



Peer Review on Participation: report of findings

Background document for Conference: Participation is Power: Keep it, Share it or Give it away?

December 2017

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the peer review of participation practices undertaken by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response's (SCHR)¹ as the first step toward meeting the goal it set itself in May 2016:

In 5 years-time, participation of people affected by crisis in humanitarian response decisions that concern them has become a concrete reality. SCHR will make this happen by demonstrating and communicating best practice, strategies and approaches.

The peer review is comprised of a desk overview of relevant reports and evaluations produced by SCHR organisations and of an actual peer review of practices carried out in two contexts², northern Uganda and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The review was carried out to reach an understanding of SCHR organisations' current approaches and of actual enablers and disablers of effective participation; in line with SCHR organisations' commitments under the Grand Bargain³.

These findings are proposed ahead of SCHR's Conference *Participation is Power: Keep it, Share it or Give it away?* They represent SCHR members' collective contribution, as they seek to learn from and influence others' work, on the issue of "participation". Together, they aim at shaping an agenda to make their commitment to greater participation and local ownership a reality.

¹ Founded in 1972, SCHR brings together nine of the world's leading humanitarian organisations to share analysis and learning, and promote greater accountability and impact of humanitarian actions. SCHR currently brings together the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement represented by ICRC and IFRC and seven NGO networks: Act Alliance, CARITAS, CARE, Lutheran World Federation, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision. SCHR has a standing invitee seat at the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#); it is the co-convenor of the [Grand Bargain participation workstream](#) and is a founding member and a Director of the [Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative](#).

² The contexts were chosen because they are conflict contexts, as SCHR's July's overview of participation practices identified these as presenting more challenges to participation than natural hazard induced disaster contexts. They were also chosen because of the concentration of SCHR organisations programmes (a requirement considering the peer review's short time frame).

³ For more information on the Grand Bargain: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc>

2. DEFINITION AND SCOPE

Definition

The definition of participation used as basis for this review is the one which has been agreed upon by the Grand Bargain “Participation Revolution” work stream, namely:

Effective “participation” of people affected by humanitarian crises puts the needs and interests of those people at the core of humanitarian decision making, by actively engaging them throughout decision-making processes.⁴

Framework

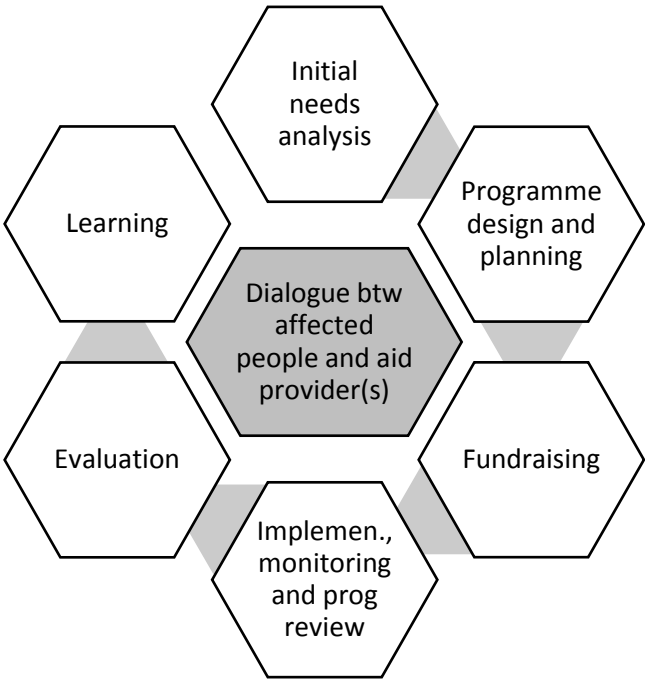
While recognising that effective participation looks very different from one humanitarian context to another, SCHR organisations agree on **the following parameters** for an overarching framework for participation of affected people in humanitarian response decisions:

▪ **The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)**

The CHS describes the essential elements of principled, accountable and high-quality humanitarian action that puts affected people at its centre. It is an essential element of effective participation.

