Community Engagement and Participatory Approaches:
Global Lessons and a Practical Toolkit

COLUMBIA | SIPA
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ACRONYMS

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
AHF	Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund
BFM	Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms
CBO	Community-Based Organizations
CDA	The Collaborative for Development Action
CEMS	Community Engagement Minimum Standards
CEP	Community Engagement Programme
CGD	Community Group Discussions
CMC	Community Management Committees
CRMS	Customer Relationship Management System
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DPIA	Data Protection Impact Assessment
FCO	Female Community Officer
FCFO	Female Community Feedback Officers
HPC	Humanitarian Programme Cycle
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICCT	Inter-Cluster Coordination Teams
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PALC	Participatory Action Learning in Crises
REF	Refugee Engagement Forum
RLO	Refugee-Led Organizations

ACRONYMS

RWC	Refugee Welfare Council
SBC	Social and Behavioral Change
SCLR	Supporting Community–Led Response
SIPA	School of International and Public Affairs
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
TWG	Technical Working Groups
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WVP	World Vision Pakistan

Executive Summary

This report presents an actionable strategy for improving community engagement in humanitarian settings. Developed at the request of Acted, it responds to a core operational need: ensuring that Acted's engagement efforts move beyond consultation and become embedded, equitable, and impactful across the program cycle. The report also includes a review of the AGORA methodology, critically examining its strengths and limitations in the context of community engagement.

Drawing from research conducted between November 2024 and May 2025, the report identifies five persistent risks that hinder meaningful engagement in the field:

- Minimal participation, transparency, and trust
- Engagement fatigue among communities and staff
- Power asymmetries between local actors, communities and international agencies
- Inflexible, top-down program design
- Funding models misaligned with adaptive, community-led work

To address these, the project team applied a mixed-methods approach, reviewing global frameworks, interviewing practitioners, analyzing case studies, and assessing gaps in existing tools. What emerged is a multi-layered strategy grounded in both principles and practice.

The report's core contributions include:
1. **A Systems-thinking framework** that redifines engagement as an ecosystem shaped by values like equity, trust, and collective accountability, not a single tactic or activity.
2. **A set of Risk Mitigation Strategies** tailored to common field-level barriers, illustrated through examples from contexts like Sudan, Ukraine, Pakistan, and others.
3. **A review of the AGORA methodology** against the identified key community engagement challenges.
4. **A modular Community Engagement Toolkit**, co-designed to be field-ready, flexible, and aligned with three key phases: pre-departure, needs assessment, and implementation.*

Taken together, these components provide a blueprint for building more inclusive, adaptive, and structurally sustainable engagement approaches. Rather than positioning communities as informants or feedback recipients, the report outlines how humanitarian actors can share decision-making power, support local leadership, and institutionalize engagement as a core function.

This is not a call for one new tool but a call to reimagine how engagement is resourced, practiced, systematized, and measured across the system.

*monitoring & evaluation excluded at Acted's request

Introduction & Objectives

Despite years of policy commitments and widespread endorsement, community engagement in humanitarian aid and development remains uneven, inconsistent and often ineffective. While frequently framed as a cornerstone of ethical and effective response, the concept itself is inconsistently defined—and even more inconsistently practiced.

In many contexts, engagement efforts are reduced to surface-level activities, such as extracting feedback or disseminating information after decisions have been made. This performative approach not only weakens trust between communities and aid actors but also results in programs that are less responsive, less accountable, and ultimately less impactful. Without deeper shifts in how engagement is conceived, resourced, and operationalized, efforts to localize aid and build equitable partnerships will continue to fall short of their transformative potential.

In response to these ongoing challenges, the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (Acted), an international non-governmental organization specializing in humanitarian aid and development, created the AGORA methodology, a participatory, area-based planning approach that centers local knowledge, coordination, and decision-making. Guided by the motto "Think Local-Act Global," Acted aims to address the shortcomings of top-down aid systems by anchoring response efforts in local territories and supporting locally driven, more accountable, and context-specific solutions.

This project, conducted between November 2024 and May 2025, is the result of a collaboration between Acted and Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). Led by a team of six graduate students and one faculty advisor, the capstone aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on community engagement in humanitarian response.

Through case study analysis, interviews with humanitarian and development practitioners, an extensive literature review, and the creation of a practical field toolkit, the team sought to identify challenges and strengthen community engagement strategies in diverse operational contexts.

This research centers on five persistent challenges that consistently undermine effective community engagement in humanitarian settings:

Lack of meaningful participation, trust, and transparency
Engagement fatigue
Unequal power dynamics
Poor adaptation to local contexts
Rigid funding structures

These core challenges formed the analytical foundation of this project, guiding both the literature review and the development of the practical toolkit.

Each theme is explored in depth throughout the report, using evidence from case studies, practitioner interviews and existing frameworks. Together, they represent critical entry points for strengthening Acted's approach to inclusive, accountable, and context-responsive community engagement.

The report is structured into four main sections:

Section One: Literature Review–Foundations of Community Engagement

This section examines how community engagement is conceptualized across a range of stakeholder groups, including academic institutions, multilateral agencies, and civil society organizations, particularly local NGOS. Rather than presenting a singular definition, the review embraces the multidimensional nature by community engagement by outlining three overarching approaches:
    i) Consultative Engagement
    ii) Participatory and Power–Sharing Engagement
    iii) Community–Led engagement

Each approach reflects distinct methodologies, degrees of community influence, and underlying values that inform how engagement is interpreted and implemented in practice.

In addition, this section identifies a set of core concepts that consistently emerge across the literature. These principles serve as a foundation for systems–level thinking and are essential for building a shared understanding of effective, ethical, and context–responsive engagement.

The literature review concludes with a comparative analysis of existing frameworks and standards currently used in humanitarian contexts. Recognizing the importance of building on–not duplicating–existing efforts, this overview highlights key contributions, strengths, and gaps across these models. It aims to provide a practical reference for practitioners while informing the design of this project's toolkit.

Section Two: Tackling Engagement Risks–Challenges and Practical Solutions

This section delves into the five core challenges identified through the research, examining how each one hinders the effectiveness and integrity of community engagement in humanitarian settings. These risks–ranging from structural power imbalances to engagement fatigue–complicate efforts to build relationships grounded in trust, inclusion and accountability.

For each challenge, the report offers practical mitigation strategies—grounded in literature and field interviews—aimed at reducing harm, strengthening participation, and supporting more adaptive, community–centered delivery. Together, they provide a bridge between high–level principles and field–level implementation, highlighting what it takes to move from intention to impact in complex humanitarian environments.

Section Three: Critical Review of ACTED's AGORA 2.0 Methodology

This section critically reviews ACTED's AGORA 2.0 methodology, analyzing its alignment with the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus framework and its effectiveness in addressing the core community engagement challenges identified earlier in the report. The methodology is assessed particularly regarding its ability to mitigate minimal participation, engagement fatigue, unequal power dynamics, poor adaptation to local contexts, and rigid funding structures.

The review identifies key strengths of the AGORA approach, as well as areas requiring further development. To enhance its impact, targeted recommendations are provided, focusing on concrete adjustments that ACTED can implement to promote deeper, more equitable, and sustainable community participation throughout its project cycles.

Section Four: The Toolkit

This section introduces the Community Engagement Toolkit, developed as a practical, adaptable resource for Acted's field teams. Designed with usability in mind, the toolkit supports staff in identifying key community engagement priorities across specific stages of the project cycle. It offers clear, actionable guidance to help teams build trust, navigate local dynamics, and operationalize participatory practices in real time.

The toolkit includes three main components:

   i) A summary page explaining the toolkit's purpose, key components, and how to use it effectively in the field.

   ii) Step-by-step engagement strategies aligned with three critical phases—Pre-Departure, Needs Assessment, and Implementation.

   iii) A collection of customizable templates, worksheets, decision matrices, and facilitation guides, designed for easy adaptation and field use.

The tools are informed by both best practices and practitioner insights, making them responsive to the realities of humanitarian work and tailored to support stronger, more inclusive engagement with communities.

Prior training for field teams on the toolkit is highly encouraged to ensure its effective use across all three phases.

Methodology

This project builds upon initial internal research conducted by Acted on the challenges of community engagement in humanitarian response. The objective was to deepen the analysis of key risks, identify practical mitigation strategies and develop a field-ready toolkit that addresses persistent engagement gaps. To achieve these aims, the team employed a multi-pronged methodology consisting of a literature review, expert interviews, case study analysis, gap assessment, and iterative toolkit development.

1. Literature Review

The literature review spanned academic scholarship, practitioner publications, and international policy frameworks to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both conceptual and operational perspectives on community engagement.

Academic Literature	Practitioner and NGO Reports	International Frameworks
Offered theoretical foundations and critical insights into topics such as power dynamics, localization, and structural reform. However, these sources often lacked concrete guidance for operationalization in field contexts.	Provided grounded examples of implementation, highlighting practical concerns such as trust-building, engagement fatigue, and community representation.	Including the Core Humanitarian Standard, the Sphere Standards, and the Grand Bargain—sector-wide commitments and normative guidance. Valuable for goal-setting standards, but offer limited context-specific or actionable strategies.

Synthesizing these perspectives allowed for a multidimensional understanding of community engagement—its intended goals, practical execution, and areas of disconnect.

2. Expert Interviews

To complement the literature review and surface practitioner-driven insights, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals working across the humanitarian and development sectors. Interviewees included representatives from:

- International agencies (e.g., OCHA, WFP, InterAction)
- Community-based organizations (e.g., Movilizatorio, Nurture Development)
- Accountability networks (e.g., ALNAP, Ground Truth Solutions)
- Researchers and Sphere framework architects

These interviews were instrumental in validating core challenges, surfacing underexplored risks, and identifying field-tested recommendations. They also informed the development of tools aligned with the needs and constraints of frontline staff. A full list of interviewees is included in the annex.

3. Case Study Analysis

To identify promising strategies for addressing core engagement challenges, a range of case studies was selected based on recommendations from interviewees, relevant sector reports, and independent desk research. The cases spanned diverse geographic regions and operational contexts, offering practical insights across both development and humanitarian settings.

Each case study was analyzed through the lens of the five core challenges identified by this project:

- Lack of meaningful participation, trust or transparency
- Engagement fatigue
- Unequal power dynamics
- Poor adaptation to local context
- Rigid funding structures

The analysis emphasized operational models, mechanisms, and enabling conditions that supported more inclusive, accountable, and adaptive engagement. These findings directly informed both the risk mitigation strategies proposed in the report and the content and format of the toolkit.

4. Gap Analysis

A gap analysis was conducted to assess where existing frameworks, tools, and institutional practices fall short—particularly with respect to usability at the field level. Drawing from literature, interviews, and case findings, this analysis highlighted recurring limitations in the accessibility, adaptability, and practical relevance of current community engagement resources.

5. Toolkit Development

The development of the toolkit was iterative and practice-oriented. The process began with a benchmarking review of existing tools, engagement models, and field resources. This helped identify design principles—such as usability, adaptability, and contextual sensitivity—that shaped the development of each tool.

Prototypes were developed and refined based on feedback from both project team members and external stakeholders with field experience. This ensured alignment with real-world operational constraints and community dynamics. The final toolkit is organized around the project lifecycle, with resources tailored to three phases of community engagement: pre-departure, needs assessment, and implementation.

Each tool was designed to be actionable, modular, and accessible to Acted's field teams, while also serving as a resource for local partners working to embed more meaningful engagement practices within humanitarian programming.

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5. Review of AGORA 2.0 Methodology

A critical analysis was conducted specifically on ACTED's AGORA 2.0 methodology, assessing its capacity to address core community engagement challenges. This analysis provided targeted recommendations to enhance its practical effectiveness, responsiveness, and sustainability at the field level.

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Part 1
Literature Review

Key Foundations of Community Engagement:
Definitions and Frameworks

Community Engagement is widely acknowledged as a foundational component of effective humanitarian response. It seeks to ensure that crisis–affected communities are not only heard, but actively shape the policies, programs, and outcomes that impact their lives. However, community engagement is not a singular, universally agreed defined concept. Its meaning and application vary depending on the actor–whether a UN agency, international NGO, or local grassroots organization. For some, community engagement is limited to gathering input; for others, it implies co–governance or even a pathway toward decolonizing aid systems.[1]

Despite this variation, several core themes consistently emerge across literature and practice: inclusion, ownership, transparency, responsiveness, and the redistribution of power.[2] Yet, how these principles are operationalized in practice remains uneven. In some contexts, community engagement is genuinely community–led. In others, it is extractive or performative–used to legitimize decisions already made without community input.

To better understand these distinctions, this section synthesizes three overarching approaches to community engagement: consultative, participatory and power–sharing, and community–led engagement.[3] Each reflects a distinct paradigm of engagement and implies different political commitments–particularly in terms of decision–making power, control over resources, and the valuation of local versus external knowledge.

These models are not purely theoretical. They are grounded in field practice and reflect lessons learned across a wide range of humanitarian contexts–from bureaucratized feedback mechanisms in UN–coordinated responses to more localized models such as the Supporting Community-Led Response (SCLR) framework.[4]

In addition to exploring these three approaches, this section outlines a set of core operational principles–adaptability, two–way accountability, sustainability, localization–that underpin effective community engagement. It also reviews key global frameworks shaping community engagement policy and implementation, including the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS), the Grand Bargain 2.0, the Sphere Standards, and the Community Engagement Minimum Standards (CEMS).

The objective is to move beyond rhetorical affirmations of community engagement, and toward a grounded understanding of what constitutes meaningful, ethical, and effective engagement–shifting the practice from performative consultation to transformative collaboration.

Defining Community Engagement: Common Themes and Variations

While community engagement is widely affirmed as a cornerstone of humanitarian action, how it is interpreted and implemented varies considerably. For some actors, community engagement is primarily a means of ensuring compliance—through consultation or feedback mechanisms—while others pursue deeper models of co-creation, shared governance, or full community leadership.

Rather than seeking a singular definition, this section presents a typology of community engagement that reflects different levels of community influence in planning, decision-making, and resource control.[5] Based on a review of global frameworks, case studies, and field practices, three primary models emerge:[6]

- **Consultative Engagement**–where communities are informed and occasionally consulted, but decisions remain with external actors.
- **Participatory & Power–Sharing Engagement**–where communities are involved in shared governance or co-design processes.
- **Community–Led Engagement**–where communities drive decisions, control resources, and lead implementation.

These models lie along a continuum–from externally managed engagement to locally driven leadership–and each carries different implications for program design, outcomes and equity. Understanding the distinctions between these approaches is essential to designing strategies that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward more transformative partnerships.[7]

Approach	Definition	Primary Objective
Consultative Engagement	Communities are asked for input or feedback, but final decisions rest with external actors.	Ensure program legitimacy, fulfill accountability requirements, and inform program design.
Participatory & Power–Sharing Engagement	Communities have a formal role in governance structures, contributing to shared decision–making.	Foster accountability, build trust, and co-design interventions with localized leadership.
Community–Led Engagement	Communities hold direct control over response planning, resources, and governance processes.	Advance self–determination, strengthen local systems, and promote sustainable outcomes.

Consultative Engagement: An Information-Sharing Approach

Consultative engagement is the most commonly practiced–and arguably the most limited–form of community engagement in humanitarian response. Rooted in top-down operational structures, this model invites communities to share input through assessments, town halls, or surveys, yet reserves decision-making authority for external actors such as governments agencies, donors or international NGOs. Communities may be asked to speak, but they are rarely invited to lead.[8]

Frameworks such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and Sphere Standards emphasize the importance of participation.[9] CHS Commitment 4, for example, calls for humanitarian actors to include communities in decision-making processes. However, in practice, these frameworks often fall short of mandating meaningful power-sharing. Participation is frequently reduced to a one-time consultation, lacking sustained engagement or influence on decisions. Community voices are heard but not shaping outcomes.[10]

Consultative engagement is typically project-based and externally driven. Programs are often designed by international actors who seek community validation for predetermined strategies, rather than co-creating solutions with those directly affected. This approach prioritizes procedural legitimacy–demonstrating that communities were "consulted"—rather than empowerment or shared ownership of outcomes.[11] As a result, participation risks becoming more performative than substantive: a requirement to fulfill donor accountability rather than a pathway to shift power.

While consultative models may serve as an entry point for engagement, they are insufficient on their own. Without mechanisms for shared decision-making, responsiveness, or accountability, these approaches risk reinforcing the same hierarchies they aim to disrupt. When communities are invited to participate but lack the power to shape decisions, engagement becomes a symbolic gesture rather than a vehicle for equity or transformation.[12] It is for this reason many humanitarian actors are now moving toward participatory and community-led models– approaches that seek to embed community voice not just in practice, but in governance and structure. As the sector increasingly acknowledges, engagement without power is not engagement at all.

Evolving Engagement: From Crisis Response to Strategic Recovery

During the recovery phase, community engagement evolves from urgent, crisis-driven responses to more deliberate, collaborative efforts aimed at long-term rebuilding. Recovery isn't just about restoring systems and resources to their pre-disaster state—it's an opportunity to correct past vulnerabilities, improve sustainability, and build greater resilience for the future. The shape that recovery takes will vary by community and disaster type, but effective recovery efforts are rooted in continued engagement. Whereas the immediate crisis phase often demands rapid coordination and top-down decision-making to meet urgent needs, recovery opens space for participatory approaches. This phase invites communities to co-create solutions, reflect on what worked or failed, and prioritize systems-level improvements. Engagement during recovery is less reactive and more strategic—shaped by the lessons of the crisis and the unique context of each community's path forward.[13]

Participatory & Power–Sharing Engagement

Participatory and power–sharing engagement moves beyond surface–level consultation to embed affected communities within the design, governance, and delivery of humanitarian responses. Unlike consultative models, which primarily solicit feedback, participatory approaches give communities a formal role in shaping decisions.[14] This may include membership on program committees, involvement in setting priorities, or shared responsibility for allocating resources and monitoring implementation.

Frameworks such as Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and the Grand Bargain 2.0 exemplify this approach. AAP promotes the institutionalization of feedback mechanisms and participatory systems within the humanitarian cluster architecture. The Grand Bargain 2.0 advances the commitment further by targeting 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors–linking participation to resource flows and structural change.[15]

At its core, this model aims to foster shared ownership and mutual accountability. Community members may co–develop response strategies, lead needs assessments, or contribute to program monitoring. The emphasis is not just on voice but on agency: recognizing local knowledge as a critical driver of effective and equitable humanitarian action.

However, implementation of power–sharing models remains uneven. In many cases, control still resides with external actors, and participatory processes are constrained by donor requirements, risk management frameworks, and institutional inertia. Local partners are often invited to "lead" without being given sufficient authority, time, or flexibility to exercise that leadership meaningfully.

One of the recurring risks in participatory models is the potential for elite capture, where more educated or well-connected individuals dominate community representation–marginalizing women, youth, or other less visible groups. Without intentional inclusion mechanisms, the promise of participation may reproduce existing hierarchies.

Balancing Participation and Accountability

As communities assume more leadership roles in humanitarian programming, the question of accountability becomes increasingly complex. Acted has a responsibility to remain transparent, responsive, and equitable in its engagement. Yet, when communities are selecting representatives or leading implementation processes, they too assume a level of responsibility—to ensure decisions are inclusive, legitimate, and reflective of diverse perspectives.

This shift requires a broader framing of accountability: not just as something owed by organizations to communities, but as a shared commitment between all actors involved. When communities make decisions, how are representatives selected? Who ensures that they act on behalf of the wider community and not just a few? And how does Acted maintain appropriate oversight while respecting community autonomy?

Traditional accountability tools—like formal elections—may not always be feasible, sufficient, or adapted to the local cultural context. Instead, practical mechanisms such as rotating representation, community charters, transparent selection criteria, and open feedback forums can help distribute responsibility fairly. In these contexts, Acted field teams will be guided by the organization's broader accountability frameworks, which provide standards and tools to support fair and transparent engagement, while ensuring oversight responsibilities are upheld across all levels of the response.

While Acted field teams are guided by organizational accountability frameworks, participatory engagement is only transformative if paired with mechanisms that reflect the complexity of shared decision-making. This includes not only Acted's ability to uphold its own standards, but also its support for communities to hold themselves—and each other—to theirs.

> **"Power–sharing must be power accounted for—by all parties."**

Ultimately, participation alone is not a guarantee of empowerment—or of good outcomes. While participatory approaches are often positioned as more ethical and inclusive, local decisions can be just as vulnerable to power imbalances, limited information, or short-term incentives as those made externally. In some cases, they may even reinforce local hierarchies or unintentionally cause harm. Supporting community leadership, then, is not just about making space for decisions—it also requires ensuring that communities have access to the tools, information, and support needed to make those decisions fairly, transparently, and with lasting impact.

