

KEY MESSAGES

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HOW TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION
PRACTICES IN THE AID SECTOR



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INTRODUCTION

The Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW), organised annually by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), took place this year from 17 to 28 April 2023, with the first week held remotely and the second week held in person in Geneva. Groupe URD took part both online and in person, and organised several sessions including on environmental issues and the Core Humanitarian Standard.¹

One of the Groupe URD sessions, which took place on 27th April from 11:00 to 12:30 in Geneva, focused on the notion of participation: “How to improve participation practices in the aid sector”. Its aim was to consult stakeholders as part of the participation study that Groupe URD is currently carrying out. The objective of this study is to analyse the notion of participation and the participation practices developed by aid actors² with a view to updating the *Participation Handbook for humanitarian field workers*³ almost 15 years after it was originally published by Groupe URD and ALNAP.

This paper presents and summarises the content of the discussions during the HNPW session. A first draft was shared with the session participants to give them the opportunity to review the summarised content and provide feedback and additional input, if deemed necessary.

METHODOLOGY

SESSION OBJECTIVE

The objective of the session was to collectively analyse and discuss how participation practices can be improved in the aid sector. It was only accessible in person and to a limited number of participants, as the session was intended to be interactive and participatory.

SCOPE

The question of how to define the term "participation" is one of the central issues in the study currently being carried out by Groupe URD. As the discussion process is ongoing, we continue to refer to the definition from the *Participation Handbook*, which is still relevant in many respects.

« Participation is understood as the involvement of crisis-affected people in one or more phases of a humanitarian project or programme: assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

(...)

It is first and foremost an attitude – a state of mind – that sees people affected by crisis as social actors with skills, energy, ideas and insight into their own situation. »

Participation Handbook for Humanitarian field workers, 2009

The *Participation Handbook* also identified four key levels of participation:

- **Passive information** – the population is informed about what is going to happen or what has already happened.

¹ For more information on Groupe URD's sessions at HNPW 2023 : <https://www.urd.org/en/event/102190/>

² For more information on the participation study : <https://www.urd.org/en/project/review-of-the-concept-of-participation-and-participatory-approaches-in-the-aid-sector/>

³ <https://www.urd.org/en/publication/participation-handbook-for-humanitarian-field-workers/>

- **Participation by providing information** - the population provides information in response to questions asked but has no influence over the process.
- **Participation through consultation** - The population is consulted on a given subject but has no decision-making power.
- **Interactive participation**, or "co-construction" or "co-decision-making" - the population is involved in the project decision-making process.

As other sessions organised during the HNPW 2023 appeared to focus on the first three levels of participation, it was decided that this session should focus on the fourth and highest level: interactive participation. This was also chosen as it seems to be the type of participation that aid organisations implement the least in practice.

SESSION FORMAT

The session was organised around four different tables - each focusing on specific issues related to improving participation practices in the aid sector. The four tables focused on:

1. **Benefits / risks** – what are the benefits and the risks of including crisis-affected people in decision-making processes?
2. **Obstacles / opportunities** – what are the obstacles and opportunities with regard to including crisis-affected people in decision-making processes?
3. **Best practices/ weaknesses** – what are the best practices that you have identified in the aid sector? What are the weaknesses/ potential areas for improvement?
4. **How/ Who / About what / When?** – in terms of including crisis-affected people in decision-making processes: how, who and when should they be included, and what decisions should they be included in?

Participants had to work in four groups – one group at each table. They were asked to discuss the relevant question and provide input at each table before moving to another table. The objective was for each group to cover all four tables and questions before the end of the session.

SYNTHESIS

IMPROVED EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAMMES - A KEY BENEFIT OF PARTICIPATION

Participants were asked about the benefits of involving crisis-affected people in decision-making processes. One of the key benefits mentioned was improved **programme effectiveness and efficiency**.

