware of potential difficulties and are trained to deal with them, but it is unlikely that you will be able to find one in an emergency situation. In the field, the person who is translating for you may need some help and advice to do their job well and you may need to adapt your behaviour and way of working to the interpretation facilities that are available. The guidance in this section refers primarily to oral translation and interpretation.

Choosing an interpreter or translator is a difficult task. In an ideal situation, the qualities of a good interpreter include:

- A sophisticated understanding of both languages
- An understanding of the subject of the discussion
- An ability to transfer ideas expressed in one language into an equally meaningful form in the other language
- An understanding of the cultures
- Sensitivity and attention to detail
- An understanding of specialised or technical terminology
- An ability to work impartially, without introducing any personal bias into the interpretation

You may need to ask a driver or a local schoolteacher to perform this function for you. In this case, it is your job to help them develop interpreting skills. It is important to take time to do this and to explain the issues involved. This will allow them to get used to the way you think and speak and is an opportunity to establish a way of working and ground rules.

Once you have found a suitable interpreter, it is important to build up a good working relationship with them. Give them as much information as you can before any activity. Unless and until you are sure about them in all respects, you must try to stay in control, and not let them have long exchanges which you are unable to follow. However, if this does happen, be sure to watch what is going on as you may learn a lot anyway.

The interpreter's gender and social status may determine how people express and present themselves to you. Women may feel uncomfortable and inhibited if they have to speak through a male interpreter, particularly in circumstances where they are not normally 'allowed' to speak out in front of men. Likewise, men may feel that certain topics are 'inappropriate' to discuss through a female interpreter.

Your relationship with the individuals and groups that you are talking with is largely dependent on your interpreter providing an accurate representation of what is said. Within the limits of maintaining a good working relationship with any long- or short-term interpreter, don't be afraid to stop them and get them to tell you what is going on and what is being said.

Tips

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Guidelines for working with an interpreter⁷:

- Regular communication with the interpreter is necessary to make sure the goals and purpose of the interview or meeting are clear. Confer with the interpreter before the meeting whenever possible.
- Describe the respective roles of the people involved, including yourself, and any relevant background information, such as foreseeable problems or conflicts and details of any confidentiality issues.
- Explain what information you are seeking and what you want to convey to people. Include details of any technical terms or specialist vocabulary that may be used.
- Speak concisely and do not use long, complicated sentences. Avoid complex discussion of several topics in a single spoken paragraph.
- Avoid technical terminology, abbreviations and professional jargon, and if you do use it be consistent. Make sure that your interpreter knows what the terms mean ahead of time and agree in advance on how they should be translated in order to reflect their meaning accurately and meaningfully.
- Avoid idiomatic expressions, slang and metaphors. Use comparisons and similes only when necessary to clarify a point and choose them with care.
- Encourage the interpreter to translate people's actual words as much as possible rather than summarising, paraphrasing or 'polishing' it into professional jargon, so that you have the clearest picture of what is going on, the emotional state of the person speaking and any other important information.
- Make sure the interpreter does not insert his or her own ideas or interpretations or omit information.

⁷ Adapted from:

Randal-David, E (1989) *Strategies for Working with Culturally Diverse Communities and Clients*. Washington D.C.: Association for the Care of Children's Health.

Lynch, E (1992) "From culture shock to cultural learning" in EW Lynch and MJ Hanson (eds) *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working with Young Children and Their Families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., pp 35–62.

- During the conversation, look at and speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- Listen to the person speaking and watch their non-verbal communication – facial expressions, voice intonations and body movements.
- Be patient and allow for plenty of time. An interpreted conversation takes longer. Careful interpretation often requires the interpreter to use long explanatory phrases. Question the interpreter if given a very short translation of a much longer dialogue.
- Learn basic words and sentences of the language. Become familiar with special terminology used by people. Even though you can't speak well enough to communicate directly, the more you understand, the greater the chance you will pick up on misunderstandings or misinterpretation (accidental or deliberate).
- Debrief after each session so that any confusion or gaps can be cleared up while the conversation is still fresh in your memory.

Interpretation is extremely tiring. However well one or both languages is spoken, you will need to make sure the interpreter has more rest periods than you normally need, has had enough to eat and feels able to say when they are tired.

Listening and taking into account what is said

Listening skills are essential to meaningful participation. Many 'participatory techniques' can become information extraction exercises, where field workers, preoccupied with their own intentions, unconsciously select or interpret information according to their own interests and level of awareness.

Ask yourself:

- Am I really listening to the other person's concerns and ideas, or am I using participatory techniques to advance my own agenda or to validate decisions that I have already made?
- Am I ready and able to hear different points of view, and am I granting the other parties enough space to express themselves?