These tensions do not negate the value of participation, but they do acknowledge the complexities of it. As it will be mentioned in the following sections, the participatory paradigm is not neutral. Like any approach, it operates within broader social, political, and institutional power structures. Recognizing these dynamics is essential if participatory models are to move beyond symbolic involvement and toward more equitable and grounded engagement.

Community-Led Engagement

Community-led models aim to provide crisis-affected populations with more direct access to funding, authority, and tools for adaptive decision-making. Unlike approaches where local knowledge is filtered through external systems, these models emphasize enabling communities to take the lead in identifying priorities and implementing solutions. One prominent example is the Supporting Community-Led Response (SCLR) model, developed by Local to Global Protection. SCLR combines mechanisms such as microgrants, participatory methodologies like Participatory Action Learning in Crises (PALC), and community-centered accountability processes to strengthen mutual aid and build resilience from within.[16]

Participatory Engagement		**Community-led Engagement**
communities advise and support	→	communities decide and act
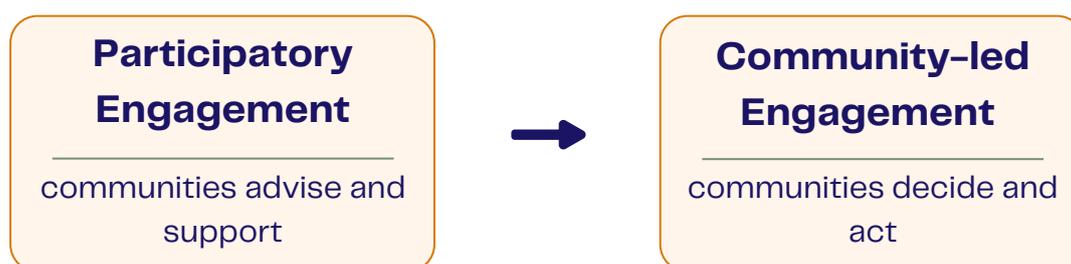
While participatory models often retain a guiding or oversight role for international actors, community-led engagement reconfigures those roles. In its most ambitious form, humanitarian agencies act not as implementers but as facilitators—providing technical support or resources only when invited to do so. These approaches aim to shift—not just share—decision-making power by building on existing social structures, leadership, and informal governance systems. Importantly, they seek to adapt to, rather than replace, the social and cultural systems already in place.[17]

The potential benefits of community-led approaches are increasingly recognized. Locally led responses are often more contextually attuned, more trusted by affected populations, and more likely to result in socially cohesive, sustainable outcomes.[18] They promote solutions grounded in lived experience and can contribute to restoring social capital during times of crisis. However, such models are not without limitations. They face significant operational and institutional constraints, including donor risk aversion, short-term funding cycles, and compliance frameworks that are often ill-suited to informal or emergent leadership structures. Many organizations also struggle with balancing commitments to localization with concerns about fiduciary oversight and capacity assurance.

Despite these challenges, community-led engagement represents one of the most ambitious ends of the engagement spectrum. It positions affected populations not just as participants, but as central decision-makers in humanitarian response. While it may not be appropriate or feasible in every context, it offers an important corrective to top-down models—one that asks external actors to shift from directing to supporting, from managing to resourcing. At its core, this approach affirms that communities are not waiting to be empowered—they are already responding. The role of humanitarian actors is to recognize, support, and where appropriate, amplify that leadership.[19]

From Consultation to Leadership: A Structural Shift

The humanitarian sector is gradually evolving from consultative models of community engagement toward approaches that center community leadership, equity, and structural redistribution of power. This evolution is not simply about improving participation metrics—it is about reconfiguring who shapes decisions, who controls resources, and whose knowledge is prioritized in humanitarian response. Frameworks like AAP, the Grand Bargain 2.0, and SCLR reflect this broader transformation, urging practitioners to move beyond symbolic involvement and toward authentic community authority.[20]

Still, this transition remains far from complete. Humanitarian systems are often constrained by rigid mandates, short funding cycles, and risk-averse institutional cultures. Even the most progressive frameworks can fall short when engagement is treated as a procedural requirement rather than a reimagining of power and partnership. Community-led models offer a compelling path forward, but they require more than rhetorical support—they demand structural change.

The following section explores the operational and systemic risks that continue to undermine effective community engagement. It highlights the practical and political challenges that humanitarian actors must navigate to make community engagement a meaningful foundation for people-centered, accountable, and adaptive humanitarian action.

A Systems–Thinking Approach to Community Engagement

Community engagement in humanitarian response is not a one–off consultation or checklist item—it is a dynamic, evolving process that requires sustained attention to systems of trust, accountability, and inclusion. Especially in crisis–affected contexts, community engagement must be understood as more than a set of tools or protocols. It is shaped by the complex interplay of the institutional structures, cultural norms, local capacities, and power relations.

This section presents a systems–thinking lens to community engagement, organizing key concepts and principles into interconnected domains. These concepts—drawn from literature, field practice, and international standards—reflect both normative values and operational imperatives. Together, they form the building blocks for more inclusive, adaptive, and community–led humanitarian responses.

Rather than treating these concepts as a linear checklist, they are best understood as mutually reinforcing elements of a broader ecosystem. Each one helps shape the conditions in which engagement can move beyond symbolic participation toward meaningful collaboration and shared ownership.

Foundation Pillars

This section outlines the foundational values that underpin ethical and effective community engagement in humanitarian response. These pillars—participation, empowerment, trust, representation, localization, gender equity, and decolonization—reflect both moral commitments and practical necessities.

They speak to how humanitarian actors show up in communities: not just with technical expertise, but with a mindset grounded in humility, inclusion, and power–sharing. Taken together, these values form the ethical architecture on which sustainable engagement must be built.

Before outlining the core concepts of community engagement, it is important to clarify the terms that are used throughout this report. Both "community" and "local actors" are complex, politically situated, and context–dependent categories.

Defining "Community" and "Local Actors"

"Community" and "local actors" are politically situated, context–dependent categories that are neither static nor uniform. Within and across communities, power, voice, and representation are often unevenly distributed. These definitions are offered not as fixed labels, but as working frames to support clarity and precision in analysis

In this report, **Community** refers to individuals and groups directly affected by a humanitarian crisis. This may include displaced persons, youth, elders, women–led groups, people with disabilities, and religious or cultural leaders. While some communities are dynamic and diverse—shaped by intersecting identities, geographies, and social relationships—others may exhibit strong cohesion grounded in shared cultural, ethnic, religious, or geographic identities. It is essential to approach each context with an understanding of how community identity is formed and sustained, and how this influences engagement practices.

Local actors include civil society, refugee- and IDP-led groups, local NGOs, municipal authorities, and other stakeholders who possess contextual knowledge and local legitimacy. Their roles, influence, and relationships with affected populations differ across contexts and should be understood in relation to local power dynamics, capacities, and trust.

Core Values of Participation

These are the basic concepts that ground community engagement.

Participation lies at the heart of community engagement, yet it is often misunderstood or diluted in practice. As defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), participation is the "informed and voluntary involvement of affected people in decision-making processes that affect them." However, participation must go beyond isolated consultations or data collection exercises. It becomes meaningful only when communities are engaged across the full program cycle—from needs assessment to implementation and evaluation—and when their input genuinely shapes decisions.[22]

In a systems-thinking approach, participation is not a standalone activity; it must be embedded into the very structure of humanitarian programming. It should be inclusive, sustained, and representative, redistributing decision-making authority to those most directly affected.

As one practitioner summarized, "Participation should be promoted throughout the humanitarian programme cycle—from planning and design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation."[23] When communities can influence outcomes, participation becomes a vehicle for power-sharing rather than a procedural requirement.

Closely tied to participation is the concept of **empowerment**. In the humanitarian context, empowerment refers not to what external actors provide, but to the conditions created for communities to lead.

According to the UNICEF MQS empowerment is both an outcome and a precondition for effective community engagement. It emerges when communities are able to control processes and outcomes—setting priorities, making decisions, and holding institutions accountable.[24]

Systems thinking reframes empowerment as more than just capacity-building. It is about enabling autonomy and dismantling dependency by redistributing resources, democratizing knowledge, and rebalancing authority. "Empowerment can be both a means and an end, and is closely linked to participation, inclusion, accountability and capacity development."[25]

Trust is the foundation on which all meaningful engagement rests. It cannot be assumed, and it cannot be rushed. Particularly in contexts where communities have experienced historical marginalization, failed aid efforts, or extractive relationships, trust must be earned, and continually reinforced. This requires regular, transparent communication; honesty about limitations; and follow-through on commitments.[26]

A systems approach views trust not as a one-off goal but as infrastructure: something built into every step of the engagement process—from how decisions are made to how conflict is addressed. Relationship-building must be intentional, sustained, and grounded in mutual respect. As one advisor put it, "Trust is not built in workshops; it is built in follow-through." Without trust, participation becomes performative, empowerment stalls, and even the most well-designed interventions risk falling flat.

Equity, Inclusion & Representation

This group focuses on who gets to participate and how power and voice are distributed within communities. These concepts remind us that community engagement is not neutral—it must be designed to counter systemic exclusion.

Representation is foundational to equitable engagement. It refers to the involvement of individuals or groups who reflect the broader diversity of a community, not just those with formal titles or institutional recognition. For engagement to be legitimate, representative structures must be transparent in their formation, inclusive of all perspectives, and accountable to the populations they speak for. This means balancing formal leaders (e.g., elected officials) with informal actors (e.g., youth coalitions, elders, grassroots organizers) and creating systems for community members to evaluate or rotate representatives over time.[27]

"Community members should be involved in selecting representatives and be able to hold them to account."[28]

Without such mechanisms, engagement processes risk reinforcing elite capture, where the same voices dominate discussions and decision–making across projects and agencies.

Localization is more than subcontracting local NGOs—it is about shifting decision–making authority to local actors who have the contextual knowledge, relationships, and long–term commitment that external actors often lack. As articulated in the Grand Bargain 2.0, localization is both a practical and ethical imperative. In systems thinking terms, it requires altering the architecture of humanitarian response to reduce dependency on centralized, global mechanisms and expand the leadership and agency of those closest to the crisis.

Real localization involves addressing structural barriers—such as language, compliance, or donor conditionalities—that keep local actors at the margins of strategic planning and funding. It means trusting local governance, respecting informal networks, and giving communities the resources, and flexibility to lead, not just implement.[29]

Power flows through all engagement—whether we acknowledge it or not. Gender, in particular, intersects with race, age, class, ability, and other identities to shape who is heard, who participates, and who is left behind. Without intentional design, engagement processes can reproduce existing inequalities, silencing women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or others who face cultural, structural, or safety–related barriers to participation. In many humanitarian contexts, LGBTQ+ identities are criminalized or socially marginalized to the extent that individuals cannot safely self–identify or organize. In such settings, inclusive approaches must be carefully adapted, ensuring that engagement strategies do no harm while still striving to uphold the dignity and rights of all community members.

The IASC Gender Accountability Framework calls for intersectional, gender–responsive engagement, recognizing that the humanitarian space must do more than "include women"—it must redesign structures so that people of all genders can participate safely, meaningfully, and with influence.

"Power relations between and among affected populations and humanitarian actors are critical and must be analyzed and addressed."[31]

This includes investing in culturally appropriate spaces for engagement, supporting alternative leadership models, and actively addressing the norms that exclude or endanger marginalized voices.[32]

Knowledge, Voice & Accountability

This cluster of principles focuses on the flows of information and authority that underpin community engagement: whose knowledge is valued, who gets to speak, and how institutions are held accountable. Taken together, these concepts expose the epistemic hierarchies in humanitarian response and offer pathways to elevate local expertise, promote shared authorship, and center feedback as a tool for power redistribution—not just program improvement.

Decolonizing Knowledge & Practice: Community engagement cannot be meaningful if it relies exclusively on externally defined metrics, languages, or systems of knowledge. A decolonial lens urges humanitarian actors to critically examine the assumptions embedded in their tools, terminologies, and institutional agendas.[31] But adopting this lens is not only about rethinking methods––it also requires requiring reckoning with tensions between local customers and humanitarian values such as equity, inclusion, and gender justice.

This is sometimes referred to as the "decolonial paradox": the difficult balance between respecting local norms and advancing rights–based or progressive values. For example, an engagement process rooted in local structures may reproduce existing hierarchies or exclude certain voices—especially those of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or marginalized ethnic groups. Participatory methods do not inherently solve these issues; they must be intentionally designed to surface, rather than conceal, power dynamics and identity–based exclusions.

A decolonial approach also challenges traditional knowledge hierarchies. Inspired by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, it shifts the core question from

"How do we extract information from communities?"

to

"How do we create knowledge with communities"

In practice, it means:

- Co–defining priorities and research questions with affected populations.
- Using culturally rooted methods such as storytelling, mapping, and visioning.
- Sharing findings back in accessible ways, and ensuring communities retain ownership over their knowledge.[34]

Ultimately, decolonizing community engagement is not a checklist—it is a continuous, context–dependent process of reflection, negotiation, and humility. It calls on external actors not only to step back, but also to grapple with the complexity of power, identity, and values in every setting.

Accountability is the connective tissue between all elements of community engagement. It is what makes participation meaningful, representation legitimate, and power–sharing real. Without mechanisms for communities to monitor, question, and influence humanitarian actors, engagement risks becoming symbolic at best—or harmful at worst.

In humanitarian response, accountability means:

- Making decisions transparent and traceable.
- Explaining how community input shaped outcomes—and if it didn't, why not.
- Creating channels for complaints and feedback that are safe, accessible, and lead to concrete action.

- Embedding accountability in both interpersonal interactions and institutional systems.

This principle is not just about doing the right thing—it's about reinforcing trust, improving effectiveness, and sharing power.[35]

Operational Principles

While values such as participation, trust, and inclusion form the foundation of community engagement, these commitments must be operationalized through concrete structures and practices. This section outlines the delivery mechanisms that enable effective engagement throughout the humanitarian program cycle—from planning to implementation to adaptation.

Two-way accountability and transparency ensures that communities are not just heard, but see how their voices shape outcomes. This requires more than collecting feedback —it involves explaining decisions, acknowledging constraints, and visibly integrating community input into programming. Transparency is key: field teams must regularly communicate not only what they are doing, but why certain choices were made. When accountability flows in both directions, communities are positioned not as beneficiaries, but as active counterparts with the right to demand answers.[36]

Accessible and Responsive Feedback Mechanisms. Feedback and complaints systems are among the most tangible expressions of community engagement—but they are often underused or ineffective. Systems fail when they are poorly advertised, overly technical, or lack follow-up. Effective mechanisms must be accessible, safe, and clearly linked to programmatic action. Communities should know how to use them, see results from their feedback, and be able to submit concerns anonymously if needed.

Moreover, these mechanisms should be adaptable—feedback channels may differ across cultural, linguistic, or age-based groups.[37]

> "Feedback mechanisms should be timely, accessible, and lead to changes in programme design and delivery."[38]

Collective Accountability. In fragmented humanitarian settings, communities often interact with multiple actors—each with separate engagement tools, feedback systems, and expectations. This can lead to confusion and fatigue. Collective accountability calls for greater alignment between agencies, including shared standards, pooled complaint mechanisms, and collaborative review processes. When actors coordinate their approaches, communities receive clearer communication and more consistent opportunities to influence programming.[39]

Ethical Foundations of Engagement

Community engagement is not only a programmatic strategy—it is an ethical commitment. At its core, ethical engagement respects the dignity, rights, and agency of affected populations. In humanitarian contexts, where power asymmetries are acute and communities may be navigating trauma, displacement, or exploitation, these principles become even more critical. This section highlights two foundational ethical commitments: informed consent and do no harm.

Informed consent in humanitarian response requires more than a checkbox on a form—it must be an ongoing, voluntary process grounded in clarity, transparency, and respect. This means individuals must understand what they are being asked to participate in, what information is being collected, and how it will be used. They must also have the genuine ability to opt out or withdraw without consequence.[40]

In contexts of displacement, trauma, or language barriers, consent is often compromised by coercion (implicit or explicit), misunderstanding, or mistrust. It is the responsibility of humanitarian actors to create conditions for informed decision–making—this includes plain–language explanations, cultural and linguistic interpretation, and spaces for people to ask questions or raise concerns.[41]

"Consent is any freely given, specific and informed indication of an agreement by the data subject to the processing of their personal data."[42]

The Do No Harm principle is a foundational ethical obligation in humanitarian action, requiring that all interventions actively avoid causing harm to the people and communities they are intended to support. As articulated by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), this means ensuring that humanitarian efforts do not exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, fuel conflict, reinforce inequalities, or create new risks. It also entails assessing and mitigating the potential negative impacts that interventions may have on local social cohesion, governance systems, and cultural or belief structures. Do No Harm is not only about avoiding immediate physical harm—it includes protecting the broader social fabric that sustains community resilience and trust.

In the context of community engagement, Do No Harm extends beyond physical and psychological protection to include social, political, and reputational harm. Operationalizing this principle involves risk analysis, context monitoring, and protective design choices—such as safeguarding feedback processes, ensuring voluntary and informed participation, and establishing contingency plans for harm mitigation. Critically, Do No Harm is not a passive stance—it is a proactive commitment to minimizing unintended consequences while centering the dignity, rights, and safety of affected populations at every stage of the humanitarian response.[43]

Systems and Structures for Engagement

Community Representation. Effective community engagement relies not just on inclusive dialogue but on representative structures that can translate community voice into decision-making power. Models such as National Reference Groups or Refugee Engagement Forums (REF) demonstrate scalable approaches to participatory governance, particularly when embedded in existing local systems. These bodies are most effective when elected or appointed through transparent, community-led processes and when their composition reflects gender, age, disability, and ethnic diversity.[44]

However, representation alone is not enough. Without meaningful authority, access to information, and integration into formal decision-making processes, representative bodies risk becoming symbolic—present in name, but lacking influence. This risk is compounded when such structures are under-resourced or unsupported over time. For community representation to serve its function, it must be backed by clear mandates, training opportunities, and feedback mechanisms that ensure accountability both to the community and from external actors.

In systems thinking terms, representation must be structurally embedded—not only invited. This means ensuring that representatives participate not only in consultation exercises, but in agenda-setting, budgeting, and review processes. Only then can engagement move from dialogue to governance.

Safe-to-Fail Innovation. In complex humanitarian environments, rigid planning models often discourage experimentation. Yet, when uncertainty is high—as it often is—adaptation becomes essential.

Safe-to-fail innovation offers an alternative: small-scale, low-risk experiments that prioritize local knowledge, encourage iterative feedback, and welcome learning from failure.[45]

> "It offers them a way to practice new approaches and a safe space to fail."[46]

This approach allows community members and field teams to test new ideas without requiring them to "get it right" the first time. When properly supported, safe-to-fail models shift the focus from fear of failure to resilience through learning. Programs like Participatory Action Learning in Crises (PALC), part of the Supporting Community-Led Response (SCLR) model, reflect this ethos by helping communities design, test, and revise their own response mechanisms based on lived experience.[47]

Strategic Design for Sustainable and Adaptive Engagement

Designing for long-term, community-driven engagement requires more than just good intentions. It demands a deliberate strategy that embeds flexibility, equity, and local ownership into the very structure of humanitarian programming. The following design elements are essential for ensuring that community engagement efforts not only succeed in the short term, but also endure and evolve beyond project cycles.

Contextual Adaptability. Engagement strategies that fail to reflect the lived realities of communities are unlikely to be trusted, embraced, or sustained. Adaptability to local contexts means designing tools and processes that are modular—not one-size-fits-all—and capable of evolving in real time. This requires a deep understanding of local power dynamics, conflict histories, and cultural frameworks, along with operational mechanisms that allow field teams to adapt accordingly.

Systems-thinking reinforces that adaptability is not a sign of weakness or compromise—it is a core feature of resilience. Feedback loops, decentralized decision-making, and flexible funding mechanisms are the structural enablers that allow organizations to pivot based on local learning.[48]

Sustainability Beyond the Project Cycle. Sustainable engagement cannot be measured by participation during a project—it is judged by what remains after the project ends. Too often, community engagement practices fade when funding concludes or implementing partners withdraw. True sustainability requires that engagement structures be integrated into existing local institutions and norms.