▪ **The Programme Cycle**

Participation should take place throughout the programme cycle, grounded in on-going dialogue between people affected by crisis and humanitarian aid providers at all stages of the cycle. This can be illustrated as follows:



When participation is limited at the onset of the programme cycle, because of pressure for rapid action or access and proximity challenges or a focus on fundraising, it is still possible to engage in two-way dialogue with affected people at the next stages of the cycle. **Lack of initial investment in participation cannot be a reason for not engaging in dialogue with affected people as the programme develops.**

⁴ The full definition can be found at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc/documents/final-participation-revolution-work-stream-recommendations>

- **A common aspiration for what effective participation is meant to achieve.**

If we imagine a “Participation continuum”, which starts with information sharing and progresses towards shared control and decision – making, as follows:

Information sharing ► Consultation ► Collaboration ► Shared control and decision – making ►

SCHR organisations come together around a common aspiration for collaboration at the very least, and shared control and decision-making between humanitarian organisations and people affected by crisis when the humanitarian response context permits.

3. METHODOLOGY

The desk overview focussed on identifying common issues of relevance to SCHR organisations in terms of their participation practices and, from these, propose specific enablers / disenablers of effective participation.

The peer review came in complement to the desk overview to determine enablers and disenablers of effective participation and achieve an understanding of SCHR organisations’ current approaches. It further specifically considered how effective participation can be reinforced both by an organisation’s approach to needs assessments and analysis and by cash-based programming, generally considered as a potential “game changer” in terms of participation.

The peer review was carried out in two contexts⁵, northern Uganda and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, to enable some degree of comparative analysis. Nevertheless, the fact that each is characterised by camp-like settlements hosting either refugees (northern Uganda) or refugees and IDPs (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) means that its findings should not be necessarily extrapolated to all contexts.

The peer review methodology was grounded in a guided dialogue with staff and / or partners of organisations being reviewed⁶ on key components of “participation” throughout the project cycle. In addition, it included, where possible, focus group discussions with staff across-organisations on issues related to cash programming and to protection. A few focus group discussions were also held with some of the people being targeted for humanitarian assistance by one or several of the organisations reviewed, to get their perspective on their participation in decision – making on humanitarian programming.

4. FINDINGS

The main enablers and disenablers of effective participation identified by this review are listed here under, followed by a more detailed listing, broken down into three categories:

⁵ The contexts were chosen because they are conflict contexts, as SCHR’s July’s overview of participation practices identified these as presenting more challenges to participation than natural hazard induced disaster contexts. They were also chosen because of the concentration of SCHR organisations programmes (a requirement considering the peer review’s short time frame).

⁶ Organisations reviewed in northern Uganda included LWF, Oxfam, Save the Children and the Ugandan Red Cross, in relation to their work with South Sudanese refugee populations. Organisations reviewed in the KRI included CARE, CRS and WV in relation to their work with Internally Displaced People and Syrian refugee populations.

- Contextual enablers / disenablers: the degree to which these apply or not may vary considerably from one context to another
- Systemic enablers / disenablers relate to how international humanitarian assistance is structured in terms of decision-making power, coordination structures and resourcing.
- Organisational enablers / disenablers are related to how the organisation makes decisions, operates throughout the Humanitarian Programme Cycle, resources its action, partners with others.

The peer review found that most of the systemic enablers / disenablers are reflected in organisational approaches and systems, and that these in turn reinforce the systemic nature of these enablers and disenablers.

Main enablers of effective participation:

Commitment and capacities

The organisations reviewed demonstrated significant commitment and investments at the programme level in participation.

For programmes which have seen the roll out of the Core Humanitarian Standard, training and support from headquarters have been consistent and significant, resulting in a programme-wide common understanding of quality and accountability priorities and objectives.

Participation in the context of localisation

All interviewees concurred on the importance of national staff and partners who have knowledge and access to affected people, including to different groups within the affected community, to achieve effective participation. The ability to have direct communication with affected people in their local language and based on in-depth understanding of their cultural and social norms is essential.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq review indicated that national / local organisations do not necessarily value and invest in participation as a matter of course. It appears that grassroots organisation may not all value participation as such, believing that they already know what affected people need and want, as they come from the community that they serve. National organisations which have more experience of working with international partners, appear to be more geared to participation, but may see it as a requirement imposed by their international partners and their donors. They often also struggle with the multiple overlapping participation related requirements passed on to them by their different INGO partners.

In situations of partnership between international, national and local organisations, a strategic partnership is central to effective participation, as all parties negotiate and agree together on participation outcomes, approaches and follow up, and own the result jointly. In the case of transactional relationships, international organisations pass on participation requirements to their national or local partners, who are then more likely to approach these as a tick box exercise.