- Am I being approachable enough so that people feel free to speak openly and frankly to me?

Don't be afraid to remain silent and just watch what is happening. Looking at people as they speak enhances their confidence and helps you to listen. In group discussions pay attention to those who remain silent, try to include them by using your eyes and body language to encourage them to speak, or ask them questions directly when appropriate. Feel free to rephrase what has been said in order to check that you have understood correctly.

The next chapter looks at communication techniques. Mutual respect is fundamental to good communication. Communication is more than simply understanding what people say to each other, it is the exchange of ideas and negotiation in decision-making. To listen and to understand each other, with mutual respect, requires flexibility and adaptability.

Quote

'Solutions to problems are not the product of a consensus, but of a negotiation between the various groups... The wealth of solutions is found in their diversity rather than in their uniformity.'

Bara Guèye⁹

Ask yourself:

- Am I able to review my priorities and objectives according to what members of the affected population say and propose?
- Am I able to explain my position in a way that is understandable to them and does not hinder dialogue?
- Does the participatory process genuinely leave space for people to engage on their own terms, or is it tailored to suit my interests?

⁹ in «La Methode active de recherche et de planification participative (MARF): acquis, limites et défis actuels», in Delville, L. et al (eds), *Les Enquêtes Participatives en Débat*, Paris: Karthala, 2000.

The use of participatory approaches, in line with UNHCR principles and modes of operation, is an important element in the running of refugee camps. However, in camps in Guinée Forestière there is concern that the forms of organisation initiated by the UNHCR –Refugee Committees and tent/zone leaders – were largely prescriptive and did not take into consideration ethnic and cultural subtleties.

Example

Although necessary in ensuring effective monitoring and co-ordination of activities, prescriptive forms of organisation may not allow the refugees' own capacities to be recognised or provide a means of useful dialogue with them.

In addition, though there is communication between UNHCR, BCR (Bureau de Coordination des Réfugiés, representing the Guinean authorities) and Refugee Committees, there is concern that the opinions of the different parties are not given equal consideration. According to the refugees, the UNHCR and its implementing partners have the ultimate say in how operations are run in the refugee camps.

III.3 Transparency and information-sharing

In many instances, aid actors do not realise how frustrating their actions can be for members of the affected population. Large white cars come and go, notes are taken, questionnaires filled in, lists drawn up, and triangulation exercises carried out, while the people affected by the disaster or crisis wonder why, and to what benefit.

It is important to explain to the population why you are there, who you work for, what the organisation does, how it works, and what constraints it faces. This can go a long way towards establishing a climate of trust, and generating the will to work together. Failure to clarify these factors can create a sense of suspicion, anxiety and frustration especially amongst people who have been through difficult or traumatic events.

Transparency does not mean one has to communicate everything to everybody. In some circumstances, it is important to respect confidentiality or withhold information

that is not confirmed or is subject to change, for reasons of security and protection, or simply to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

Quote

'We can't tell the refugees that we haven't yet received their food supplies (...) just as we can't talk about the possibility of transferring a population to another location in their presence (...) There are certain subjects that are extremely sensitive and need to be discussed internally before conveying the information to the refugee population (...) for their own security'.

Aid worker, Guinée Forestière.

However, these concerns should not prevent aid organisations from aspiring to greater transparency in their decision-making and operational choices.

Presenting yourself properly to the population with whom you wish to work is the first step to developing a relationship based on mutual respect and transparency. Explain the history, mandate and work of your organisation. Be precise in presenting your guiding principles. Tell people about yourself too, not just about your work role, but where you come from and about your family and country. Explain why you are visiting the community, but be careful not to create false expectations.

When engaging with a community, it is very important to clarify from the outset how you and your organisation function, the constraints under which you have to operate, and what you can and cannot do. This is equally

Example

The Guinean Red Cross purchased food supplies locally and therefore was able to adapt the food rations provided to refugees based on their traditional culinary habits and preferences. The World Food Programme – which runs operations on a much larger scale – is reluctant to consult refugees on the composition of the food rations they receive, because this is largely determined by what is available on the international market and what can be transported to the area of operations. These constraints can be clearly explained to refugees.

important with the administrative and government officials who have local responsibilities for the people too.

Certain project procedures, such as provision of supplies, are long drawn out affairs. The population might not understand why so much precious time is lost. It is important to explain these processes before people start to think that you are trying to make money out of their suffering. Involving a community representative in the development of a tender and the responses to it can be a good way of avoiding misunderstanding.