A systems-oriented design emphasizes early planning for transition and exit, transferring ownership of tools, knowledge, and responsibilities to community actors. When engagement becomes embedded in the community's own rhythms and infrastructure, it is more likely to last, evolve, and serve future needs.[49]

"Community engagement should be embedded throughout the programme cycle and sustained beyond the project lifecycle."[50]

Social and Behavioral Change (SBC) efforts are often framed in terms of messaging—convincing communities to adopt certain practices or attitudes. But systems thinking reframes SBC as a co-creative process. Rather than pushing external narratives, effective SBC emerges from participatory inquiry, grounded in local knowledge and co-designed interventions.

When communities are part of shaping the messages and mechanisms of change, outcomes are not only more relevant—they are more likely to stick.[51]

Sustainable Partnerships are built on who is at the table—and how that table is set. Strategic partnerships should go beyond subcontracting relationships to reflect co-creation, co-accountability, and co-investment. This shift requires a fundamental reimagining of partnership dynamics: not as transactions, but as mutual commitments to transformative change.

From a systems perspective, partnerships are leverage points—places where institutional behavior and power structures can be shifted. When designed with shared ownership and reciprocity, partnerships can dismantle extractive practices and re-anchor engagement in solidarity.[52]

Capacity-Sharing. Traditional capacity building often reinforces harmful hierarchies, casting local actors as lacking and international actors as experts. In contrast, capacity-sharing embraces mutual learning, peer exchange, and the recognition that expertise is distributed—not concentrated.

Systems thinking treats capacity not as a commodity to be delivered, but as a dynamic ecosystem that can be cultivated through relationships. Supporting local leadership, recognizing informal knowledge, and creating platforms for horizontal exchange are all part of rebalancing the engagement equation.[53]

Conclusion

By embracing these core concepts through a systems-thinking lens, humanitarian actors can move beyond checklist engagement to co-create durable, equitable and community led responses. Effective community engagement is not just a better process, it is a structural rebalancing of power and knowledge in humanitarian action.

Community Engagement Standards

Community engagement in humanitarian response is shaped not only by field realities but also by the global standards, frameworks, and operational tools that guide how organizations design, deliver, and evaluate their work. Over the past two decades, diverse models have emerged—each responding to different gaps, operational challenges, or strategic ambitions. While these approaches vary in scope and emphasis, they share a common aim: to ensure that communities are not merely passive recipients of aid, but active, empowered participants in shaping the response that affects their lives.

This section does not prescribe a single "correct" framework. Instead, it maps the core models currently guiding community engagement practice across the sector. These include:

- **Global Guidelines and Normative Standards:** Broad, principles-based commitments that define what effective, accountable engagement should look like across contexts (e.g., Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), Sphere Standards, Grand Bargain 2.0).
- **Operational Frameworks and Standards:** Tools that help humanitarian actors embed community engagement principles throughout the program cycle (e.g., Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), Community Engagement Minimum Standards (CEMS), Minimum Quality Standards).
- **Field-Level Toolkits and Practice Models:** Practitioner-focused models that translate community engagement into everyday field operations (e.g., Supporting Community-Led Response (SCLR), The CHAT Tool).[54]

By examining these frameworks together, this section highlights their overlapping principles—such as participation, accountability, and localization—as well as their distinct contributions. Understanding their unique entry points and audiences allows practitioners, donors, and policymakers to select and adapt the most relevant tools based on their context, goals, and scale.

A summary comparison table follows, providing an at-a-glance reference to how each model functions, whom it targets, and what type of guidance it offers.

Framework	Core Purpose	Target Users	Type
Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS, 2024)	Guiding organizational accountability and program quality	INGOs, donors, humanitarian leadership	Global Guideline
Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)	Embedding feedback loops and transparency mechanisms in programs	Field Staff, M&E teams, cluster leads	Global Guideline

Framework	Core Purpose	Target Users	Type
Sphere Standards (2018)	Designing and delivering rights–based humanitarian responses	Humanitarian actors across sectors, technical advisors	Global Guideline
Grand Bargain 2.0	Shaping policy and funding decisions to support localization	Donors, INGO HQs, policymakers	High–Level Policy Agreement
Supporting Community–Led Response (SCLR)	Enabling full community control of crisis response and recovery	Local actors, community networks	Operational Model / Approach
Community Engagement Minimum Standards (CEMS)	Embedding community engagement principles across the program cycle with practical indicators	Program managers, field implementers	Implementation Standard
Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action TOOLKIT (UNICEF)	Guidance for participatory planning, community dialogue, and inclusive decision–making in humanitarian contexts.	Community facilitators, field staff, project managers	Operational Tool
Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement (UNICEF)	Monitoring, evaluating, and benchmarking community engagement efforts	M&E teams, consortiums, implementing partners	Guiding Framework

Table 1.2: Comparative Look at Community Engagement Standards

Normative Standards and Policy Commitments

Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS, 2024 Edition)

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) outlines nine commitments that organizations shall meet to uphold quality, accountability, and respect for the rights of affected populations. These commitments span the humanitarian program cycle, promote inclusive assistance, robust feedback mechanisms, and responsible use of resources. Unique among global standards, CHS is linked to measurable performance indicators, enabling certification and continuous improvement. The 2024 revision expands guidance on participation, reinforcing that community engagement is not supplementary—it is a fundamental criterion for quality. By mandating community influence at every stage, CHS helps embed participation as a non-negotiable aspect of humanitarian action.[55]

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)

Accountability to Affected Populations, developed through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), is a foundational principle of humanitarian coordination. Rather than functioning as a static standard, AAP is a cross-cutting commitment that emphasizes the agency of affected communities in overseeing and influencing humanitarian assistance. Its five pillars—leadership and governance, transparency, feedback and complaints, participation, and learning—serve as a blueprint for embedding accountability throughout all operations. While AAP is often implemented through tools like feedback systems and communication platforms, its value is in its reorientation of accountability—from donor reporting to community responsiveness.[56]

Sphere Standards (2018)

The Sphere Standards remain one of the most comprehensive global agreements for humanitarian quality and accountability. Built on a Humanitarian Charter and four sectoral standards (WASH, Food Security, Shelter, and Health), the framework grounds service delivery in legal and ethical rights. What distinguishes Sphere is its integration of community engagement throughout: participation, transparency, and informed consent are core operational requirements. The 2018 edition pushes for inclusion at all stages, calling for programs to adapt to local cultural norms, support two-way communication, and respect community leadership in shaping outcomes.[57]

Grand Bargain 2.0

The Grand Bargain, launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and updated in 2021, is a political reform agenda co-signed by donors and humanitarian agencies. Its most transformative commitment—the "Participation Revolution"—calls for affected people to be active participants in shaping aid decisions. The updated Grand Bargain 2.0 streamlines its focus into two priorities: improving funding quality and flexibility, and enabling local leadership. This includes structural reforms such as joint needs assessments, flexible financing, and the removal of barriers that marginalize local actors. Although it is not a programmatic standard, the Grand Bargain has significant implications for community engagement—particularly by tying participation to governance, funding, and system-wide change. It challenges agencies to move beyond field-level engagement and address the power dynamics that shape the humanitarian system itself.[58]

Operational Tools and Models

Supporting Community-Led Response (SCLR)

The Survivor- and Community-Led Response (SCLR) model, developed by Local to Global Protection, repositions communities as primary responders and decision-makers in humanitarian settings. Centered on self-determination, SCLR enables communities to assess needs, design interventions, and lead recovery efforts with flexible resources and minimal external interference. Core elements include community-managed microgrants, low-burden administrative processes, and adaptive learning methods such as Participatory Action Learning in Crises (PALC). By building on local networks and emphasizing social cohesion and shared agency, SCLR offers a strong alternative to conventional top-down humanitarian models.[59]

Community Engagement Minimum Standards (CEMS)

CEMS offers a structured and practical framework for embedding community engagement across the humanitarian program cycle. Developed by the Collective Service, CEMS articulates seven interlinked standards—participation, inclusion, communication, feedback and complaints, coordination, adaptation, and accountability. Each standard is tied to actionable indicators and guidance that help organizations move from theory to practice. The 2022 revision enhanced the focus on participatory monitoring, ethical information use, and safeguarding. CEMS is particularly valuable for field teams, as it balances high-level values with real-world constraints, offering adaptable tools for diverse operational contexts.[60]

Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action TOOLKIT (UNICEF)

CHAT is a multi-agency toolkit developed by UNICEF and CDAC Network, WHO, IFRC and US-CDC, to support high-quality, context-sensitive community engagement throughout all phases of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC). Structured around a detailed "Action Framework," it links specific engagement practices—such as social data analysis, participatory planning, and feedback mechanisms—to operational phases like needs assessment, planning, and monitoring. It integrates foundational standards like CHS and CEMS and includes thematic modules tailored to different types of crises. CHAT also incorporates principles of Social and Behavioral Change (SBC), emphasizing community-driven communication strategies, partnerships with local media, and long-term institutionalization through government and civil society collaboration.[61]

Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement

This framework provides a results-oriented approach to defining, measuring, and improving the quality of community engagement in humanitarian response. Developed through interagency collaboration, it defines high-quality community engagement in practice, using indicators beyond activity tracking to assess effectiveness and influence. Key features include benchmarks for inclusion, responsiveness, and timely feedback utilization. The framework primed for donors, M&E professionals, and coordination bodies seeking consistency across agencies or large-scale responses. Its emphasis on verifiable outcomes—such as changes made in response to feedback or the diversity of community voices heard—helps safeguard against tokenism and supports meaningful, measurable accountability to affected populations.[62]

Conclusion

The community engagement standards and frameworks outlined in this section offer essential foundations for ethical, participatory, and accountable humanitarian practice. Yet in the field, translating these commitments into reality is rarely straightforward. Even the most well-crafted tools can falter when applied within systems marked by entrenched hierarchies, limited funding, and competing institutional priorities.

Striking the right balance between responding to immediate needs and building long-term relationships is key. Community engagement should not be an afterthought—it must be embedded in both rapid response and recovery. This means designing processes that are agile in crisis, but also resilient enough to sustain trust and inclusion over time.

Across operational contexts, community engagement efforts routinely run up against structural and political constraints: tokenistic participation, misaligned incentives, unequal power relations, and community disengagement. These challenges are not the result of poor intentions—they are symptoms of a system that has not yet fully adapted to the participatory models it promotes.

In other words, strong standards do not automatically yield strong engagement. To close this gap, humanitarian actors must confront the risks and tensions that undermine community engagement in practice. The next section examines five core challenges—ranging from the erosion of trust to the inflexibility of funding systems—and offers strategies to mitigate them. Drawing from field-based case studies and practitioner experience, this analysis highlights what it takes to make community engagement not just a principle, but a practice rooted in legitimacy, power-sharing, and community leadership.

To consider: Critical Reflections on Participation

While this literature review highlights participation as a core pillar of ethical and effective humanitarian response, it is equally important to recognize the critical debates surrounding participatory approaches. Scholars such as Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari caution against romanticizing participation as inherently empowering. In their piece Participation: The New Tyranny?, they argue that participatory methods, when implemented uncritically, can reinforce existing power hierarchies, depoliticize development work, and marginalize dissenting voices. Participation may look inclusive while advancing externally driven agendas or predetermined outcomes. These critiques remind us that participation is not a neutral act—it operates within political, social, and institutional dynamics that can both enable and constrain community agency. As such, participatory models must be approached with self-awareness, ensuring they do not replicate the very inequities they aim to dismantle.[63]

Another critical consideration is the potential for social re-engineering—the reshaping of community structures, roles, or norms through well-intentioned but externally driven engagement processes. While this can lead to positive transformations, such as enhanced inclusion or accountability, it can also create unintended disruptions or resistance, particularly when local customs, authority structures, or values are altered without sustained dialogue and consent.[64]

This tension complements earlier discussions of shared accountability and will be explored further in the next section, which examines the practical risks and limitations that shape community engagement in real-world settings.

Part 2
Tackling Engagement – Challenges and Practical Solutions

Tackling Engagement Risks – Challenges and Practical Solutions

While community engagement is widely recognized as essential to effective and equitable humanitarian response, in practice it is often limited by systemic challenges. Drawing from case studies, academic literature and NGO best practice, this section identifies five core challenges that impede the ability of humanitarian organizations to build meaningful and accountable relationships with communities:

1 **Lack of meaningful participation, trust and transparency**
Superficial engagement erodes trust when community voices have little influence over decisions.

2 **Engagement Fatigue**
Repeated, unresponsive engagement processes exhaust communities and weaken participation.

3 **Unequal power dynamics**
Structural hierarchies and exclusionary practices marginalize local voices in decision–making.

4 **Poor adaptation to local contexts**
Standardized tools and approaches overlook cultural, social, and political realities on the ground.

5 **Rigid funding structures**
Inflexible, short–term funding undermines community–driven action and sustainable engagement.

For each risk, this section outlines practical strategies to mitigate harm, strengthen partnerships, and build more responsive and accountable aid delivery.

Lack of Meaningful Participation, Trust, and Transparency

In humanitarian contexts, meaningful participation refers to the proactive inclusion of affected populations in the decisions that shape the programs, policies, and services intended to support them. It is not enough to gather community feedback through one-time consultations or surveys. True participation involves engaging communities throughout the project lifecycle—from needs assessment and design to implementation and evaluation—and ensuring their input meaningfully influences outcomes.

According to Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), meaningful participation is "the processes and activities that allow people and communities to play an active role in all decision-making processes that affect them."[65] This level of engagement improves outcomes, when governing bodies and aid agencies actively seek out the goals, concerns, and values of communities—and those communities, in turn, see that their contributions shape decisions.

Trust and transparency are essential to making this possible. When communities are asked to participate but see little evidence that their voices affect decisions, it fosters skepticism, apathy, or outright disengagement. Transparency in decision-making processes and clear accountability for how input is used are critical to sustaining trust over time. Without this, participation risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive—a checkbox rather than a foundation for equity and shared ownership.[66]

Key Contributing Factors

- Underrepresentation of marginalized groups such as women, youth, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, who are often excluded from standard engagement channels.

- Lack of follow-through: Community members are consulted, but their input is not reflected in program design or resource allocation.

- Historical distrust rooted in extractive engagement: Communities may carry skepticism toward aid actors due to past experiences where their input was solicited but ignored, or used without involvement or attributeon. When local knowledge is treated as data to extract rather than expertise to implement, trust erodes—and participation begins to feel performative or exploitative.

- Weak feedback loops that do not close the gap between input, action, and reporting.

- Opaque decision-making processes, where communities don't understand how or why decisions are made.

Strategies to Mitigate Lack of Meaningful Participation, Trust, and Transparency

Meaningful participation in humanitarian response is more than an ethical imperative—it is essential to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes. Participation becomes meaningful when it moves beyond tokenism and creates real opportunities for communities to shape the decisions that affect their lives. This requires proactive inclusion of underrepresented groups, clear and transparent communication about roles and intentions, and feedback systems that are responsive and integrated into program design and delivery.

Trust and transparency are closely tied to participation: when community members understand how and why decisions are made, and see their input reflected in those decisions, trust is built. Conversely, when participation feels performative or extractive, communities become disillusioned, disempowered, and disengaged. The following examples illustrate how humanitarian actors have operationalized participation, trust, and transparency through deliberate design choices in their staffing, community structures, and decision-making processes.

Explaining the Project' Purpose, Role and Intentions

Establishing trust and transparency in humanitarian response begins well before program implementation—it starts with how an organization introduces itself. Clearly articulating the project's purpose, goals, and methods from the outset is foundational to building credibility and fostering meaningful engagement. Communities have a right to understand why an organization is present in their territory, what it intends to do, and how those actions align with local needs and priorities.

In **Ethiopia** and **Colombia**, for instance, humanitarian actors set a collaborative tone from the outset—not just through early conversations, but by deliberately rethinking their roles and methods to foster locally defined ownership.

In Ethiopia, World Vision Ethiopia (WVE) piloted the Accountability Learning Initiative (ALI) in two field offices in the Amhara region to strengthen community understanding of its mandate and improve feedback mechanisms.

A key issue was that community members in some areas felt uninformed about WVE's activities and role. To address this, WVE tested the use of noticeboards as a communication tool. In one site, regular use of the boards—even in low-literacy settings— helped foster peer-to-peer information-sharing and icreased trust.

In the other site, where boards were underused, communities reported limited awareness of WVE's work. The ALI pilot revealed that visible, consistent communication tools—when tailored to local context—can clarify project intentions and strengthen engagement. Interviews also surfaced broader lessons around power and perception, including the need to communicate clearly not only what an organization can do, but also where its role ends.

In **Colombia**, Movilizatorio confronted civic distrust and disengagement by intentionally rethinking how it introduced itself to communities—not as a service provider, but as a facilitator of shared action. From the outset, the organization focused on building trust through clarity: being transparent about its role, values, and limitations.

Rather than over-promising outcomes, Movilizatorio emphasized co-responsibility and care, framing participation as a joint effort.

A core challenge was sustaining engagement, especially among youth. To address this, they used participatory tools like peer-led initiatives, collaborative design spaces, and storytelling campaigns that fostered a sense of ownership and belonging. Field teams adapted roles to match local interests and made space for community-driven leadership.

Interviews highlighted that clear communication of purpose—paired with visible early actions and emotional connection—was key to building legitimacy. This helped manage expectations and reduce dependency, while reinforcing the idea that meaningful participation also involves shared responsibility.

Crucially, these teams didn't just explain what they hoped to deliver—they also shared what was outside their control. This helped prevent disappointment and supported a culture of transparency. Framing these conversations as mutual exchanges—rather than announcements—enabled communities to challenge assumptions and shape expectations from the beginning.

Relatable and Context-Sensitive Project Teams

The composition of a project team plays a critical role in shaping the accessibility, equity, and impact of community engagement efforts. When team members reflect the cultural, linguistic, and gender identities of the communities they serve, they are more likely to build trust, communicate effectively, and elicit honest feedback. Conversely, when humanitarian actors appear disconnected from or unfamiliar with local norms, engagement efforts risk being perceived as extractive, performative, or even threatening.

In **Pakistan**, World Vision Pakistan (WVP) identified a major barrier to meaningful participation: women were routinely excluded from formal feedback mechanisms due to restrictive cultural norms. To address this, WVP adapted its accountability systems through the introduction of Female Community Feedback Officers (FCOs)—women from local communities trained to engage directly with other women in ways that were culturally acceptable and safe. FCOs conducted informal conversations, household visits, and small group discussions, enabling women to share concerns and experiences that had previously gone unheard.

The result wasn't just broader participation—it was better information. By removing social and cultural barriers to expression, WVP produced more equitable and responsive programming. Much of this success sttemed from the credibility and trust held by FCOs, due to their local identities, was essential to the strategy's success.

Hiring locally and with intention is not optional—it's strategic. Culturally competent teams don't just speak the right language—they understand power dynamics, gender norms, and trust networks. Their presence signals respect. Their work strengthens credibility. Their insights make programming more ethical and effective.

Structured and Inclusive Representation

For engagement to be meaningful, communities must see themselves in the spaces where decisions are made. That means building representation systems that are inclusive by design—not just in theory—and that center legitimacy, diversity, and local trust.

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Rather than creating a new structure, the REF was built on the Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs)—democratically elected bodies that already held legitimacy within settlements.

Members were selected from RWC III leaders across all settlements and Kampala, using criteria that balanced representation by geography, population size,gender, and youth.

This design ensured that participation was structured, inclusive, and grounded in systems communities already trusted.

By creating a two-way communication channel—where representatives both consulted their communities and shared outcomes back—the REF strengthened accountability and helped refugee perspectives shape national policy in a sustained and credible way.

Sudan's Sudan's Sudan's Marhab Interagency Community Feedback Mechanism scales a localized, structured approach to participation across all 19 states, including hard-to-reach areas. The system includes over 300 community-based feedback committees and a network of 100+ women-led, disability, and community-based organizations (WLOs, DPOs, CBOs). This broad representation embeds inclusion and accessibility into the feedback process. Marhab also serves as a multi-agency coordination platform, used by 30+ humanitarian actors and aligned with national coordination structures such as the ICCG and HCT—ensuring community input is connected to decision-making and service delivery across sectors.

Meanwhile in **Pakistan**, World Vision's use of Female Community Feedback Officers (FCOs) offers a reminder that representation isn't only formal. When women are excluded from public forums due to cultural norms, responsive organizations create parallel pathways for voice—through informal conversations, local partnerships, and context-sensitive outreach.

Across contexts, the lesson is clear: inclusive representation requires more than an open invitation—it demands structural design, power-sharing, and cultural awareness. When communities recognize decision-making spaces as legitimate, they engage more deeply and sustainably.