Needs analysis instead of needs assessments

The dominant siloed approach to programming is reflected throughout the programme cycle, including in how organisations carry out needs assessments. These are sectoral and often use different methodologies, which make it a challenge to compare and analyse data consistently.

The review teams questioned whether the focus at the onset of the response on assessments (sectoral) rather than on analysis (situational and contextual, including issues, such as protection,

inclusion / exclusion, gender, etc.) is one of the main challenges in progressing from a project-by-project sectoral approach to participation to a people-centred one.

Cash transfer programming (CTP)

There seems to be a consensus among those interviewed that cash transfer programming, when it is appropriate in terms of proximity to functioning markets, and provided it is based on a proper analysis of vulnerabilities, capacities and threats, can enable participation, as affected people are able to choose what assistance to access. Nevertheless, CTP responses considered as part of this review were voucher-based rather than cash-based, and very little thought seemed to have gone into opportunities and challenges of moving towards unconditional cash transfers. Part of the reason for this, at least in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, has been that unconditional cash has not been supported by government policies; other reasons include the challenge that such an approach poses to existing humanitarian approaches and coordination structures and the outstanding questions around how to measure its impact and outcomes.

It may be helpful to consider whether such discussions at country level, initiated from a participation perspective, could contribute new perspectives and ideas.

Enablers broken down into contextual / systemic / organisational

Context Specific	Systemic	Organisational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active and outspoken people affected by crisis: affected people, including children, actively engage in participation mechanisms and are outspoken about their concerns and issues. • Affected people have a sense of community and accessible representation structures • Authorities engaged in leadership and coordination of the response and committed to giving affected people a voice in decisions which affect them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible donors: donors which allow organisations to adapt their interventions according to affected people’s expressed needs, feedback and complaints. • Providers of assistance with capacity to respond to input from affected people • Providers of assistance which can invest in participation across sectors • Cash programming (as a means of giving more choice/options to affected people) • Good coordination / cross agency collaboration and inclusive leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive organisational culture and commitment to participation, in terms of leadership, mechanisms, investments and tools (ex. In the CHS, In training of staff, in allocation of resources to participation) • National staff and partners with local knowledge and access to affected people, including to different groups within the affected community. • Strategic partnerships with national and local organisations (in opposition to transactional partnerships). • Protection integrated as a cross-cutting community-based approach to identify and meet the needs of affected people. • Decision – making related to grant management and allocation of resources is close to project management

Main disenablers of effective participation:

Lack of a common understanding of participation and its purpose within and across stakeholders

When SCHR organisations report on participation, they tend to focus on the feedback and complaints mechanisms that they have put in place. They do not report on what they've heard from affected people and how this has impacted on their understanding of needs and capacities and on their decision-making and programming.

There is no shared vision of what participation is supposed to achieve within and among all the stakeholders (authorities, donors, UN agencies, NGOs ...) intervening in the same context. The fundamental questions of what participation can aim to achieve in that context, from "information sharing" all the way to "joint decision - making", or of how success is going to be measured, are neither systematically discussed within organisations, nor across organisations' in-country leadership, nor in coordination mechanisms, nor with people affected by crisis themselves.

Effectively each organisation decides on what participation is going to entail within the framework of its own activities, which often translates into a project-by-project approach.

Reports of affected people's views come from within the implementing organisation

The views of affected people and communities are collected and transmitted by organisations' own staff, without recognition of the biases involved. Apart from third-party Core Humanitarian Standard verification audits for the organisations which have chosen to undergo third party verification or certification against the CHS, there is no report of attempts at complementing and verifying an organisation 's understanding of affected people's views and perspectives by collecting these independently.

Siloed approach to participation: sectoral and project-based resources and practices

Participation is broken down by sectors of activity and by project. This reflects the way that funding is channelled through the international aid system from the donor all the way to the implementer, as well as global coordination structures and mechanisms. Each project has its own participation resources, in support of specific project objectives. The only examples of participation cutting across sectors and specific projects came when organisations had either allocated resources to participation mechanisms independently from project earmarking, or adopted a community-based approach to protection.

This siloed approach to engagement with affected people is further re-enforced by the fact that there is limited interaction across sectors and projects and therefore few attempts to pool existing information together to gather a more comprehensive understanding of affected people's needs, capacities and suggestions.