When using particular techniques (like mapping, triangulation exercises, and focus groups) be sure to give reasons for them. For instance, how the information collected will be managed; how it will be used, where it will be kept, who will have access to it, and so on.

Explaining the various stages involved in the provision of aid, from the donor to the NGO, can help to prevent misunderstanding.

Explain yourself using vocabulary and expressions that are accessible to your audience. Be open to questions, check that you have been understood, and do not hesitate to clarify the situation again and again.

Participation usually requires that the parties involved in a project provide resources such as time, labour, material input and so

Example

In one part of Afghanistan, an organisation was so sure that it would get funds for a project that the team in the field informed the local population of it without first explaining that it was only in the assessment stage. The population in the affected area thought that the organisation had the means to implement the project and started to mobilise its own contribution in order to participate in it. However, in the end, the funding was not granted, creating significant tension.

Example

Without prior discussion, an aid agency determined the type and the level of assistance that it would provide for a shelter construction programme, as well as the contributions to be made by beneficiaries. Suddenly, the organisation had to reduce its level of assistance. Instead of negotiating a way out of the problem, it stubbornly maintained that 'nothing had been formally promised'. Members of the affected population, having provided sand and gravel, and therefore having kept their side of the bargain, believed that the organisation was trying to cheat them. The incident almost resulted in a violent confrontation and the organisation's personnel were expelled from the area.

on. The nature and the amount of each party's contribution should be clearly stated and respected throughout the process. Commitments can be formalised through a contractual arrangement and should be realistic, creating an incentive for participation.

Chapter 5 looks at how to establish partnership agreements and how to work with partners.

Example

During the preparation stage of a food distribution project in northern Afghanistan, the ICRC discussed the beneficiary selection criteria with village representatives. Once they were approved, it was announced widely in village assemblies that, if anyone were found to be cheating in regard to distribution, the entire village would be sanctioned. Village representatives found this to be a fair process. Social pressure within villages was enough to prevent abuse.

Example

Following large-scale floods in south-east Asia, an organisation tried to set up a programme to rehabilitate flood-control dykes and the irrigation infrastructure. Conflict between the local governor and the central ministry for irrigation, resulted in a stalemate that prevented the organisation from getting clearance to import some equipment. A meeting was held to explain the problem to the community. The level of trust that had been established with the villagers and their commitment to the project were so great that they decided to send a delegation to the capital and the matter was rapidly resolved.

Of course, things do not always go according to plan, but as most societies have their own problem-solving mechanisms, it makes sense to use these as part of your programme.

For instance, public announcements at general meetings or on local radio, notice boards and leaflets are essential. They ensure that problem-solving mechanisms are transparent and give individuals the opportunity to complain or appeal. It is important to choose a media that is accessible to all in order to avoid discrimination. For example, all local languages should be used, messages should not only be communicated via written media if there are a lot of illiterate people and places should be chosen to which women as well as men have access, etc.

Such communication is central to social rapport, encouraging members of the population themselves to ensure that programme modalities are respected. This is an effective way of avoiding manipulation or diversion of aid, and discrimination.

Unforeseen difficulties due, for instance, to delays in acquiring funding, hold-ups in relation to shipments, the supply of insufficient, incorrect or spoiled goods, and problems due to the climate and insecurity are frequent. Members of the affected population and the structures with which you work will most likely be understanding if the risks and complications have been fully explained to them. What is totally unacceptable is not keeping them informed, as this is essential to establishing a relationship of trust. As in any relationship, failure to be consistent, to be true to your commitments or to hold others accountable for theirs will undermine the relationship and any trust you have built up between you.

- 1 Have I explained clearly why I am here, what my organisation does, how we work, and the constraints on our work?
- 2 Have I identified appropriate information-sharing channels and processes to ensure that all people are reached?
- 3 Am I being consistent in what I say and do?

KEY
QUESTIONS
17:
*Transparency
and
information-
sharing*

Chapter 3 summary

Building mutual respect

1 If you decide to adopt participatory approaches despite the fact that your organisation does not routinely use them, assess your motives and goals regularly to ensure that you are not simply using them as a way of reaching your own pre-set objectives.

2 It is important to be aware of your attitudes, behaviour and how other people's perceptions of you can either create barriers or build bridges.

3 Adopting culturally appropriate behaviour and dress demonstrates respect for the people you are working with.

4 Interpreters do more than translate words. To a large extent they 'translate' you to the other party. Time spent building understanding and developing ways of working with an interpreter is time well spent.

5 Sharing information and being transparent about your aims, constraints and influences is a necessary part of a trusting, respectful relationship.