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In **Uganda**, a persistent challenge was that refugees were rarely included in national-level decision-making processes, despite strong community-level leadership. Speaking with the NGO Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) highlighted this challenge, noting that many affected individuals feel their knowledge and input are not respected or meaningfully considered. There is a desire for two-way communication with aid providers, rather than one-sided information sharing. To address this gap, the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) was established in 2018 as a national consultative body that could connect refugee voices to policy forums such as the CRRF Steering Group.

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Collaborative Decision-Making with Communities

Collaborative decision-making represents one of the clearest departures from traditional, top-down humanitarian practice. Rather than seeking community validation for pre-designed plans, this approach invites communities to define needs, set priorities, and lead execution. The result is not just better-targeted programs, but a redistribution of authority that enhances equity and accountability.

In **Ukraine,** the Survivor- and Community-Led Response (sclr) model offers a compelling example of collaborative decision-making in action. Following their exclusion from formal humanitarian coordination, local community groups—including informal networks, IDPs, and churches—were empowered to lead response efforts through flexible microgrants. Facilitated by the Alliance for Public Health (APH), over 97 grants were issued across 18 oblasts, reaching more than 52,000 individuals. Communities designed their own initiatives—such as communal laundry stations, art therapy centers, and bomb shelter retrofits—based on local needs and capacities.

Rather than acting as gatekeepers, humanitarian actors served as facilitators, helping with logistics while preserving community ownership. Crucially, decisions about which projects to fund were made by local selection committees composed of community members, religious leaders, and municipal officials. A conversation with GTS reinforces the importance of embedding community engagement and participation at the center of humanitarian response. They emphasize that failing to do so leads to wasted resources, missed opportunities, and ineffective outcomes. GTS also challenges the notion that accountability to affected populations is a stand-alone component that may or may not be funded, instead, they stressed that donors increasingly expect communities to be meaningfully engaged and consulted. When this engagement is lacking, there is often a clear disconnect between the priorities expressed by communities and the aid or interventions they ultimately receive.

Given growing funding scrutiny, community engagement must be central. This structure brought transparency to resource allocation and affirmed that those closest to the crisis were capable of managing its response. The sclr model shows how shared governance, when paired with flexible, low-barrier funding, can restore trust and shift power meaningfully toward affected communities.

In East Africa, refugee-led organizations (RLOs) were often sidelined from formal coordination structures, resulting in limited participation and mistrust in humanitarian decision-making. To counter this, RLOs organized and led a Regional Protection Dialogue with over 70 participants—including representatives from 44 RLOs, UNHCR, NGOs, and donors. RLOs set the agenda, facilitated the sessions, and collectively authored a regional statement of demands and recommendations. This process created a platform where displaced communities could shape priorities and policies directly, rather than being consulted after decisions were made. The dialogue fostered trust, visibility, and more accountable engagement between local actors and the broader humanitarian system.

Together, these models show that power-sharing is not only feasible—it's essential. When communities are trusted to lead, humanitarian responses become more effective, more just, and more sustainable. Co-decision-making isn't a symbolic gesture; it's a structural choice to share control, build trust, and center dignity.

Intentional Feedback Mechanisms and Processes

In many humanitarian contexts, feedback mechanisms exist on paper but fail in practice. They may be inaccessible, overly technical, or disconnected from decision-making. As a result, affected communities may stop engaging—feeling that their voices go unheard or unheeded. A functional feedback system must be timely, transparent, and explicitly tied to programmatic outcomes.

The Afghanistan Community Voices & Accountability Platform offers a compelling model for restoring trust and ensuring meaningful participation through intentional, inclusive feedback processes. The initiative conducted community validation workshops with nearly 1,000 participants, where residents were invited to review, confirm, or challenge needs assessment findings—before decisions were finalized. This practice helped ensure that humanitarian plans were not only data-driven but grounded in lived experience, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

Feedback was also used as a tool for inclusive planning. Through household-level consultations—particularly with women and caregivers—new insights emerged around caregiving responsibilities and aid distribution dynamics. In response, targeting criteria and assessment tools were revised to reflect these realities. With support from a multi-channel system (including local language tools, female enumerators, and offline options), the platform created a trusted, context-sensitive mechanism for collecting feedback and using it to directly shape operational decisions and the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

In **Venezuela**, the UN Contact Line showcases how centralized systems can still be people-centered. Designed for accessibility, the Contact Line allows communities to submit questions or complaints—confidentially and across agencies. Its value lies not just in intake, but in action: reports are routed to relevant actors through a coordinated referral process. This reinforces transparency, avoids duplication, and gives community members confidence that speaking up will lead to follow-up.

Taken together, these cases highlight a core principle: feedback is only empowering when it changes something. For that to happen, organizations must invest in: Clear feedback channels tailored to the local context, dedicated processes to analyze and act on what's heard, and transparent communication to show what's been done in response.

Engagement Fatigue

Engagement fatigue–also known as assessment fatigue or consultation fatigue–occurs when communities or humanitarian workers become disillusioned or disengaged from continued participation in assessments, consultations, or feedback mechanisms. In humanitarian contexts, it often arises from repeated requests for inputs with little or no visible follow–up or programmatic change.

There are two primary forms of engagement fatigue. At the community level, affected populations may grow weary of being surveyed or consulted without seeing results, leading to withdrawal from further engagement and mistrust.[67] At the operational level, field staff may experience burnout due to under–resourced engagement roles, high turnover, and the emotional burden of repeated consultations in high–stress environments. In both cases, engagement becomes extractive rather than empowering.[68]

The consequences of unaddressed engagement fatigue are significant: weakened trust, declining response rates, reduced accuracy in needs assessments, and missed opportunities for community–driven innovation.[69] Engagement fatigue diminishes meaningful participation, weakening the credibility of humanitarian action and its ability to deliver effective aid..

Key Contributing Factors

Community–Level Drivers

- Over–consultation: Repeated surveys or needs assessments—often from multiple organizations—overwhelm communities and contribute to fatigue.[70]
- Lack of tangible results: When communities do not see how their input influences decisions or leads to visible changes, participation can feel symbolic or performative—reinforcing mistrust and discouraging future engagement.[71]
- Extractive or disjointed engagement practices: Poor coordination among organizations, unclear communication, and inconsistent follow–up reduce trust and the quality of participation.[72]

Operational and Systemic Drivers

- Limited resources: Staff often lack time, tools, or training to carry out meaningful, and sustained engagement.[73]
- Inflexible funding: Rigid program cycles may not allow space to incorporate feedback or adapt interventions.[74]
- Community engagement as a secondary priority: When treated as an add–on rather than core to program design, engagement efforts often lack depth or continuity.

Strategies to Mitigate Engagement Fatigue

Engagement fatigue arises when communities become disengaged due to repeated, burdensome, or poorly structured participation processes. In crisis-affected settings, communities are often asked to participate in surveys, assessments, and consultations without seeing clear results or changes. Over time, this lack of responsiveness erodes trust and discourages future engagement. Additionally, humanitarian workers responsible for collecting and responding to feedback may experience burnout when feedback systems are unclear, under-resourced, or treated as an administrative add-on rather than a core part of programming.

Addressing engagement fatigue requires shifting from extractive models of data collection to participatory systems built on transparency, purpose, and reciprocity. Feedback processes should be designed with communities—not just for them—and implemented in a way that balances timeliness with intentionality. This means clarifying what type of input is needed and when, embedding engagement into regular program cycles, ensuring consistent follow-up on community concerns, and investing in staff and community capacity to manage feedback. When engagement is structured, responsive, and respectful, it becomes a pathway for building trust rather than a source of frustration or fatigue.

Clarify Roles and Resource Feedback Staff

Internal systems for tracking and triaging feedback are critical. In Pakistan dedicated MEAL staff ensure that all input is logged, reviewed, and responded to—preventing community insights from being lost or deprioritized. In Syria, the SafeLine initiative outlines clear SOPs and referral pathways, reducing the frustration that arises when issues are passed between organizations without resolution.

In Venezuela the Línea de Contacto's shared governance and staffing model helped address engagement fatigue by reducing the burden on individual agencies and staff. Instead of duplicating efforts, participating agencies contributed to a centralized feedback and PSEA mechanism coordinated by OCHA. Dedicated personnel were hired to manage operations, and each agency contributed 1% of its CERF allocation to support staffing, communications, and CRM systems. This pooled model not only standardized how complaints were addressed, but also ensured that feedback responsibilities were clearly defined and adequately resourced, preventing burnout and promoting consistency across the response.

When feedback is treated as a shared responsibility—with dedicated systems, clear roles, and built-in transparency—it transforms from a burden into a trust-building asset. These examples demonstrate that sustained engagement depends not just on asking for input, but on creating environments where communities see that input reflected in outcomes. Addressing engagement fatigue requires more than streamlining—it calls for a rebalancing of expectations, resources, and accountability across every level of the response. The next strategy explores how pacing, timing, and communication practices can further reduce strain and foster more meaningful participation.

Diversify Feedback Channels to Reduce Burden and Expand Reach

Engagement fatigue can often be traced to overreliance on a narrow set of tools—town halls, surveys, or repeated interviews—placing strain on both communities and the local leaders facilitating participation. Reducing this burden requires supporting community leaders with a variety of accessible, adaptable, and low-burden engagement tools that reach diverse groups and minimize duplication.

In Uganda the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) built out a decentralized communication system using WhatsApp and Telegram groups. These digital channels allowed elected leaders to maintain ongoing dialogue with constituents across dispersed settlements, gather real-time feedback, and report on decisions—without requiring frequent in-person meetings.

Similarly in, Ukraine, the Survivor- and Community-Led Response (sclr) model recognized that community leaders were often overburdened by formal engagement processes while still actively responding to crisis needs. To reduce engagement fatigue and sustain momentum, the program emphasized peer-to-peer learning and horizontal exchange across local groups. APH facilitated digital connection using messaging platforms that enabled rapid communication, resource sharing, and problem-solving between community-led initiatives across 18 oblasts.

This informal infrastructure allowed local actors to remain engaged and informed without relying on rigid reporting cycles or repeated external consultations. The approach demonstrates how well-facilitated, low-pressure communication channels can sustain participation and build resilience while respecting the capacity limits of community leaders.

In Sudan, community members were facing consultation fatigue from repeated, uncoordinated engagement efforts by multiple humanitarian actors. The Marhab Interagency Community Feedback Mechanism responded by centralizing feedback collection across 30+ agencies, creating a unified system that reduced duplication and eased the burden on affected communities. Marhab streamlined the experience through shared intake forms, service mapping at national and sub-national levels, and interagency SOPs for referrals and feedback handling.

These tools, aligned with coordination bodies like the ICCG and HCT, allowed communities to engage once while ensuring their feedback reached multiple actors—illustrating how system-level coordination can meaningfully reduce engagement fatigue.

At a hyper-local level, World Vision in Pakistan enhanced outreach by collaborating with community-based organizations to conduct door-to-door engagement. Leveraging the trust and familiarity these groups had within their communities, members increased awareness of the Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism (BFM), and offered more personalized invitations to participate—especially important in settings where public meetings may not be accessible or culturally appropriate for everyone.

Across these examples, the lesson is consistent: sustainable engagement hinges on reducing the burden of participation. Whether through digital channels, shared infrastructure, or trusted intermediaries, expanding the toolkit of community leaders can ensure feedback remains inclusive and consistent—without becoming a source of burnout.

Align Community Engagement with Key Decision Points

Engagement fatigue often stems not from too much participation, but from poorly timed or unfocused participation. When feedback is solicited without a clear purpose or outside of key decision-making windows, it risks becoming extractive rather than impactful. A more sustainable approach involves aligning engagement moments with the specific phases of humanitarian programming—ensuring community input is both timely and actionable.

In Uganda, the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) anchors its consultation schedule to the planning calendar of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). By holding quarterly meetings that coincide with national decision-making cycles, the REF ensures that feedback is delivered at the moment it can shape real outcomes. This reduces pressure on community leaders to continuously consult and report, while increasing the strategic value of their engagement.

A similar model is used in Afghanistan, the Community Voices & Accountability Platform offers a model for reducing engagement fatigue by aligning community feedback with key decision-making moments. Feedback is systematically integrated into national coordination structures—including Technical Working Groups (TWGs) and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT)—ensuring that community input informs each phase of the humanitarian cycle, from needs assessment to response planning and adaptation.

Rather than collecting feedback in isolation, the process is phased and synchronized across agencies, allowing communities to provide input once per phase with the assurance that it will be reviewed and acted upon. Feedback results are analyzed quarterly, visualized through Power BI dashboards, and translated into advocacy briefs used by response planners and donors. This intentional timing reduces duplication and consultation fatigue while reinforcing the credibility and purpose of community engagement.

These examples illustrate a key systems insight: engagement is most sustainable when it is intentional, structured, and visibly linked to influence. Rather than treating community input as a constant requirement, planning when and why feedback is needed creates space for reflection, response, and shared learning. This makes the engagement process more transparent, respectful, and ultimately more effective for all involved.

Train and Support Project Staff to Sustain Engagement Systems

Sustainable community engagement depends not only on community willingness, but on the capacity of staff to manage and respond to feedback reliably. When engagement is treated as an add-on—or when staff are unclear, overwhelmed, or undertrained—feedback loops break down, questions go unanswered, and trust erodes. To reduce fatigue and foster lasting participation, humanitarian teams must be equipped with clear roles, realistic workloads, and ongoing support.

In Nepal, field research revealed that high staff turnover and overwhelming caseloads led to gaps in feedback follow-up. This breakdown wasn't caused by flawed tools, but by overburdened teams. A key takeaway: no engagement strategy can succeed without structured staffing plans and support mechanisms. Clear responsibilities, time allocation, and coordination routines are essential.

Some organizations address this by decentralizing engagement duties. Training local volunteers and community facilitators to collect and respond to feedback can expand reach and reduce pressure on core teams. These local actors often hold deeper trust and familiarity with the community, further strengthening participation and response quality.

In Pakistan, World Vision implemented regular sensitization trainings for both staff and partner community-based organizations (CBOs). These sessions focused on strengthening understanding of the Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism (BFM), building staff confidence in explaining its function, and encouraging proactive outreach. Importantly, field staff routinely carved out space during public meetings to explain the BFM and collect community concerns—making feedback a core, visible feature of program delivery, not a peripheral task.

Together, these examples reinforce a core principle: engagement is only as strong as the people who carry it out. Supporting frontline staff through training, workload management, and structured protocols doesn't just improve feedback systems—it protects against burnout and builds stronger, more trust-based relationships between communities and humanitarian actors.

Unequal Power Dynamics

Power imbalance between humanitarian actors and local communities are deeply embedded in the structure of international aid.[75] These dynamics are often shaped by donor priorities, institutional frameworks, and organizational hierarchies. As a result, affected communities frequently have limited control over how priorities are set, how programs are designed, or how resources are distributed.[76] This disconnect can foster mistrust, undermine the legitimacy of interventions, and reduce long-term effectiveness.

Power asymmetries also exist within communities, where internal hierarchies, social norms, or historical marginalization may silence certain voices–particularly women, youth, ethnic minorities, or persons with disabilities. In this context, navigating power dynamics requires more than acknowledging inequality.[77] It demands intentional strategies to elevate local expertise, share decision-making power, and ensure participation reflects the diversity of the community itself. [78]

When power is not shared or interrogated, community engagement risks becoming performative rather than participatory.[79] Projects may replicate existing inequities or exclude the very populations they aim to support. Moreover, disempowered communities may disengage entirely, perceiving aid efforts as externally imposed or extractive.

Key Contributing Factors

Structural Drivers

- Top-down decision-making: Agencies often operate within rigid donor frameworks that prioritize speed and scale over shared governance.[80]
- Donor-driven priorities: Project timelines, focus areas, and deliverables are often shaped more by external agendas than local needs.[81]
- Administrative bureaucracy: Institutional norms and coordination bottlenecks limit flexibility and responsiveness.[82]

Relational and Cultural Drivers

- Historical mistrust: Past experiences of exclusion or harm can create skepticism about engagement processes.[83]
- Language and communication barriers: Misinterpretation, translation gaps, or overreliance on formal language can limit meaningful dialogue.
- Socioeconomic hierarchies: Wealth, gender, education, or social status often determine whose voice is heard and whose is overlooked.[84]
- Perceived vs. actual power: Even with formal representation, community actors may lack real influence if decisions are still controlled by agencies.[85]

Operational Challenges

- Lack of field-level authority: Frontline staff often cannot act on community feedback without external approval, reinforcing top-down dynamics.[86]
- Time constraints: Building trust and shifting power takes time—something not always built into short-term project cycles.

Strategies to Mitigate Unequal Power Dynamics

Power imbalances are deeply embedded in the structure and delivery of humanitarian aid. International organizations often hold control over resources, timelines, and decision-making authority, while local communities—those most affected by crises—have little say in how aid is designed or delivered. These imbalances are not only external (between international actors and local communities) but also internal, as community structures themselves can marginalize women, youth, and other underrepresented groups.

Mitigating unequal power dynamics requires intentional systems that transfer decision-making authority, elevate local leadership, and respect existing community structures. Without these, engagement can feel extractive and disempowering—further entrenching inequality and undermining trust. The following examples demonstrate how organizations have worked to redistribute power more equitably through structured roles, democratic representation, and principled partnerships with local actors.

Give Field Teams the Authority to Respond

Unequal power dynamics are often reinforced within humanitarian organizations themselves—where field teams, despite being closest to communities, lack the authority to act on the feedback they collect. When decision-making is overly centralized, local engagement becomes symbolic: feedback flows upward, but decisions come down delayed, filtered, or disregarded.

To shift this, organizations must decentralize authority and define clear thresholds for field-based decision-making. In Ethiopia, as documented by CDA, regular feedback-sharing sessions between frontline staff and senior leadership helped elevate local insights and increase program responsiveness. These sessions fostered reflection not just on what communities said—but on how internal structures supported or stifled follow-through.

World Vision Pakistan (WVP), offers a more formalized model. There, field teams are empowered to make autonomous, real-time adjustments for non-sensitive issues. For high-risk concerns—like fraud or protection violations—a structured referral system connects frontline staff to MEAL teams, who escalate cases as needed. This layered approach balances agility with accountability.

In Syria, SafeLine's initiative addressed power disputes around information by introducing tiered data access protocols. By defining who could view, act on, or refer specific types of feedback, the model reduced confusion, ensured confidentiality, and clarified authority across agencies working in complex settings.

Across these examples, one lesson is clear: empowering field teams isn't just about speed —it's about legitimacy. When those engaging communities have real authority to act, engagement becomes more than performative. It becomes a practice rooted in shared decision-making, transparency, and respect for local knowledge.

Centering Local Leadership and Avoid Top–Down Solutions

Power imbalances are often reinforced not only through global hierarchies but also through field–level decision–making structures that default to top–down control. Too often, humanitarian programs arrive with pre–packaged solutions, sidelining the knowledge, priorities, and social infrastructure that already exist. This not only undermines effectiveness but also erodes trust, reduces sustainability, and perpetuates dependency.

Equitable engagement demands a shift in posture—from directing to enabling. Field teams must see themselves as collaborators within a local system, not as external fixers. This means supporting, not supplanting, the actors and institutions already responding to crisis with creativity and resilience.

In Ukraine, the Survivor– and Community–Led Response (sclr) model directly challenged traditional, top–down humanitarian structures by placing community actors at the center of project design and delivery. Instead of implementing externally designed programs, humanitarian facilitators supported informal and formal local groups—including IDPs and church networks—as they developed, funded, and carried out their own recovery projects. These included water station repairs, bomb shelter adaptations, and communal support spaces. Facilitators provided logistical and budgeting guidance, but intentionally stepped back from shaping project content. This "coaching, not commanding" approach reframed relationships between NGOs and communities, reinforcing local agency and treating communities not as beneficiaries, but as equal partners in the response.

In East Africa, refugee–led organizations (RLOs) confronted entrenched power imbalances that often excluded them from decision–making and funding processes. Rather than treating displaced individuals as beneficiaries or research subjects, the initiative positioned RLOs as co–researchers and strategic actors. Refugee leaders were trained to conduct interviews, analyze findings, and shape the agenda for a Regional Protection Dialogue, which they also helped design and facilitate.

By co–authoring a collective statement of demands and engaging directly with donors and UNHCR, RLOs asserted their role as experts and decision–makers. This approach challenged top–down models and re–centered those with lived experience as primary drivers of humanitarian policy and practice.