In short-term projects, it is often a challenge to dedicate sufficient human resources and time to consultation with affected people at the onset of the project cycle, and then to adjust the response to input received from affected people during the implementation and monitoring phases of the project. In addition, frequent significant time lags in the grant allocation process, between the initial assessment of needs and the start of implementation, impact negatively on the trust affected people may have had in the organisation providing assistance, and therefore their willingness to engagement constructively in participation outcomes.

In addition to challenges to effectiveness, this siloed project-by-project approach to participation raises a fundamental question of efficiency, namely whether organisations could rationalise participation resources better with less of a sectoral focus and more of a people-centred approach

Centralised decision-making

Organisations reviewed generally described their institutional donors as flexible in terms of adapting funding to best respond to needs articulated by affected people. The closer the decision-making authority related to grant management and allocation of resources to project or programme management, the easier it is for organisations to request course correctors from their donors. Generally, it was felt that donors with a representation close to operations were even more sympathetic to adapting grants to input from affected people.

The review teams found that certain fundamental programming decisions were taken by the UN agency resourcing the programme, without the NGO in charge of implementation feeling that it had the power to influence such decisions, i.e. decisions related to targeting criteria and in certain cases, actual list of beneficiaries, or to the type of item distributed. This effectively leaves organisations in direct contact with affected people in no position to carry out meaningful engagement with them on issues related to vulnerability and needs, only on issues related to the organisation and the monitoring of the distribution.

While prioritisation is necessary considering limited resources to cover all needs, centralisation of decision making undermines frontline organisations’ ability to carry out meaningful consultation with the affected people it is attempting to serve. The discussion on how to find the balance between deciding on the allocation of limited resources and giving space to operational organisations to carry out meaningful participation, is one which needs to take place at the Cluster and Inter-Cluster level, with referral to the Humanitarian Country Team as necessary. This requires substantive engagement by NGOs in these coordination mechanisms, as well as their ability to raise their concerns to a higher level when necessary, through global coordination or policy-making fora or directly to relevant UN agencies headquarters.

Disenablers broken down into contextual / systemic / organisational

Context specific	Systemic	Organisational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of women and children’s voices and influence in public space • Authorities and affected communities with hierarchical top down practices of governance • Tension between participation of affected people and participation of government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralisation of decision making by UN lead agency and/or cluster coordinator on issues such as priority interventions, numbers of beneficiaries, targeting criteria, etc. • Funding of participation is project-based and sectoral • Short term and unpredictable funding • Insufficient funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited will and ability to understand affected people’s culture and social structures. • Limited efforts towards child participation, even when children represent most of the affected population and are eager to be involved in the life of their community • Gender narrowed down to specific pre-identified protection issues faced by women and girls (such as for example Gender Based Violence, early marriage, etc.)

Context specific	Systemic	Organisational
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays in the grant allocation processes which creates frustration with affected people, and breaks the trust that they might have had in organisations. • Competition for resources across sectors and organisations • Different understanding of participation and different capacities to implement participation across organisations • Low participation at the initial stage of the response, as rapidity of response is prioritised • Programme targets and success indicators focus on numbers of beneficiaries, cost per beneficiary, etc. and do not facilitate reporting on participation outcomes • Too many different participation related reporting requirements⁷ (internal and external) • Focus on geographical areas of operation which are accessible, resourced and provide visibility rather than on areas where needs are highest (in contradiction with the principle of impartiality) • Limited access to affected people because of inadequate security or security management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sectoral approach to the project cycle, including in terms of resourcing

5. CONCLUSION

This peer review has demonstrated SCHR organisations’ commitment and dedication to participation. It has also shown to what extent systemic constraints to an affected people centred approach to humanitarian decision – making are translated into organisations’ systems and ways of working, with these then further reinforcing the systemic nature of these constraints. Making greater participation a reality is going to requires approaches and measures aimed at systemic, not only organisational, impact.

This report aims at providing an understanding of the current state of play of participation, as carried out by SCHR organisations. It purposely does not provide any recommendations for action, even though a broad course of action may be implicit in some of the findings. It is anticipated that each SCHR organisation will review these findings internally, to decide on appropriate priorities and action at an organisational level, as well as on its contribution to SCHR’s High-Level Conference in January 2018 which aims at sector-wide learning and an agenda to make the commitment to greater participation and local ownership a reality.

⁷ One organisations’ MEAL coordinator in northern Iraq described having to meet seven different sets of participation -related reporting requirements, four external ones and three internal ones.