To address entrenched power dynamics in humanitarian response, Sudan's Marhab system placed a strong emphasis on local leadership and transparent data governance. Participating civil society organizations signed formal data–sharing agreements supported by a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA), ensuring that community data would be handled with transparency, consent, and accountability. An Information Sharing Protocol endorsed by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and field–level access controls reinforced local control over sensitive information. In a context where data often reinforces institutional power, Marhab created mechanisms to ensure information remained a tool for community protection—not external control.

In Afghanistan's the Community Voices & Accountability Platform revealed a critical but often overlooked aspect of power dynamics: the internal inequities within communities themselves. Through feedback collected across channels—including local hotlines, in–person interviews, and household consultations—community members reported issues such as coercion, bribery, and abuse by local gatekeepers involved in aid distribution. Rather than dismissing these as local anomalies, the platform treated them as structural concerns, prompting agencies to build accountability safeguards into program design.

This feedback–driven response reframed power not just as something to shift from international actors to communities, but also as something to be equitably distributed within communities. By recognizing and addressing these internal dynamics, the platform supported more inclusive local leadership while avoiding romanticized or top–down assumptions about community cohesion.

Poor Adaptation to Local Context

In humanitarian response, engagement tools and communication strategies are often developed with a one-size-fits-all mindset—standardized forms, digital surveys, or rigid consultation timelines. However, this approach rarely reflects the linguistic, cultural, technological, and social realities of the communities these responses aim to serve.[87] Without tailoring, engagement risks becoming inaccessible, inappropriate, or even counterproductive.

Adapting to local context means recognizing existing community structures, cultural norms, gender dynamics, communication preferences, and capacity for participation.[88] For example, in some contexts, digital platforms may be inaccessible due to low connectivity or digital literacy; in others, mixed-gender consultations may exclude women due to prevailing norms.[89] Meaningful adaptation requires both flexibility and respect—ensuring that strategies are built around communities, not imposed upon them.[90]

Key Contributing Factors

Design and Delivery Barriers

- Standardization: Tools and timelines developed centrally often fail to reflect diverse realities in the field.[91]
- Digital divide: Over reliance on digital engagement methods can exclude vulnerable populations—especially women, people with disabilities, and those in rural or insecure areas.[92]
- Language and literacy mismatches: Engagement materials are often produced in dominant or formal languages that may not align with community fluency or preferred formats.

Sociocultural Dynamics

- Cultural norms and power dynamics: Local hierarchies, gender roles, and other social norms may silence certain voices and shape who participates—and who doesn't.[93]
- Weak local partnerships: Failing to engage trusted community leaders, grassroots groups, or existing networks undermines credibility and reduces local relevance.[94]

Operational and Structural Constraints

- Time and resource limitations: Tailoring engagement strategies takes time, knowledge, and coordination—resources often lacking in emergency responses.
- Short project cycles: The pressure to deliver quick results may discourage deeper community dialogue or reflection.[95]

Strategies to Mitigate Poor Adaptation to Local Contexts

Community engagement strategies that fail to adapt to local cultural, linguistic, technological, and social contexts often miss their intended impact—or worse, cause harm. Too frequently, humanitarian organizations rely on standardized engagement tools or imported program models that do not reflect the realities of the communities they aim to serve. Whether it's launching a feedback platform that excludes non-literate populations, conducting consultations in dominant languages only, or failing to recognize existing local governance structures, these misalignments can alienate community members and erode trust.

Adapting to local contexts requires more than translation or logistical adjustments—it demands a genuine investment in understanding how communities organize, communicate, and make decisions. It also involves identifying what is already working and building on those assets rather than replacing them. Effective adaptation starts with listening: learning from local leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to shape engagement processes that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable. Without this grounding, even well-intentioned efforts can be perceived as disconnected, extractive, or disrespectful.

The following section explores strategies that have helped humanitarian actors meaningfully adapt their engagement approaches. These include tailoring feedback mechanisms to match community capacities, co-designing solutions with local allies, and shifting power to those with the strongest understanding of local dynamics.

Adapt Feedback Mechanisms to Local Realities

One of the most immediate and visible ways humanitarian organizations can demonstrate cultural competence is through the design of their feedback systems. Yet too often, these mechanisms rely on standardized tools that overlook how people actually communicate, access information, or express concerns. When systems are not aligned with community realities—whether due to language barriers, literacy levels, technological limitations, or social norms—participation falters and trust erodes.

Adapting engagement tools to local contexts means more than translation—it requires co-creation, flexibility, and responsiveness. In Ethiopia, for example, traditional feedback tools like suggestion boxes and community notice boards were largely ineffective. In response, WVE worked directly with the community to shift strategies: recruiting trusted intermediaries—such as youth leaders and teachers—to gather and relay concerns, hosting demographically-specific focus groups, and launching a confidential phone line to accommodate non-literate populations. These layered approaches not only increased access but improved the quality of input by recognizing how different groups experience and engage with aid differently.

In Sudan, the humanitarian operating context spans both urban centers and hard-to-reach areas, with major disparities in access to infrastructure and technology. To adapt feedback collection to this reality, the Marhab Community Feedback Mechanism employed a mixed-modality design: combining high-tech channels like a toll-free hotline (6664), WhatsApp, chatbot, and email with low-tech, community-based outreach through a network of over 300 localized feedback committees. This flexible model enabled inclusive engagement regardless of digital access, while the integration of a national service map and referral pathways ensured that feedback could still reach relevant actors across the response system. Marhab's design demonstrates how tailoring mechanisms to local infrastructure and social dynamics is key to inclusive and context-sensitive engagement.

In Venezuela, humanitarian actors faced the complex challenge of delivering feedback mechanisms amid low connectivity, political sensitivity, and security risks. To adapt to these conditions, the Línea de Contacto was built around service-specific agreements and tailored data-sharing protocols, ensuring that feedback systems respected local trust dynamics and privacy expectations. Information handling was guided by inter-agency data-sharing agreements and operated under OCHA's neutral coordination, reinforcing community confidence in the system.

By aligning design choices with Venezuela's operational realities—including shared infrastructure and strict confidentiality safeguards—humanitarian actors were able to maintain meaningful engagement even in highly constrained settings.

Pakistan World Vision customized tools not only linguistically—using Urdu and Pashto—but also programmatically. They were integrated into ongoing health, education, and livelihoods work, creating consistency and strengthening relationships over time. This was especially important in contexts where restrictive INGO laws required organizations to maintain a trusted, low-profile presence.

Finally, in Syria, the SafeLine initiative intentionally selected and adapted digital tools based on field partner input and comparative assessments. Humanitarian actors piloted several tools, collected user feedback, and revised SOPs accordingly—ensuring that the final system reflected the operational realities of the cross-border response.

Across these contexts, a common thread emerges: tools work best when they are built with—not just for—the people who will use them. Whether through hybrid designs, tailored data governance, or localized facilitation, adapting feedback systems to reflect local knowledge and constraints makes engagement more credible, accessible, and sustainable.

Strategically Engaging Existing NGOs, Local Allies and Structures

Adapting engagement to local contexts is not only about modifying tools—it is also recognizing and working with the people and institutions embedded in those contexts. Local NGOs, grassroots leaders, and trusted service providers often hold the cultural knowledge, community trust, and operational agility that international actors may lack. When humanitarian engagement overlooks these actors, it risks redundancy, irrelevance, or even harm. But when done right, strategic partnership with local allies can elevate community voice and broaden reach.

In Ukraine, the Survivor- and Community-Led Response (sclr) model prioritized strategically engaging existing community structures rather than building parallel systems. Humanitarian actors partnered with the Alliance for Public Health (APH)—an organization already embedded in local response networks—to identify and support informal community groups, including IDPs, church groups, and local volunteers. Instead of starting from a deficit lens, the approach built on what communities were already doing well: offering support, organizing relief, and identifying urgent needs. This asset-based engagement helped avoid duplication, reduced disruption, and ensured that new initiatives were co-created with actors who held contextual knowledge and trust. By leveraging established relationships and community strengths, sclr grounded its response in the realities of local systems rather than external assumptions.

In Afghanistan, community feedback didn't just inform project delivery—it directly shaped national-level humanitarian planning. The Community Voices & Accountability Platform was strategically embedded within existing humanitarian coordination structures, including the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT), enabling feedback from diverse communities to flow into key decision-making spaces.

Local enumerators, trained within partner NGOs, gathered context-specific insights using tools adapted to Afghanistan's linguistic, geographic, and gender access constraints. These findings were used to inform the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)—from strategic priorities to funding allocations and seasonal timing. By anchoring feedback collection within trusted local partners and aligning it with institutional planning processes, the platform ensured that humanitarian strategy was not imposed top-down, but co-produced with the communities it aimed to serve.

These examples point to a broader principle: effective adaptation starts with humility—recognizing that communities already hold solutions, relationships, and expertise. The role of external actors is not to replace these systems, but to invest in, amplify, and learn from them.

Rigid Funding Structures

Community engagement is frequently deprioritized in humanitarian budgets, often treated as an add-on rather than a core component of effective response. Rigid donor requirements, short-term funding cycles, and the lack of dedicated resources for participatory approaches result in fragmented, inconsistent, and under-resourced engagement.[96] These structural constraints not only weaken accountability to affected populations but also diminish trust, ownership, and long-term impact.[97]

Local organizations and community members are often expected to participate without compensation or capacity support.[98] This reinforces unequal power dynamics, risks burnout, and limits the reach of engagement efforts.[99] Sustained, meaningful community participation requires explicit budget lines for engagement activities, flexibility to adapt to feedback, and financial investment in local actors and systems.[100]

Key Contributing Factors

Structural and Financial Barriers

- Short-term funding cycles make it difficult to invest in long-term relationships or capacity-building.[101]
- Rigid donor mandates restrict how funds can be spent, often leaving little room for adaptive programming.[102]
- Underinvestment in engagement—including interpretation, transport, and facilitation—reduces the effectiveness and inclusivity of community participation.[103]

Sustainability and Equity Challenges

- Unpaid community labor places a disproportionate burden on local leaders and volunteers, compromising equity and potentially leading to burnout.[104]
- Limited financial autonomy among local NGOs, due to donor dependence and lack of alternative revenue streams, restricts long-term sustainability and decision-making power.[105]

Risk of Ethical Dilemmas

- Funding-source misalignment—including partnerships with corporations or investors—may jeopardize mission alignment or damage trust with communities.[106]
- Financial instability from market volatility or unreliable income streams can threaten continuity of services and organizational resilience.[107]

Strategies to Mitigate Rigid Funding Structures

Despite broad consensus that community engagement is critical to effective humanitarian response, funding structures rarely reflect this priority. Engagement activities—especially those focused on co-design, trust-building, or support for local organizations—are often underfunded or treated as ancillary to "core" program implementation. Short-term grant cycles, donor-imposed restrictions, and inflexible budgeting practices limit the ability of humanitarian actors to invest in long-term, community-driven partnerships. As a result, engagement efforts are frequently rushed, under-resourced, and unsustainable.

These funding dynamics not only affect external programming but also place disproportionate burdens on local community members, leaders, and organizations. Volunteers are expected to give time, labor, and expertise—often across multiple initiatives—without compensation, logistical support, or decision-making authority. This dynamic can reinforce power asymmetries and undermine community trust, particularly when participation becomes costly or extractive.

To mitigate these risks, organizations must work with donors to advocate for more flexible, long-term funding models that center community engagement as a core component of humanitarian strategy. At the same time, programs must ensure fair, dignified compensation for community members' time and contributions—whether through stipends, meals, transportation, or direct investment in local leadership. The following subthemes explore ways to address these constraints in practice.

Design Flexible, Trust-Based Funding Models

Rigid, donor-driven funding structures are one of the most persistent barriers to meaningful community engagement. Engagement activities—particularly those that build local leadership, accountability, or trust—are often underfunded or treated as secondary to technical program delivery. Without flexible, long-term investment in community-led efforts, even the most well-intentioned engagement strategies risk becoming extractive, unsustainable, or inequitable.

To address this, humanitarian actors must advocate for and adopt funding models that are flexible, pooled, and grounded in local decision-making. These models not only improve program adaptability and speed, but also help shift ownership and power to the community level.

In Ukraine, the Survivor- and Community-Led Response (sclr) model addressed the limitations of rigid humanitarian funding by introducing a flexible microgrant system. Facilitated by the Alliance for Public Health (APH), the program issued 97 small grants—often under $5,000—to local community groups across 18 oblasts. These grants supported a range of community-designed recovery initiatives, including bomb shelter improvements, water station repairs, and services for displaced families.

The model emphasized light compliance, trust-based oversight, and rapid disbursement, enabling grassroots-led action without the delays and barriers of traditional funding channels. By shifting control to local actors and minimizing bureaucracy, sclr demonstrated how flexible funding can unlock more timely, relevant, and responsive interventions.

In Afghanistan, flexible, trust-based engagement was institutionalized through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF), which allocated dedicated budget lines for accountability activities across the response. These funds supported the core functions of the Community Voices & Accountability Platform—including feedback hotlines like Awaaz, household-level consultations, community validation workshops, and interagency coordination structures. Rather than treating participation as an optional or add-on activity, AHF embedded these costs as core programmatic requirements, signaling that community engagement and transparency are foundational to humanitarian effectiveness.

By normalizing the allocation of funding for accountability processes—and allowing implementing partners to adapt feedback collection tools to their contexts—the AHF supported a model of engagement that was both flexible in design and firm in institutional commitment. This approach helped shift participation from a soft obligation to a budgeted, operational priority.

In Venezuela, the Línea de Contacto—an inter-agency community feedback and PSEA mechanism—was sustained through a collaborative, flexible funding model that responded to severe financial constraints, including hyperinflation and chronic underfunding. Rather than relying on a single donor stream, the mechanism was financed through a cost-sharing structure, with each participating agency contributing 1% of its CERF allocation. Contributions were calculated using a shared formula based on headcount, fundraising capacity, and people reached, ensuring both equity and adaptability. This model distributed financial responsibility, reduced dependency, and demonstrated that inter-agency trust and shared commitment can create resilient engagement infrastructure—even in highly constrained environments.

By contrast, Nepal experience highlights the risks of failing to embed engagement in funding strategies. Community participation efforts there proved difficult to sustain once donor support ended, underlining the need for long-term, institutionalized investment in community engagement infrastructure.

Across these examples, the lesson is clear: flexible, multi-actor, and community-directed funding is not just a financial arrangement—it is a strategy for power-sharing, accountability, and resilience. Community engagement must be budgeted not as an add-on, but as a foundational pillar of humanitarian response.

Providing Stipends or Non-Monetary Compensation for Community Support

Community engagement frequently depends on the unpaid labor of local leaders, volunteers, and informal representatives—individuals who mediate between humanitarian actors and affected populations. Yet when these roles come with personal costs and no compensation, they become inaccessible to many. Over time, this dynamic not only excludes less-privileged voices but also contributes to burnout, resentment, and weakened community ownership.

To build more equitable and sustainable engagement systems, humanitarian organizations must treat compensation—monetary or otherwise—as a core budget item, not a discretionary add-on. Recognizing and resourcing local contributions signals that community leadership is not charity—it is essential labor that deserves respect and support.

In Uganda's the Refugee Engagement Forum (REF), provides a practical model. While community representatives are not salaried, they receive regular support in the form of data stipends, transport coverage, and meal costs for official engagements. This approach preserves the volunteer spirit while ensuring participation does not come at a personal financial loss—especially for those balancing caregiving, informal work, or displacement-related hardship.

Building on this model, field experience and internal team reflections underscore the importance of explicitly budgeting for community participation. Project designs should incorporate flexible compensation mechanisms, whether through stipends, meals during meetings, transport reimbursement, or childcare support. Embedding these costs in program budgets signals that community input is not just welcomed—but valued.

In West Africa, Tostan's Community Empowerment Program (CEP) offers another model rooted in community development. Through Community Management Committees (CMCs), local leaders are given access to community-managed grants, which fund local projects and—in some cases—allow committees to reimburse members for their time and work. This model supports participation while embedding accountability, as funding flows through trusted local structures.

Across contexts, practical support may also include childcare, food, stipends for interpreters or facilitators, or access to shared development resources. These forms of support lower participation barriers and ensure a more diverse range of voices are able to stay engaged over time.

Ultimately, compensation is not only a question of equity—it is a lever for inclusion, accountability, and sustained collaboration. By embedding these costs into program design from the outset, humanitarian actors demonstrate that community knowledge, leadership, and time are not just welcomed—they are valued and indispensable.

Conclusion

Addressing the challenges of community engagement in humanitarian response requires more than isolated best practices—it demands a shift in how engagement is valued, resourced, and structurally supported. Through the five thematic areas explored—meaningful participation, engagement fatigue, power dynamics, adaptation to local contexts, and funding constraints—it is clear that many of the barriers to community engagement stem from entrenched systems that prioritize speed and control over inclusion and shared leadership.

Effective mitigation strategies exist. They are rooted in transparency, flexibility, collaboration, and a commitment to power-sharing. From building decentralized feedback loops to resourcing community-led initiatives, the examples presented throughout this section offer practical, proven ways to strengthen engagement and reduce harm. However, these strategies must be intentionally embedded into organizational culture and planning frameworks.

The next section of this report translates these insights into a practical toolkit for field teams, practitioners, and decision-makers—offering adaptable guidance grounded in real-world experience and designed to support locally driven, accountable humanitarian responses.

Bridging Theory and Practice: Gap Analysis and Insights

While community engagement is widely acknowledged as essential to effective humanitarian response, our research revealed persistent gaps between conceptual frameworks and field-level realities. Through our literature review, interviews, and case study analysis, we sought to not only understand these gaps but also to identify actionable ways to bridge them—informing the development of our field-oriented toolkit.

Gaps in the Literature and Practice

Despite a growing number of global standards and frameworks—CHS, Sphere, Grand Bargain, and CEMS among them—we observed that even with the best intentions, community engagement may not lead to positive outcomes:

- Operationalization remains weak: Many community engagement frameworks emphasize participation and accountability but offer limited practical guidance on how to implement these principles in complex, time-pressured field contexts.
- Too much theory, not enough field focus: Academic literature often critiques power dynamics and structural inequities but lacks concrete, implementable strategies. Conversely, UN/international guidance can be overly generic and disconnected from local realities.
- Monitoring and evaluation dominate: Many resources emphasize measurement and reporting, while fewer support the "how" of engagement—how to build trust, co-design priorities, or communicate transparently at the community level.
- Limited attention to fatigue, trust-building, and power transfer: These core challenges are acknowledged but rarely addressed with tangible, replicable tools.

Insights from Field Interviews

Interviews with practitioners from a diverse range of organizations—local NGOs, UN agencies, INGOs, and policy institutions—offered crucial grounding.

Key takeaways include:

- Operational practicality: There was a strong call for plain-language, low-burden tools that integrate easily into daily workflows. Practitioners emphasized that overly complex or academic materials often go unused in the field.
- Early-phase planning needs: Multiple interviewees highlighted the lack of structured guidance for the earliest moments of engagement—especially around setting expectations, clarifying mandates, and mapping internal community power dynamics. These insights directly informed the development of our research checklist and project-mapping tools.
- Engagement fatigue is real: Field teams and community-facing staff affirmed that repeated, uncoordinated consultations without visible follow-through have led to community disengagement. Interviewees voiced a strong desire for clearer support in closing the feedback loop and communicating how input informs decisions.

- Accountability matters: A recurring theme was the gap between organizational values and operational practice. While community engagement is widely endorsed at the policy level, interviewees shared that field teams are rarely held accountable for delivering on community engagement goals. Without formal expectations, training, or performance indicators, community engagement becomes deprioritized. This insight reinforced the need for internal staff check-in tools and leadership buy-in.

These perspectives directly shaped the structure, tone, and content of the toolkit, which aims to fill these identified gaps and provide realistic, user-centered tools for field teams.

From Insight to Action: Toolkit Design

We designed the toolkit not as a summary of best practices, but as a practical response to the persistent barriers that field staff face in operationalizing community engagement. Drawing on case study evidence, expert interviews, and field-tested frameworks, the tools:

- Begin before arrival, offering guidance on cultural understanding, power mapping, and realistic project scoping.
- Emphasize shared leadership and flexibility, helping teams engage in participatory planning and co-decision-making.
- Provide support for feedback processing, team reflection, and adaptive learning—prioritizing systems that work for both communities and staff.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the toolkit equips teams not just to meet community engagement benchmarks—but to build more trust-based, effective, and responsive humanitarian partnerships.

Part 3
Critical Analysis of ACTED's AGORA 2.0 Methodology

Critical Analysis of ACTED's AGORA 2.0 Methodology

The objective of this section is to connect the findings presented in the theoretical sections of the report, namely "Section One: Literature Review–Foundations of Community Engagement" and "Section Two: Tackling Engagement Risks–Challenges and Practical Solutions," with the AGORA 2.0 methodology employed by ACTED in its projects. Where applicable, the paper proposes potential adjustments aimed at enhancing the robustness of the methodology in terms of community engagement.

Initially, the intention is to critically compare the adopted methodology – AGORA 2.0 – with principles designed to ensure genuinely transformative community engagement, fostering an environment where local actors effectively lead decision–making processes rather than merely being consulted to legitimize the project.

Subsequently, the paper seeks to assess whether the NGO's methodology has effective mechanisms to address the five primary challenges identified in the report related to implementing projects where community engagement is pivotal. These challenges include: (1) Lack of meaningful participation, trust, or transparency; (2) Engagement fatigue; (3) Unequal power dynamics; (4) Poor adaptation to local context; and (5) Rigid funding structures.

Finally, the section aims to present recommendations for adjustments to ensure adherence to best practices in this area and suggest additional points for investigation that may be hindering the effective implementation of the methodology and genuine community engagement within the projects.

Conceptual Field of the AGORA Methodology

Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus Approach

The Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus (Triple Nexus) is an integrated approach designed to bridge immediate humanitarian actions, sustainable development strategies, and peace–building initiatives in fragile contexts or protracted crises.

This approach emerged as a critical response to historically recognized limitations of traditional methods, which are often isolated and disconnected, resulting in inadequate responses to the complexity of contemporary crises[108].

The concept of the Nexus is underpinned by the idea that humanitarian crises are not isolated events but components of broader structural contexts involving institutional fragility, endemic poverty, and social and political conflicts.

Academic literature emphasizes that fragmented and temporary approaches fail to address these structural roots of crises, creating vicious cycles of humanitarian dependence and insufficient recovery[109]. Thus, the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus advocates for a holistic approach that integrates different sectors and phases of assistance into continuous and cohesive planning, aiming for an effective transition from emergency response to sustainable development and long–term stabilization[110].

The AGORA methodology, grounded in the Nexus concept, aims precisely to overcome these shortcomings of traditional approaches through deeply contextualized and territorialized interventions, based on a detailed understanding of local dynamics and genuine community participation[111].

Practical Objectives of AGORA in Operationalizing the Nexus Concept

To effectively operationalize the Nexus, the AGORA methodology sets clear practical objectives guiding its interventions:

- **Territorial Contextualization and Detailed Assessment** – AGORA begins with comprehensive territorial assessments, employing robust research and analysis methods to capture specific local realities. This enables interventions to be precisely tailored to the actual needs and social, economic, environmental, and cultural contexts of the target areas[112].

- **Deep and Inclusive Community Participation** – The methodology places a strong emphasis on active and inclusive participation from local communities. Community engagement extends beyond superficial consultations, aiming to empower communities to make meaningful decisions and lead the planning and implementation of interventions, ensuring high ownership and sustainability of proposed initiatives.

- **Implementation Driven by Local Demands** – AGORA prioritizes interventions directly aligned with community–identified priorities. These interventions are executed by ACTED, IMPACT, or through local partnerships, strengthening local and external networks, ensuring long–term continuity and effectiveness of actions[113].

- **Continuous Strengthening of Local Capacities** – Recognizing that successful interventions require strong local capacities, AGORA continuously invests in local capacity building, participatory governance, and robust participatory monitoring and accountability mechanisms. These actions are crucial to ensuring sustainable outcomes following the formal conclusion of projects[114].

Critiques of Traditional Humanitarian Aid Motivating the Creation of AGORA

The AGORA methodology emerged directly from widely recognized critiques of traditional international humanitarian aid approaches, specifically highlighting the following criticisms:

- **Fragmentation and Isolation** – Traditional interventions are frequently segmented by specific sectors (health, education, food security, etc.) and disconnected from development or peace–building initiatives. The Columbia SIPA report explicitly critiques this fragmentation, emphasizing that such an approach leads to uncoordinated and often ineffective responses to complex and interconnected challenges.

- **Superficial Community Participation** – In many traditional approaches, local communities are only superficially engaged, lacking genuine influence over crucial decisions affecting their lives. This practice results in low ownership and poor sustainability of interventions, often leading to resistance or rejection of proposed actions[115].

- **Disregard for Local Cultural and Political Context** – Many traditional initiatives ignore or minimize local knowledge and existing social structures. As highlighted by the report "Think Local, Act Global," this oversight can lead to culturally inappropriate or politically contentious interventions, further compromising their effectiveness and community acceptance[116].

In response to these critiques, the AGORA methodology offers an integrated and territorialized alternative that prioritizes detailed understanding of the local context, active community participation, and rigorous accountability mechanisms. By adopting this approach, AGORA aims to fundamentally transform traditional humanitarian aid and development practices, making them more relevant, effective, and sustainable in complex and fragile contexts[117].

Analysis of the AGORA 2.0 Methodology Against Theoretical Foundations of Community Engagement

From the literature review and assessments of traditional intervention projects, five fundamental principles for effective community participation and engagement in change processes were identified.

Consultative Engagement vs. Participatory and Power–Sharing Engagement vs. Community–Led Engagement

The Columbia SIPA report distinguishes three main approaches to community engagement:

- **Consultative:** limited to superficial consultations without real community power.
- **Participatory and Power–Sharing:** communities actively participate in governance and decisions.
- **Community–Led:** communities control resources, decisions, and project implementation .

The AGORA methodology clearly moves beyond the consultative approach by explicitly adopting robust participatory practices. Local engagement is strongly emphasized with local interfaces holding substantial roles, identifying needs, setting priorities, making decisions about resources, implementing concrete actions, and conducting continuous monitoring. This structure effectively strengthens power–sharing, promoting meaningful autonomy and local leadership[118].

Fundamental Principles for Community Engagement

The literature highlights several essential principles for effective community engagement: (i) Inclusion; (ii) Local Ownership; (iii) Transparency and Trust; and (iv) Local Adaptive Capacity.

- **Inclusion:** AGORA actively promotes representative diversity, ensuring gender balance and participation of marginalized groups in the composition of local interfaces, guaranteeing equitable participation and decision–making[119].

- **Local Ownership:** The methodology encourages deep participatory planning, empowering communities to identify priorities and local solutions, enhancing a sense of ownership and commitment to projects[120].

- **Transparency and Trust:** Methods such as community scorecards and social audits provide clear, tangible mechanisms to ensure transparency of actions and foster trust between communities and the organization[121].

- **Local Adaptive Capacity:** AGORA conducts detailed contextual assessments through IMPACT, enabling continuous adaptation of actions to specific local needs and realities, strengthening community adaptive capacity[122].

Fundamental Principles for Community Engagement

Literature identifies several risks to meaningful community engagement: (i) Tokenistic or superficial participation; (ii) Elite capture and reinforcement of inequalities; (iii) Poor adaptation to specific local contexts.

- **Tokenistic Participation:** AGORA explicitly adopts structured and deep participatory practices, moving beyond superficial consultation toward transformative participation that effectively empowers communities[123].

- **Elite Capture:** The methodology uses transparent and culturally appropriate processes to form local interfaces, ensuring leadership is representative, legitimate, and inclusive, thus preventing domination by local elites[124].

- **Poor Context Adaptation:** Rigorous and detailed territorial assessments are conducted to deeply understand local contexts, ensuring actions implemented are specifically adjusted to identified realities, preventing inadequate or decontextualized actions[125].

Decolonization and Valuing Local Knowledge

Literature emphasizes that genuine community engagement must promote the decolonization of knowledge, valuing local perspectives and community leadership in decisions and actions

- AGORA actively integrates traditional and local knowledge throughout all phases, valuing local autonomy and respecting traditional cultural and social practices. The methodology maintains an ethical, explicitly decolonizing stance, consistently seeking relevant and culturally appropriate local solutions[126].

Accountability

Literature highlights clear and effective accountability mechanisms between organizations and communities, enhancing trust and mutual learning

- AGORA establishes clear accountability mechanisms through participatory monitoring, regular social audits, and explicit communication and feedback channels. These mechanisms enable communities to actively monitor resource use and action performance, increasing transparency and fostering mutual learning and trust[127].

From its conceptual design perspective, ACTED's AGORA 2.0 methodology fully aligns with the theoretical requirements outlined in the Columbia SIPA report, promoting effective participation, robust accountability, transparency, real inclusion, and valuing local knowledge.

Analysis of Community Engagement Challenges and Responses from AGORA 2.0 Methodology

This section evaluates the methodological responses provided by AGORA 2.0 to address the five primary challenges to effective community engagement in change processes

Challenge 1: Lack of Meaningful Participation, Trust, or Transparency

This challenge pertains to superficial or symbolic participation and the absence of trust and transparency between communities and implementing organizations

Concrete Actions by AGORA 2.0:

- Detailed participatory planning with direct, active community involvement from initial phases, utilizing regular community meetings and deliberative decision-making spaces[128].
- Periodic implementation of social audits where community members oversee resource allocation and evaluate action performance[129].
- Systematic application of specific tools for continuous monitoring and transparent feedback on activity progress[130].
- Regular, clear, and accessible communication regarding decisions, achieved outcomes, and next steps, using means suitable to local realities[131].

Challenge 2: Engagement Fatigue

Refers to community exhaustion from repeated participation in processes without tangible or timely results.

Concrete Actions by AGORA 2.0:

- Immediate implementation of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), ensuring communities see quick, tangible results to sustain interest and motivation[132].
- Diversification of communication channels and methods, including digital platforms and innovative tools to minimize repetitive in-person efforts[133].
- Clear, systematic structuring of community feedback to reduce redundant processes, ensuring each interaction provides perceived value to communities[134].

Challenge 3: Unequal Power Dynamics

This challenge highlights the risk of elite capture or dominance by influential groups, marginalizing vulnerable groups in community decisions.

Concrete Actions by AGORA 2.0:

- Establishment of transparent, culturally sensitive criteria for forming local interfaces, ensuring broad representation, gender balance, and active inclusion of minority groups[135].

- Conducting workshops and targeted training to strengthen capacities of marginalized groups, fostering equitable participation in community decisions[136].

- Reinforcement of traditional and informal local governance mechanisms, integrating them legitimately and representatively into decision-making processes[137].

Challenge 4: Poor Adaptation to Local Context

Occurs when interventions overlook local specificities, resulting in inappropriate actions

Concrete Actions by AGORA 2.0:

- Detailed territorial assessments conducted by IMPACT, ensuring ongoing, in-depth understanding of local contexts, including socioeconomic and cultural dynamics[138].

- Constant validation of proposed interventions through participatory local processes, continuously adjusting actions based on feedback and contextual changes[139].

- Active integration of traditional knowledge and local cultural practices, ensuring implemented solutions are culturally appropriate and effective[140].

Challenge 5: Rigid Funding Structures

Refers to limitations imposed by funding models that impede rapid responses to emerging community needs.

Concrete Actions by AGORA 2.0:

- Use of flexible local sub-grants, allowing rapid and effective adaptations to emerging community demands[141].

- Active mobilization of additional resources through strategic partnerships with international donors, private sector, and alternative financing sources[142].

- Ongoing advocacy actions with donors to promote adaptive financial models aligned with specific local community needs[143].

The AGORA 2.0 methodology provides robust, concrete, and detailed responses to central challenges identified by Columbia SIPA literature. Its actions foster meaningful participation, reduce engagement fatigue, balance power dynamics, ensure rigorous local context adaptation, and introduce flexibility into financial structures, ensuring effective and sustainable interventions.

Critical Analysis of ACTED's AGORA 2.0 Methodology

Considering comparative literature, AGORA 2.0 appears consistent and up-to-date, without significant innovations or methodological proposals indicating the need for a more profound review. All collected information, whether from surveys developed by the SIPA team or other researched sources, suggests that the adopted methodology is, at least theoretically, state-of-the-art.

The increased contracting of ACTED after adopting AGORA 2.0 by major and reputable global project funders (e.g., USAID, NORAD) and, importantly, repeated contracts from these same organizations, serve as the best indicators of this statement. The repeated engagements allow us to infer that evaluations from governments and local organizations were also positive, despite occasional setbacks and specific problems, inevitably arising when operating across such diverse realities and cultures as ACTED does.

Nevertheless, the requested analysis of the methodology might indicate concern for its continuous updating, which is extremely healthy. The only other signs of potential discomfort from local teams regarding the effectiveness of adopted practices to ensure desired community participation and engagement came from observations collected during interviews with local teams, indicating a decrease in participation noted at meetings. This decline might be credited to logistical issues for some community representatives and difficulties in adhering to a stricter work schedule, possibly due to observing specific religious rituals.

These issues apparently do not result from methodological guidelines; on the contrary, deep respect for culture, practices, and deeply rooted moral principles is highly emphasized. However, noise and gaps inevitably occur between a project's conception and its execution and implementation, even when using a suitable and powerful methodological base. These setbacks should be systematically measured through continuous evaluations of projects and their impacts. This concern is fully acknowledged by ACTED and explicitly prioritized in official documentation.

The analyzed documentation outlines the theoretical basis for development and detailing, respecting AGORA 2.0 principles, especially community protagonism in its processes. As these tools are still under development, broader evaluations of their effectiveness remain limited to a few projects, though they have been extremely positive thus far.

Considerations and issues raised to enable or facilitate its universal implementation within AGORA activities, especially those related to the necessary execution time and associated costs, are not impediments to its adoption. It should simply be considered that in reality-changing processes, we always seek a feasible proposal—that is, an intervention plan that can be effectively implemented, technically and politically viable. Economic and financial constraints are part of this broader context and are considered in the consultant-provided documentation.

However, alternative ways of addressing these issues can and should be explored. For instance, prioritizing management indicators that are easier to detect and require fewer resources, capable of promptly signaling undesirable events to facilitate decision-making and adjustments, is also mentioned in ACTED's documentation.

Usually, project evaluations emphasize developed products, their relation to used resources, and defined timelines—what literature classifies as efficiency analysis. We were positively surprised to find ACTED concerned not only with efficiency but also with project effectiveness. Effectiveness relates not just to products but to the relationship between product and result—in other words, the impact on reality and derived changes relative to intended objectives.

This requires clearly described and defined problems, along with immediate, medium-term, and long-term objectives. Literature refers to effectiveness concerning long-term outcomes, assessing how implemented policies and projects collectively contribute to reaching these objectives. These evaluations should be continuously developed alongside stakeholders, as emphasized in the provided documentation.

From a theoretical standpoint, we remind that a plan materializes only through action; otherwise, it remains merely theoretical, incapable of addressing the declared issues for which it was designed. This applies to methodological questions as well. Even if all planned products are executed, interventions may result in low or null impact if poorly implemented. The impact of a plan depends not only on its quality but also on the quality of its implementation.

Both factors are mostly within the planner's governance but are far from guaranteeing the plan's success or effectiveness in promoting the desired reality change, given that the future is also conditioned by variables and invariants outside the planner's control. This context includes economic and political regimes, geographic and climatic constraints, cultural, moral, and religious principles, as well as other actors' positions within the same social context, with potentially differing or conflicting interests and objectives.

Furthermore, methodology comprises a set of principles, guidelines, and tools defining, guiding, and systematizing the postures, practices, and actions of the field team, who are effectively responsible for project implementation. Beyond methodological adequacy and its interaction with organizational structure conditions, as well as rules and systems imposed by project financiers and sponsors, the field team's capability will ensure implementation quality.

The issue becomes even more complex when dealing with organizations like ACTED, which, through AGORA 2.0, has already operated in 17 countries, executing 21 projects, reaching approximately 1.8 million direct beneficiaries, and supporting around 1,294 organizations[144] .

Assuming there are no methodological problems, which indeed seems to be the case, the main critical success factor will be the management and training of human resources involved in implementation.

We do not have information regarding significant turnover of field personnel, but if there is high turnover, we recommend placing greater emphasis on team training.

In summary, as highlighted in AGORA 2.0, if the community does not feel "ownership" of the project, they will not commit to it and will likely become disengaged during implementation or upon the consulting team's departure.

It is worth noting that another highly effective methodological tool is the adoption of problem-based planning approaches. Methodologies such as Strategic Situational Planning (PES), Altadir Method of Participatory Planning (MAPP), among others, have developed tools that greatly facilitate this dynamic.

This approach greatly enhances the organization and development of group activities, mediating discussions and achieving consensus that fosters community ownership of content and proposed solutions.

Clearly defining what is to be understood as the problem to be addressed—in other words, the aspects of reality that require change—significantly facilitates defining the scope and mode of action. This approach prevents divergent understandings among individuals or groups regarding what the problems are and, consequently, the solutions to be proposed and implemented.

Another crucial aspect is reaching consensus on the primary causes that led to the current situation. Without understanding these causes, it becomes more difficult to propose actions aimed at overcoming them.

The Explanatory Causal Flowchart, for example, has proven very effective in this regard, as it encourages collective discussion, compelling participants to articulate their positions and opinions about the problem's causes and their interconnections.

The outcome of this process shifts the evaluation responsibility away from the consultant—who now serves primarily as a facilitator—to the participants, making it a product of their reflection.

Research indicates that this method has been extremely effective. Communities or members of client organizations adopt the proposal as their own, significantly enhancing their commitment to its implementation.

Finally, we would like to emphasize and reiterate that, according to the extensive reviewed material, if there are more systematic issues in project implementation—which apparently is not the case (based on available evaluations and other mentioned indicators)—they are not due to theoretical inadequacies of the AGORA 2.0 methodology.

One of our few observations is that the methodology, likely due to the high diversity of realities it must address, is quite general and includes numerous variables to consider. This makes the field team training process complex, and since these teams will be the primary factor ensuring high-quality project implementation, this complexity is noteworthy.

We have information that more simplified instruction sets are under development, which could significantly aid in team preparation.

Some remaining gaps, such as project monitoring and evaluation, also seem to be well underway.

As a final contribution, recognizing that this is a social context involving multiple actors with diverse interests and objectives, we suggest giving special attention to actor analysis and assessing the political feasibility of plans and initiatives.

Part 4
The Toolkit

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

Why this toolkit?

This toolkit supports & guides meaningful community engagement from project launch to completion. Whether preparing to leave, entering a new community, or mid-implementation, this resource serves as a companion–from checklists, conversation–starters, to practical references.

✓ Prompting and asking the right questions to offering adaptable strategies that engage with communities in a respectful, informed, and responsible way.

How to use the toolkit?

This page is a "read–me–first–guide". Below, find the 3 core sections of the toolkit. Each subheading is **clickable** and will take you to a dedicated main page.

① **Pre–departure** — How to prepare yourself and team before arrival & build your understanding of context, culture, & connection.

② **Needs Assessment** — How to listen actively, learn & gather insights that shape meaningful engagement.

③ **Implementation** — How to co–create with communities & apply knowledge while adapting strategies as your work unfolds.

To dive deeper into subheadings—click to expand & access practical guidance.

End of each phase: explore the **Tools Section** for ready–to–use templates, checklists & guides to support collaborative community–centered work.

Note on Timing of Use: Most of the guidance in this toolkit is intended for use after the immediate onset of a crisis. While some tools may be adaptable to and useful in rapidly changing situations, the majority are designed for more stable phases where there is time and capacity for deeper engagement and planning.

Pre–Departure

Laying the Groundwork

_____

Why this Phase Matters?

This phase is your foundation, to be used before stepping into any community. It's where you build self–awareness and that of your context, sharpen your focus, and start preparing logistically, relationally and ethically.

This stage reminds us that **"no one–size–fits–all"** is more than a slogan; it is a principle that must shape everything that follows. The choices made here deeply influence trust, no–harm, safety, and an ideal success of community engagement efforts.
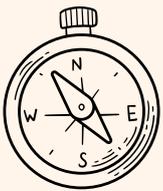
Think of this phase as **your compass**—it helps you understand your own biases and the terrain before you begin the journey.

Key Goals: What Are We Working Toward?

1. Begin by Understanding, Not Assuming

Recognize that each community holds its own history, strengths, and ways of doing things. Before anything else, come prepared to listen, observe, and understand.

2. Position Yourself Within the Context

Develop a working understanding of the local landscape—including social dynamics, power structures, and ongoing efforts—to ensure that your engagement is relevant, respectful, and avoids harm. Be upfront about any power, privilege, or access that may shape your perspective.

Core Actions

1. Conduct Contextual Background Research

Understand the cultural, political & social context prior to engaging in any community. What are the cultural norms? How do religion, gender roles, or history shape people's lives? What tensions might exist?

Taking time to explore these questions helps you show up more prepared, avoid missteps, and adapt your approach to fit the local reality.

⭐ A **research categories–checklist** is included in the Tools section.

2. Clarify Purpose and Role of the Project

Clearly communicating your purpose builds early trust. Teams must explain why Acted is present, what support it can offer, and its limits. Transparency from the start manages expectations, prevents frustration, and creates space to align with local priorities and build shared ownership.

⭐ A **project–mapping worksheet** is included in the Tools section.

3. Assess Existing Efforts, Community Capacity and Coordination Landscape

Communities are not blank slates—there are always existing resources, initiatives, and relationships already in motion. Take the time to understand what's already happening on the ground.

- **Internal to the community**: may include local NGOs, community groups, traditional leaders, or service providers.
- **External actors**: local authorities, UN agencies, or other INGOs operating in the area.

Understanding who is doing what, where, and identifying strengths and gaps helps ensure Acted's role complements—not duplicates—existing efforts. Strong coordination is useful for improving efficiency and building trust with both the community and partners.

⭐ A **stakeholder & capacity mapping sheet** is included in the Tools section.

Needs Assessment

Listening & Learning

Why this Phase Matters?

This phase deepens insights through listening, learning, & co-defining priorities with the community. **A Needs Assessment is about building shared understanding.**

This is where Acted shifts from preparation to real-time engagement. It's the moment to identify who to engage, how, and where, ensuring dialogue is inclusive and priorities emerge from the community, not external assumptions.

Think of this phase as your **sounding board**—it's where active listening meets shared direction, guiding your next steps together with the community.

Key Goals: Where are we headed?

1. Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

Create space for communities to voice their needs, priorities, and lived experiences—without jumping to conclusions or solutions.

2. Build a Shared Picture of Needs and Priorities

Define needs and opportunities together with the community, making solutions more relevant, accepted, and sustainable.

3. Lay the Groundwork for Meaningful Participation

Build trust by demonstrating transparency and collaboration now—the way you engage today shapes participation tomorrow.

Core Action

Use Participatory Tools to Engage and Understand Community Needs

Use **participatory approaches** that invite people to express what matters most to them, in ways that feel natural & inclusive.

Methods can include community mapping, group dialogue, visual tools, or informal storytelling spaces. Prioritize approaches that make space for quieter voices, local knowledge, and diverse perspectives to be heard.

☆ **The Participatory Planning Tool** is included in the Tools section.
It will enable you to work with the community to understand the needs from their perspectives, co-define priorities and articulate a shared vision of impact.

☆ **The How to Workshop Effectively Tool** is included in the Tools section.
It guides steps on what should be taken into account when running a meeting or workshop. This tool is complementary to any engagement you envision to have with the community.

Implementation

Deliver & Deepen

Why this Phase Matters?

This is where plans meet action. Implementation is when we deliver on what was assessed and prioritized with the community. Based on the needs assessment and participatory planning, this phase translates Acted's support into action.

Regular check-ins, internal reflections, and open feedback loops are critical to stay responsive and strengthen trust on the ground.

Think of this phase as your **partnership in motion**—a time to build trust through action and stay open to adjustment.
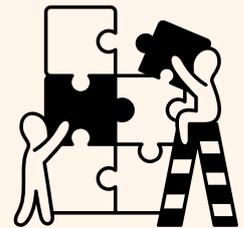
Key Goals: What are we aiming for?

1. Work With, Not Just For the Community

Keep **community members involved** in decisions, roles, and actions. Participation doesn't stop after planing—bring people along at every step.

2. Stay Flexible, Stay Aligned

Field conditions change. **Keep listening, adapt as needed,** and ensure your actions continue to reflect the community's evolving priorities..

3. Build Accountability Through Action

Close the loop by sharing updates, inviting feedback, and being transparent about changes, delays, or limits. Trust is built when communication stays open—especially when things don't go as planned.

Core Actions

1. Internal – Check Ins and Stay Open to Adjusting

Things don't always go as planned—and that's okay. What matters is building in moments to **pause**, **reflect**, and **adjust**.

Check–ins focus on more than outputs—they explore how people feel, how dynamics are evolving, and whether the process still feels right. A quick temperature check within Acted's internal team is just as important as external outputs.

⭐ A **Pulse Check** is included in the Tools section.

2. Close the Loop: Keep Feedback Moving Throughout

Make sure communities know what's happening as activities roll out. Share updates, be upfront about delays or changes, and always create space for feedback.

Closing the loop isn't just about informing––it's about maintaining trust by making people feel heard. It's an opportunity for the community to provide feedback on what is working, what isn't working, learn and course correct / adapt.

Choose feedback channels that fit the community's habits and comfort levels. What works in one setting—like WhatsApp groups, or suggestion boxes—may not work elsewhere. Aim for at least **three community–approved feedback mechanisms**, tailored to what people trust and feel safe with.

⭐ A **Feedback Flow** Template is included in the Tools section.

Tools

- Tool No. 1: Research Checklist

- Tool No. 2: Project Mapping Worksheet

- Tool No. 3: Stakeholder and Capacity Mapping Sheet

- Tool No. 4: Participatory Planning Tool

- Tool No. 5: How to Run Effective Meetings/Workshops

- Tool No. 6: Pulse Check

- Tool No. 7: Feedback Flow

Research Checklist

This research tool is designed for field teams to quickly gather the essential background knowledge before entering a community they are not native or familiar with. It is helpful in building understanding, trust, and adaptive approaches.

✓ **Use this checklist to guide background research and team preparation.** These questions help uncover the lived realities, risks, and social dynamics shaping the community.

Language & Communication

✓	Community-Centered Questions	Field Tips for Implementation
☐	What are the **main languages** spoken in the community? Are there significant dialects or translation needs?	Language is more than translation—it's tied to identity, power, and inclusion. Recognize which languages dominate public conversation and which are silenced.
☐	What **intergenerational shifts** (in values, migration, tech use) are visible between elders and younger people?	Intergenerational dialogue reveals valuable tensions, transformations, and differing world views.
☐	What are the **dominant sources** of trusted information (news, church, radio)?	Identify which voices are credible locally—whether traditional media, elders, digital platforms, or informal networks.
☐	What **public services** (education, healthcare, transport) are available, and who is excluded?	Access is shaped by class, caste, gender, ability, and geography. Look for gaps—not just availability.
☐	What are the most **urgent needs** identified by civil society or grassroots groups?	Local civil society often highlight urgent needs more sharply then external assessments or government reports. Center these insights.

History & Politics

✓	Community-Centered Questions	Field Tips for Implementation
☐	Are there any existing internal conflicts (ethnic, political, land-based) or historical tensions to be aware of?	Frame conflicts in context, avoid portraying communities as flawed.
☐	What is the political history of the region (colonial legacies, foreign interventions)?	Understand how colonial borders, governance structures, or development projects have shaped today's realities.
☐	What role has humanitarian aid played in this area in the past, and how is it perceived by the community?	Communities remember. Past aid—whether empowering or harmful—shape current trust and expectations.
☐	How does gender shape leadership, access to resources, and daily responsibilities?	Gender is context-specific. Avoid binary assumptions and explore how norms are evolving, or enforced.

Land/ Space & Displacement

✓	Community-Centered Questions	Field Tips for Implementation
☐	What patterns exist around land ownership, displacement, or resettlement?	Land is not just property—it's spiritual, communal, or ancestral. Consider how land loss relates to power, history, and dispossession.
☐	How is the community's relationship to the land, animals, and agriculture changing?	Environmental knowledge is local and lived. Ask how climate, extraction, or policy have shifted this relationship.
☐	What are the dominant sources of livelihood, and how has the economy changed in recent years?	Economic shifts often reflect deeper issues—climate change, migration, privatization, or gendered labor divisions. Look for root causes, not just symptoms.

Religion / Ethics

✓	**Community–Centered Questions**	**Field Tips for Implementation**
☐	What are the major ethnic and religious groups present, and what are the dynamics between them?	Avoid oversimplifying diverse communities into monolithic groups. Research how hierarchies impact relationships and access to resources.
☐	How has migration (immigration/emigration) shaped the community's demographic or social fabric?	Migration reflects global and local power flows. Learn how borders, remittances, or displacement affect belonging and identity.

Acknowledge What Already Exists

Communities are rich in knowledge, relationships, and ongoing efforts.

- Map existing organizations, networks, leaders, and movements.
- Honor and amplify what is already working before proposing new solutions.

> **Field teams should slow down and use the checklist not just for assessment–but to deeply understand lived realities, existing local organizations, and community–led initiatives.**

Project Mapping
Worksheet

This tool helps you structure and clearly present Acted's role and purpose within a specific project and community.

How to use it: Follow the diagram layout, and answer each prompt. The goal is to create a realistic picture for the community of what Acted can and cannot provide, being upfront about resources, capacities, and limitations.

By setting clear expectations early, this tool helps prevent confusion, frustration, and engagement fatigue, while building shared understanding around local priorities.

- Project Name: _____
- Location/Community:_____
- Start Date:_____
- Expected End Date:_____
- Lead Organization: Acted

acted

Why are we here?

What are we trying to achieve?

What change do we hope to support?

Describe the issue, need, or opportunity Acted is responding to, and why this location was selected (e.g., drought–induced displacement, post–disaster recovery, community development priorities).

State the primary goal of the project, focusing on what specific actions Acted will take (e.g., improve local disaster preparedness, expand access to education).

Describe the long–term impact Acted hopes to contribute to in the community (e.g., strengthened local leadership, increased climate resilience, improved public health outcomes).

Acted

International NGO committed to supporting vulnerable communities in times of crisis and recovery, through participatory and locally driven approaches.

Why is Acted working in this area?

Describe how the community's needs align with Acted's mission and broader goals.

What is Acted not doing here?

Clarify scope limitations—what Acted cannot provide, such as financial aid, permanent jobs, long-term support, or services beyond its mandate.

Who are Acted's key partners?

List NGOs, government bodies, local associations, and donor agencies supporting the work.

How long will Acted be present?

Be realistic! Mention phase length, possible funding extensions, or exit plan if known.

Local Context Alignment

Local priorities & Needs

What community expressed issues are being addressed? Link to participatory needs assessments or consultations.

Overlapping Initiatives

Identify other organizations addressing similar issues in the area. Highlight overlaps or coordination opportunities.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Identify areas for coordination, joint planning, or resource–sharing with the community or other stakeholders.

Potential Sensitivities

Any local tensions, exclusion risks/concerns (social, ethnic, political, etc.) that could affect community trust, safety, or engagement.

Community Engagement Plan

How will Acted inform the community about this project?

Traditional (community meetings, posters, radio) digital (SMS, WhatsApp), and local leaders.

How will Acted manage expectations?

Use clear messages and tools to explain scope and limits, and gather feedback to adjust communication.

What feedback mechanisms will be used?

Hotlines, community focal points, suggestion boxes, WhatsApp groups, etc.

Who represents the community in decision making?

List leaders, committees, or focal groups Acted will engage with.

Resource Transparency

Resource/Service	Available? Y/N	Clarifications
Long–Term Staffing	Y/N	How long are Acted staff funded to remain?
Unrestricted Funds	Y/N	Can Acted adjust project design or not?
Community Compensation	Y/N	Will community facilitators or workers be compensated?
Infrastructure Support	Y/N	Can Acted build/repair physical infrastructure or only provide soft programming?

Field Tip: If possible, display a flyer that summarizes key information from the project mapping worksheet.

✓ Place it in visible community spaces like grocery stores, schools, shelters, community centers, or transit stops. Also, consider sharing it digitally (e.g., via WhatsApp or Telegram).

✓ **Remember:** to check with the community to identify the most accessible and trusted channels.

✓ **Suggested timing:** Update this information every 1–2 weeks to keep communication consistent.

Stakeholder and Capacity Mapping Sheet

Why use this tool?

The Stakeholder and Capacity Mapping Sheet (Google Sheet) is the main working tool where you will record your findings. On the next page, you'll find the link to the Sheet, along with a dictionary that defines each variable used.

> Update this sheet before community engagement and throughout implementation as new insights emerge.

If you have immediate computer access, you can also download and complete the spreadsheet version of this tool directly.

🔗 **Click here to access it**

Actor/Group Name	Type	Expertise Focus Area	Capacity/Strenghts	Level of Influence	Community Trust Level	Focal Point	Preferred Communication Method	Contact Information	Notes

Field	Description
Actor/Group Name	The name of the individual, organization, community group, government body, or other stakeholder relevant to the project area. This can include formal and informal actors.
Type	The classification of the actor/group (e.g., Local NGO, Community–Based Organization, Community Leader, Government – Local/ National, UN / Multilateral Organization, International NGO, Non–State Actor, Religious Actor, Private Sector / Business or Other.
Expertise Focus Area	The primary thematic area(s) of work or expertise (e.g., education, health, shelter, livelihoods, protection, advocacy, peacebuilding, etc.). Can list more than one if applicable.
Capacity/Strengths	Key resources, skills, relationships, or areas where the actor/group demonstrates added value or effectiveness. **Think what can they bring to the table?** This may include: • Technical expertise (e.g., health, education, protection) • Operational capacity (e.g., ability to mobilize people or deliver aid quickly) • Local presence and knowledge (e.g., deep understanding of the territory, languages, culture, or conflict dynamics) • Networks and relationships (e.g., strong ties with local authorities, community elders, youth groups, or religious institutions) • Experience with similar projects (e.g., has successfully implemented participatory assessments or community dialogues) Other (add any others in Notes)
Level of Influence	The degree to which the actor/group can shape decisions, mobilize communities, or affect project outcomes. **Use qualitative scales like High / Medium / Low or describe briefly in Notes)**
Community Trust Level	How trusted this actor/group is by the local population. Can be rated (e.g., High / Medium / Low) or described based on evidence or field team insights
Focal Point	The main contact person within the actor/group, including name and role/title, if known.
Preferred Communication Method	The best way to engage with this actor/group (e.g., phone, WhatsApp, email, in-person, through intermediaries, etc).
Contact Information	Relevant phone numbers, email addresses, or other means to reach the focal point or organization.
Notes	Any additional relevant context, observations, or recommendations for engagement. This can include political sensitivities, prior collaboration history, or key reminders.

Participatory
Planning Tool

A step-by-step facilitation guide to identify needs, set priorities, and craft a collective vision with the community

———

The planning tool offers a step-by-step approach that can help translate community voices into practical action. It guides field teams through three main stages of participatory engagement: understanding community needs, co-defining priorities, and articulating a shared vision of impact.

✓ It's designed for flexibility—you can use it in a single workshop or across multiple sessions. It emphasizes inclusive participation, centers community knowledge, and builds a shared sense of purpose.

Step 1: Understand — Inclusive Needs Assessment

Goal: This first step builds a shared understanding of the community's needs, priorities, and expectations. It emphasizes deep listening—through dialogue, observation, and reflection—to ensure Acted's response aligns with local realities.

Field Tip: A need is not just a lack–it is a story, a signal, and a starting point. Ask deeper questions: What is missing? Why? How do people describe it? What can be built upon?

Road Map for Step 1

1. **Humanitarian Context** – Set the scene: What are the humanitarian needs?
2. **Who Was Engaged** – Document which community groups/voices participated.
3. **Methods Used** – List the facilitation methods and approach.
4. **Category-Based Mapping Tool** – Systematically organize the collected information.
5. **What Are the Insights?** – Analyze top needs, root causes, and existing community resources.
6. **Team Reflection and Observations** – Reflect on group dynamics, power issues, lessons learned.

1. Crisis Context: Set the Scene

Before gathering needs, **situate the assessment in the local context.**
Identify the key events, challenges, or ongoing crises shaping the community's situation.

Example:
This needs assessment took place after a Category 4 cyclone displaced over 4,000 residents across Wada and Thula provinces. Acted is planning to deliver emergency food aid, set up temporary learning centers, and support the rebuilding of local water systems.

2. Who was engaged?

List all community groups and local actors who contributed their voices to the needs assessment.

Example:
- Women heads of households (15 participants)
- Youth groups (male and female, ages 14–25)
- Teachers, elders, displaced individuals in shelters

Field Tip: Prioritize inclusion. Ask: Whose voice is often unheard? Were marginalized groups engaged?

3. Methods Used

Document the participatory methods used to gather community input.

Example:
- Individual storytelling: Interviews with displaced women to explore food insecurity and relocation fears.
- Community Group Discussions (CGDs): Separate sessions with youth, elders, and teachers.
- Visual Mapping: Participants sketched "before and after" maps of neighborhood conditions.

Field Tip: Open and close sessions respectfully—using local greetings, prayers, or customs to build trust.

4. Category–Based Mapping Tool

Use the chart below to guide your needs assessment and identify vulnerabilities, helping prioritize the groups most affected by the crisis and map key geographic characteristics.

Categories of analysis from Multi–Cluster Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA)	
Affected groups (i.e, IDPs affected residents)–Which groups are more exposed to risks?–How are different groups coping with the emergency situation?	**Administrative area** (ie., province A vs province B)–Which areas are the most severely affected?– Are some neighborhoods or territories facing greater needs?
Vulnerable groups (i.e. older people, people with disabilities, women) –How are sub–groups specifically impacted?–How have existing vulnerabilities worsened because of the emergency event?	**Distance** (i.e, distance to storm track, conflict zone, oe earthquake epicentre) –Are needs greater closer to the center of the event?–Are people in high–intensity areas worse affected?
Socio–economic groups (i.e. farmers/wage workers, religious and ethnic groups)–Are fishermen more affected by the tsunami than farmers?– Are certain groups more affected due to their origin, religion or level of poverty?	**Setting** (i.e., urban/rural, coastal/inland)–Is the population affected differently according to the setting?–Do populations have access to goods and services? (ie., food, water etc)
Sex and age (i.e. young children, adolescents, adults and older people)–How are needs different by gender and age group?–Are different priority needs expressed by the male and female population?	**Composite** (i.e., areas with differing population densities located close to the epicenter or main impact zone)–Are densely populated areas worse affected than less populated ones?

Don't forget to summarize and consolidate the most relevant information!

5. What are the Insights?

After organizing the information, synthesize key insights:

Example:

Top Needs Identified

1. Lack of consistent food aid: people report skipping meals, especially women prioritizing children.
2. Unsafe shelter conditions: leaking tents, no separation by gender, leading to protection concerns.
3. Lack of access to clean water: existing water sources are far or contaminated post-flooding.

Root Causes	Existing Resources
• Aid deliveries are irregular and do not match population growth	• Local youth groups eager to assist in aid distribution
• Temporary shelters were not designed for long-term use	• Women's cooperative that can help identify vulnerable households
• Water points were damaged and not repaired	• Local governments with existing structures and processes

Field Tip: Don't just list needs-trace patterns. How are needs linked to causes? What existing resources can be leveraged for solutions?

6. Team Reflection and Observations

Conclude Step 1 with an internal team reflection to capture lessons learned during engagement.

- What dynamics stood out? Who spoke most or least?
- What assumptions were challenges?
- What emotions or tensions emerged?

Examples of Observations:
- Power dynamics: Male elders dominated CGDs until facilitators paused and redirected to women.
- Assumptions challenged: Belief that elders would support temporary relocation was contradicted.
- Emotional Tone: Moments of grief and anger emerged when the issue of unmet aid promises was raised.
- Silent voices: Two young women left early, one facilitator noted signs of discomfort during CGD.

Field Tip: Pay attention to subtleties: body language, seating arrangements, who translates, and who chooses not to speak.

Next Steps

1. Validate findings with community groups through a feedback loop (e.g., presentation of summarized findings on posters).

2. Map who should be involved in Step 2 (prioritization) and schedule follow-ups

3. Share findings internally with Acted teams involved

Always conclude with a follow-up plan. Consider what further engagement is needed or how you will share findings back.

Step 2: Prioritize — Co–Design Planning

Goal: Field teams and community members work together to prioritize the most critical and actionable needs through inclusive decision–making.

Roadmap for Step 2:

1. **Setting the Stage**– define who, where and how. Follow the bullet points below
2. **Facilitate Discussion**– use "Guiding Questions"
3. **Prioritize together**–use the priority matrix to identify and rank the needs.
4. **Establish Actions–Points**–jointly define concrete next steps.

1. Setting the Stage

Field Tip: Create a welcoming, neutral space: open seating, accessible materials, interpreters if needed.

- **Who** are we engaging with? (comm. groups informal leaders, women, youth, local institutions etc);
- **Where** and **how** are we engaging? (location, format –small/big group–, community hall);
- **How** will we ensure inclusion (gender, age, ability, language, etc).

2. Facilitate Discussion

Guiding Question	Community Feedback	Notes on Tone/Context
• What challenges are most pressing for your family /community?		
• If you could improve one thing, what would it be?		
• What do you need more of or less of in daily life?		
• What are the existing capacities?		

After facilitating community discussions, identify the main needs/issues raised. **Use the Priority Matrix** (next step) together with the community to rank these needs by urgency and feasibility.

Key Principles Checklist

☑ We listened without interrupting

☐ We used open-ended questions

☐ We engaged diverse community members

☐ We didn't pre-define the needs

☐ We identified shared themes collaboratively

Keep in mind this checklist while engaging in the discussion.

Try to actively check off the list as you notice yourself applying those points.

3. Prioritize Together: Using the Co–Design Priority Matrix

When utilizing the Co–Design Priority Matrix, the field–staff will utilize the information gathered from the "Discussion," specifically the information found in the "Guiding Questions" chart to identify "needs/issues" into areas of urgency and feasibility.

Work with the community to rank needs based on:

High=H (red) / **Medium**=M (yellow) **/ Low**= L (green)

If possible, use colors.

Need/Issue	Urgency (H/M/L)	Feasibility (H/M/L)	Priority Rank	Who Raised It?

Field Tip: Use group discussion to agree on rankings. Where possible, use color codes (e.g., red/yellow/green) to visualize.

4. Establish Action–Points

The aim is not only to identify priorities but also **to determine concrete actions** Acted can realistically take and to ensure that they are aligned to the local realities and preferences of the community.

Field Tip: Always create an action plan and checklist to organize and track response activities.

Action/Response	What Acted is implementing: good, services, activities or support actions
Prioritized Need	Make sure the actions are connected to any specific need that was previously identified with the community
Best Day/Times	When response activities or deliveries should take place based on community preferences
Appropiate Distribution Spaces	Where activities or aid delivery can happen safely, accessibly and appropriately
Trusted Local Focal Points/Partners	Who to collaborate with locally to support delivery, participation and communication
Communication Methods	How to maintain regular contact with the community before, during, and after planned activities

Step 3: Envision — Shared Vision Statement

Goal: Co-create a short vision that reflects the change the community wants to see in their own words.

How to facilitate?

Explain the purpose and use of the vision statement. Create a collaborative space using sticky notes, a notebook, or open discussion.

Discussion Prompts (Use as 4 Dialogue Stations or a Guided Conversation)

A	B
What matters most to you? (e.g., daily priorities, access to food/water/basic needs and services, safety, dignity)	What does positive change look like? (e.g., real-life signs of improvement or recovery)
C	**D**
Who benefits, and how? (e.g., inclusion, aid effectiveness, gaps)	What are the biggest challenges and hopes? (e.g., barriers, local strengths, hope drivers)

Final Step: Draft a Vision Statement Together

Example: "We want to live in peace, have enough to eat, and not be forced to leave every time there's a drought."

✓ Use sticky notes, group writing, or oral summaries.

Field Tip: This statement is intended to be more than symbolic, it should guide programming decisions and future engagement.

Remember: After the session, write down what worked, what didn't, and how the energy in the room shifted.

How To Run Effective
Meetings/Workshops

This tool supports Acted teams and community leaders in running more effective meetings by pausing to reflect, tracking how engagement feels, and strengthening collaboration for more adaptive and grounded work.

Step 1: Setting the Tone

- Create a comfortable environment! (Prioritizing safety, privacy and basic needs)

- Open the meeting by revisiting the shared goals of the current project.

- Make sure everyone understands their role and why their presence matters. **Community leaders can—and should—take responsibility during meetings and workshops.**

- Ask check in questions amongst the team leaders (whoever is hosting the meeting). If the meeting host is a singular individual, ask these questions/similar to themselves and answer with authenticity of how they are viewing their approaches.

Examples:
1. Does this feel fair to everyone?
2. What would a good conversation feel like in this space?
3. Is this space set up in a way that helps people feel free to share?

✓ Clarify that participation is expected, whether through speaking, writing, or sharing visuals—whatever feels most comfortable. **Emphasize collaborative efforts.**

Field Tip: Use stories or visuals to help bring the goals to life.

Step 2: Facilitate Purposeful Brainstorming

Two options: Break into small groups of participants or stay as a larger team (choose depending on group size, which would work best).

(1) **Small Groups**– assign "pieces of the project" to each section
- What roles or tasks are essential to the project?
- What has to happen for this project to succeed?
- What does success look like at each stage– who/how/what can help us get there?

(2) **Larger Team–** start with a "piece of the project" then continue down the list, coming up with other ideas you feel are suitable and continue until complete.
- What roles or tasks are essential to the project?
- What has to happen for this project to succeed?
- What does success look like at each stage– who/how/what can help us get there?

NEXT   **Each group presents their ideas.**

Remember to encourage others to suggest edits, rename unclear tasks, and prompt further questions provoking understanding of "what does x,y,z mean?" for further clarity.

Capture everything on some sort of documentation, depending on what you are utlizing! (ex: a live chart, or loose paper)

- Small groups– will do exactly what is stated above.
- Larger team– will do this after each "Piece of the project" is drafted

Step 3: Clarification/Agreement

Identify clear action points based on the brainstorm discussion. **The goal is to agree on next steps, define who is responsible, and set a realistic timeline.**

Use the chart below to organize roles, responsibilities, and needed support.

Task/ Roles	Names of Who is Responsible (who's doing it)	Priority (e.g., Low, Med, High)	Role Type (lead, support, consultant)	Timeframe (when will it happen)	Status /Progress	Notes or Tools Needed (materials, support, extra notres)

Field Tip: Encourage participants to collaboratively define roles and responsibilities. Invite them to adjust wording until there's clear agreement, and ask clarifying questions about what each task involves.

Avoid ambiguity– instead of vague tasks ex "coordinate logistics," clarify what those logistics look like in this setting and how they should be implemented.

Examples: "coordinate logistics" ➜ "organize transportation for Monday's outreach event, in charge of xxx". **Think about:**

⟶ What needs to be in place before we begin?

⟶ What barriers can stop this from working and how do we get around them?

⟶ What's something small that we can do that would set us up for longterm success?

Pulse Check

This tool is designed to support field teams and Acted in pausing weekly to reflect—not just on activities, but also on how the engagement process feels for the team, the community, and key relationships.

Weekly check-ins allow for a real time pulse check with the community's pace, priorities, and lived realities.

✓ This tool aims to ensure that engagement remains human-centered, responsive, and grounded in trust. It reinforces the idea that **impact isn't just about outputs, it's also about how people experience the process along the way.**

Section	Prompt
Looking Back	What Happened this week? (List activities, meeting, fieldwork, conversations, events, etc) What worked well? (Relationships, communication – not just results) What felt off or difficult? (Confusion, tension, resistance, or any struggle?)
Listening & Feedback	What feedback did you hear from the community? (Verbal, observations, body language, tone) Are there signs of fatigue, frustration, o disengagement? (If yes, describe what you noticed.) Did the process feel meaningful or energizing to anyone? (If yes, share story or quote.)
Adjustments & Next Steps	What should we adjust or rethink? What's coming up next week?
Vibe Check	One word to describe this day/week, months energy
Appreciation	Shout out another team or community member
Support Needed	What would help support you tomorrow/next week/next month?

Below you will find two instruments to support The Pulse Check.

(1) **Pulse Check Google Form:** A short reflection tool to help track how community engagement is going.

- Facilitators Name _____
- Community/Group–Individual Name_____
- Date of Check–In_____

For easier tracking by field teams, this form can also be filled out online. Acess it **here** 🔗

(2) **Master Question List:** This is a customizable list of guiding questions field teams can draw from based on their needs that week. Use as–as or modify. Feel free to add your own questions!

I. Looking Back
Purpose: Understand what happened, and how the team felt about it.

What key activities, conversations, or events took place this week?	What felt different this week compared to the last?
Did anything surprise you?	Were there any moments where something felt "off"?
What moments felt especially positive or energizing?	What do you think caused that?
What tensions or frustrations came up?	What gave you momentum this week?

II. Internal Team Vision and Feelings
Purpose: Check in on how the team is experiencing the work.

What was the general mood of the team this week?	Did you feel able to raise concerns or give input this week?
Did you feel heard and supported by others? Was there clarity on what the team's focus or purpose was this week?	What felt motivating or meaningful to you?
Were roles and responsibilities clear?	Is anything weighing on you or the team emotionally?

III. Community Feedback and Signals
Purpose: Reflect on what was heard, seen, or felt from the community

What informal or formal feedback did you hear from the community this week?	Were there gestures, body language, or quotes that stuck with you?
Did anyone express appreciation or concern?	Did community members seem more empowered or more hesitant?
Were there moments of visible community fatigue or disengagement?	Was trust growing, holding steady, or slipping?
Any changes in tone, participation, or attendance?	

IV. Adaptation and Course Correction
Purpose: Decide how to adjust based on how things are going

What should we do differently next week?	What's something small we could shift that would make a big difference?
Is there something we need to slow down or explain better?	Have any new dynamics emerged that we should be paying attention to?
Are we moving at a pace that feels right for the community?	What are we learning that we should share with others?

V. What's Coming Up?
Purpose: Ground the team in the near future.

What's on the calendar for next week? (Events, meetings, check-ins)	What relationship-building opportunities should we prioritize?
Are there any upcoming moments that need extra preparation?	What do we need from HQ / other teams to succeed next week?

IV. Adaptation and Course Correction
Purpose: Decide how to adjust based on how things are going

What one word would you use to describe this week?	Who deserves a shout out this week?
If this week were a weather pattern, what would it be?	What support do you need next week?
What's one thing you're grateful for?	What's one thing you're looking forward to?

Feedback– Flow

This feedback tool is divided into three steps to help field teams better understand what is working—and what isn't—when engaging with communities.

What is a feedback mechanism?

A feedback mechanism lets communities raise concerns, ask questions, and share ideas, building trust, accountability, and more responsive programs.

Field Tip: Set a clear, recurring deadline for each step. Making these updates consistent helps build trust and transparency and avoid engagement fatigue.

Think ahead: How will communities be able to provide feedback? When can feedback be shared? When will responses be given?

Step One: Feedback Channels

What to consider: Make feedback channels visible, accessible, and community approved. Before selecting any channel, ask and be mindful :

A few questions	A few elements
Are there existing structures (e.g., committees, CBOs) already trusted by the community?	Leverage existing trust and networks
Are there access barriers (e.g., literacy, language, connectivity)?	Make sure feedback mechanisms are accessible to everyone.
What kind of feedback are you collecting?	Different channels are better for sensitive vs. general input.
Who will process and respond to feedback?	Set clear expectations: explain each channel's purpose and response frequency to avoid overpromising.
How will you close the loop?	A lack of feedback to the community may contribute to erosion of trust and engagement fatigue.

Field Tip: Remember: One size doesn't fit all. Use a mix of channels tailored to different groups (e.g., women, elders, youth, people with disabilities).

Channel Type	Strengths	Limitations	Best Used When...
Suggestion Box	Anonymous, low-cost	Not suitable for illiterate populations or urgent issues	People want anonymity and literacy levels are high
WhatsApp / SMS	Accessible, fast, low-barrier if phones are common	Excludes those without devices or connectivity	Digital access is widespread
Hotline / Phone Line	Real-time, can offer anonymity	Requires staff, may not be trusted without strong promotion	Communities can speak directly and privately
Community Committees	Trusted, familiar, rooted in local networks	Risk of gatekeeping or bias; may exclude marginalized groups	Existing structures are representative and functioning
CBO Partners / Volunteers	Can reach marginalized groups, culturally appropriate	Informal; quality depends on training and trust	You have trusted community liaisons or partner orgs
Community Meetings	Transparent, inclusive when facilitated well	Power dynamics may silence some voices	Discussions are needed and facilitation is strong
Focus Groups	Can be targeted to specific populations (e.g., women, youth)	Small sample size, requires trust and skilled facilitation	In-depth feedback needed from key groups
Digital Platforms / Apps	Scalable, data collection efficient	Low adoption if not adapted to local context	Long-term projects with access to tech resources
In-Person Office Hours	Builds trust through direct access; informal setting encourages openness	Requires a permanent staff member	Community is comfortable with face-to-face interaction

Step Two: Understanding Feedback

Guiding Questions for field teams to reflect and analyze feedback accurately

What is being said?	Identifying tone and urgency	Who is giving feedback?
What are the main concerns or priorities raised in this round of feedback?	Which concerns feel most urgent to the community?	Which groups or individuals are speaking up? Zoom out and identify if we are hearing from youth, person with disabilities, women, elders, etc
Are people asking about the same issue more than once? Why might that be?	Does the feedback suggest disengagement, support, frustration, fatigue, hope or any other sentiment?	
Are there signs of confusion or misinformation we should clarify?		
Did any suggestions surprise you? If so, what did and why?	Are there any signs of escalating tension or conflict?	Who might still be left out?

Field Tip: Pay attention to body language, who's quiet, who's avoiding eye contact or who dominates the space—these are feedback signals too. Keep an eye on the room.

Remember

1. Informal moments often bring the best feedback—casual chats, walks, or after meetings.

2. **Be transparent.** If Acted can't act on a request, explain why and manage expectations honestly.

Field team self-check

- Is the feedback beyond Acted's control?
- Should we continue, adapt, or change feedback channels?
- Are we treating feedback as a learning opportunity, not just criticism?
- Are we missing any key insights?

Step Three: Feedback Response
Close the loop. Be transparent about what's being done—and what can't be.

After identifying recurring issues, plan how to share feedback and analysis with the community. **Ensure concerns are tracked systematically** and updates follow a clear cycle: what was said, what is being done, and the current status.

| **Feedback or Concern Raised** | Example: "We asked for consistent communication and we are not evidencing that." |

| **Our Response / Action Taken** | Example: "We've now set a biweekly update schedule via WhatsApp and physician flyers." |

| **Tracker— If still pending, why?** | Example: "Awaiting confirmation from local leaders. |

🟢 Done 🟡 Pending 🔴 Unresolved

Planning & Facilitating Feedback Dialogues

Type of meeting	Where and when	How	Participants
Internal participation analysis meeting	Local branch/weekly staff meeting	Presentation followed by discussion	Acted staff – roles vary internally with each context.
External participatory analysis meeting	Community center in two selected neighborhood or meeting points with the community	Focus group discussion	Randomly selected community members who are interested in the survey findings
Broader dissemination	Community members across the affected territory	Posters, Whatsapp. Local radio	Community members across the affected territory

Annex

1) Terms of Reference

Capstone Workshop Program
Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs
Terms of Reference (TOR) Between Client Acted: Project Director – Sebastien Trives, and SIPA Capstone Workshop; Faculty Advisor, Ruth Mukwana

Project Title: Community Engagement and Participatory Approaches: Lessons Learned from Global Practice, and Practical Implementation
Client Organization: Acted
Client Website: www.acted.org/en/agora
Client Project Director and Contact Information:

Background:
.Following the decision to freeze USAID funding which impacted Acted's project in Sri Lanka, the Capstone project has been adjusted to focus on community engagement and the evaluation of the AGORA project in Sri Lanka has been removed.

Although local/community engagement is not unique to AGORA programmes within Acted and IMPACT Initiatives (IMPACT), local stakeholders and communities play a central role in actions that apply the methodology. Indeed, Acted aims to involve local actors (i.e. local governance actors, traditional and religious authorities, community members, CSOs/CBOs, private sector actors, deconcentrated technical services and national government representatives, local partners/NGOs) throughout the project cycle: profiling and analysis of territories and needs, planning, implementation, coordination, advocacy, and monitoring and evaluation.

Local/community engagement comes with both benefits as well as risks, the latter ranging from aid diversion, elite capture, marginalisation, to issues with navigating cultural norms and how to engage with informal/de facto governance actors, particularly when linked concerns of predatory behaviours or contested sovereignty. Furthermore, as participation implies a cost for both as an organisation and the participants/beneficiaries, Acted has to be mindful of not creating an unnecessary burden for them. Having a practical toolkit or checklist to guide Acted staff as they work with communities will help to systematize Acted's engagement with communities in all their operations and improve the sustainability of Acted's programs.

Objective:
1. Synthesize effective community engagement practices in humanitarian operations, including successes, challenges, lessons learned and best practices.
2. Identify risks related to community engagement, in addition to elite capture and aid diversion, such as power dynamics, conflict risk, funding issues, and provide mitigation strategies.
3. Develop a practical and adaptable resource (checklist or toolkit or guide) that provides clear guiding questions and recommendations for Acted staff on how to engage communities in the different phases of a project cycle. The monitoring and evaluation phase will not be included.

Tasks:

Students will (i) Undertake a primary literature review that will provide a conceptual baseline on community engagement. Based on Acted's internal work and external sources, the literature review will explore some of the community engagement strategies, challenges, risks and mitigation measures. Students will also (ii) Review a few case studies and interview practitioners to gather successful strategies, lessons learned and best practices. Students will (iii) compile the insights, good practices, lessons learned and recommendation into a field-focused resource (checklist or toolkit or guide) on community engagement.

Deliverables and Timetable:

1. A report with key findings from the literature review, case studies and interviews providing an overview of local/community engagement issues relevant to international aid. The report will include recommendations on how to adapt Acted's approaches and the AGORA methodology to maximize benefits and minimize/mitigate risks.
2. A practical and adaptable resource (checklist or toolkit or guide) that provides clear guiding questions and recommendations for Acted staff on how to engage communities in the different phases of a project cycle. The monitoring and evaluation phase will not be included.

General Timeline:

Fall Capstone Consultancy Project Management Course:

- First Faculty Meeting with Team: suggested date and time November 15th at 2:10–4:00pm
- Client Orientation meeting with Capstone team: Recommended Date– Week of November 18th at a time convenient for the client.
- Final Meeting with Team for Fall Term: Week of December 2nd (to be scheduled directly between the faculty advisor and the team).
- December 9th: Capstone team will submit to the faculty advisor a preliminary project work plan.

Spring Capstone Workshop Key dates

- January 21, 2025: First day of the spring semester
- Last week of February, 2025: Draft report outline submitted to faculty advisor and client
- Week of March 3 – 7, 2025: SIPA Capstone Midterm Presentations
- Week of March 10, 2025: Mid-term briefing to client
- March 17–21, 2025: Spring break (no classes this week– International travel for Capstones with travel abroad)
- First week of April, 2025: Draft report submitted to faculty advisor
- End of April, 2025: Presentation of key findings to client
- End of April, 2025: Final report submitted to client
- May 5, 2025: Last day of spring semester– all deliverables should be submitted to the client by this date

Preferred Qualifications:
- Interest and knowledge of the international humanitarian and development system, the nexus approach (humanitarian/ development and peacebuilding), and localization;
- Experience with mixed-methods research, including developing guidelines for stakeholders interviews.

Logistics:

Students are expected to regularly communicate with the client throughout the project. Acted HQ will assign a focal point for communication. The Capstone team will conduct desk research remotely and can conduct key informant interviews with Acted and IMPACT staff and relevant implementers on the ground through the support of the project advisor and partner organizations.

2) Table 1: Interviewees

Name	Organization	Relevance
Alejandra Ucros + Nicky González	Movilizatorio	Local NGO in Colombia with community engagement projects
Cormac Russel	Nurture Development	Global expert in Asset–Based Community Development with work across 35 countries
Neil Levine + Hasi Edema	CDA Collaborative Learning	Works on community–led decision making and local participation in aid efforts
Jennifer Doherty	ALNAP	Focuses on learning and accountability in humanitarian response
Christine Knudsen	InterAction	Former Sphere Director, current Director of Humanitarian Policy at InterAction
Rachel Maher	OCHA / IASC	AAP Advisor with the Inter–Agency Standing Committee
Negar Ghobadi + Simon Reink	World Food Program (WFP)	Specialist in AAP and Community Feedback Mechanisms
Sophie Tholstrup	Ground Truth Solutions	Expert on perception–based feedback and community accountability systems in humanitarian contexts
Maela-Anna Ruiz Le Moing	Acted	Acted AGORA Officer supporting the capstone team with project coordination and past AGORA insights
Mathilde Vincent	Acted	Acted AGORA officer providing strategic guidance and field–informed isnights on community engagement
Antonin Malinge	Acted	Acted MEAL manager and main capstone focal point

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