It is interesting that effectiveness and efficiency should be seen as a key benefit of participation as **the time and resources needed to develop participatory approaches are often considered to be an important obstacle to participation**. Aid actors often claim that they do not have the time and resources to be able to develop participatory approaches. They argue that this is mainly due to the constraints imposed by donors on project proposals and design. During the workshop, it was highlighted that the aid sector needs to move away from a short-term perspective in the way programmes and interventions are designed. **Indeed, if the population is involved in decision-making processes from the onset of a crisis, the resulting programmes and activities will be more relevant and sustainable. This will take more time and resources at the beginning of the programme, but it will significantly reduce the risk of having to subsequently finance new projects to meet the same needs.**

How can participation improve programme efficiency and effectiveness?

The participants mentioned the following ways that participation can contribute to programme efficiency and effectiveness.

A better understanding of populations' needs

Participation was mentioned as an opportunity for aid actors not to rely on assumptions, to identify what they do not know and to go beyond their preconceived ideas of populations' needs. Participation can help them to understand what the "real" problems and "real" needs of a population are, which can then have a positive impact on the programmes and activities implemented. Indeed, these programmes and activities are more likely to be relevant to the populations' needs and are more likely to be effective and efficient in responding to them in the long term.

"It's about solving the real problems communities are facing rather solving the issues we think they are facing".

However, the limits of the concept of "real needs" were also discussed. Communities often understand how the aid sector works, notably in places where there is a memory of aid. They then tend to adapt their answer to the offer they think they will receive from aid actors. In his book *"Anthropologie et développement"*, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan underlines that the concept of 'needs' is "extremely vague, uncertain and imprecise"⁴. He challenges the idea that needs are objective, common to an entire population and expressed by its representatives. He also points out that needs assessments tend to only be used to legitimise projects that have already been designed by aid actors.

Beyond the identification of needs, participation is also an opportunity for communities to point out longer-term and/or complex problems. These problems are not specific to the ongoing crisis or emergency, but they allow aid actors to have a broader understanding of the situation in which communities find themselves and to take these aspects into account in their programme design and development. This might include barriers limiting access to basic services, for example. The participants also highlighted that raising these longer-term problems provided an opportunity to bring them up with other actors, such as national and/or local authorities.

In addition, better understanding of the community's needs and situation increases the feasibility of the programmes and activities developed, and helps to identify longer-term solutions. Community involvement in decision-making processes also enables more culturally sensitive interventions and context-based action. All these aspects ultimately contribute to a programme's effectiveness and efficiency.

Understanding community diversity

It was also highlighted during the workshop that, if done well, participation contributes to the recognition of community diversity, in terms of members and profiles. Indeed, aid actors tend to see a community as a homogenous unit, but within a community people's needs and situations may differ greatly. Participants mentioned that it is therefore important to develop participatory approaches with a wide, diverse group of persons in order to be aware of and acknowledge this diversity. The question of community diversity is related to the issue of "truly representative participation", which is difficult to achieve in practice due to the challenges of gaining access to vulnerable groups.

⁴ J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, « *Anthropologie et développement – Essai en anthropologie du changement social* », Karthala, 1995.

Reframing the notion of participation

Highlighting the fact that participatory approaches can help to increase efficiency and effectiveness might be a way to reframe the notion of participation in the aid sector. Indeed, this could contribute to a paradigm shift where participation would no longer be considered as an “add-on”, but would be seen as a key measure of the success of programmes and interventions.

“Participation is not just the right thing to do – it also makes the response more effective”.

Participants felt that aid actors should **emphasise effectiveness and efficiency when they talk about participation, particularly in discussions with donors.** Funding should be earmarked for participation in order to move away from a vision where it is seen as a non-essential “extra”. **And programmes should start being evaluated on this basis too.** Thus, evaluations should look at how effective aid actors have been in handing over leadership to local communities.

In order to contribute to this paradigm shift, participants mentioned that it may be necessary to share evidence to demonstrate that participation positively contributes to the efficiency and effectiveness of programmes. While this may help to make the argument more compelling, there is some doubt about the aid sector’s continuous need for evidence as it already made a commitment to bring about a “participation revolution” eight years ago. As such, the need for evidence should not be used as an excuse to further delay the shift in power dynamics that the sector desperately needs.

OTHER BENEFITS

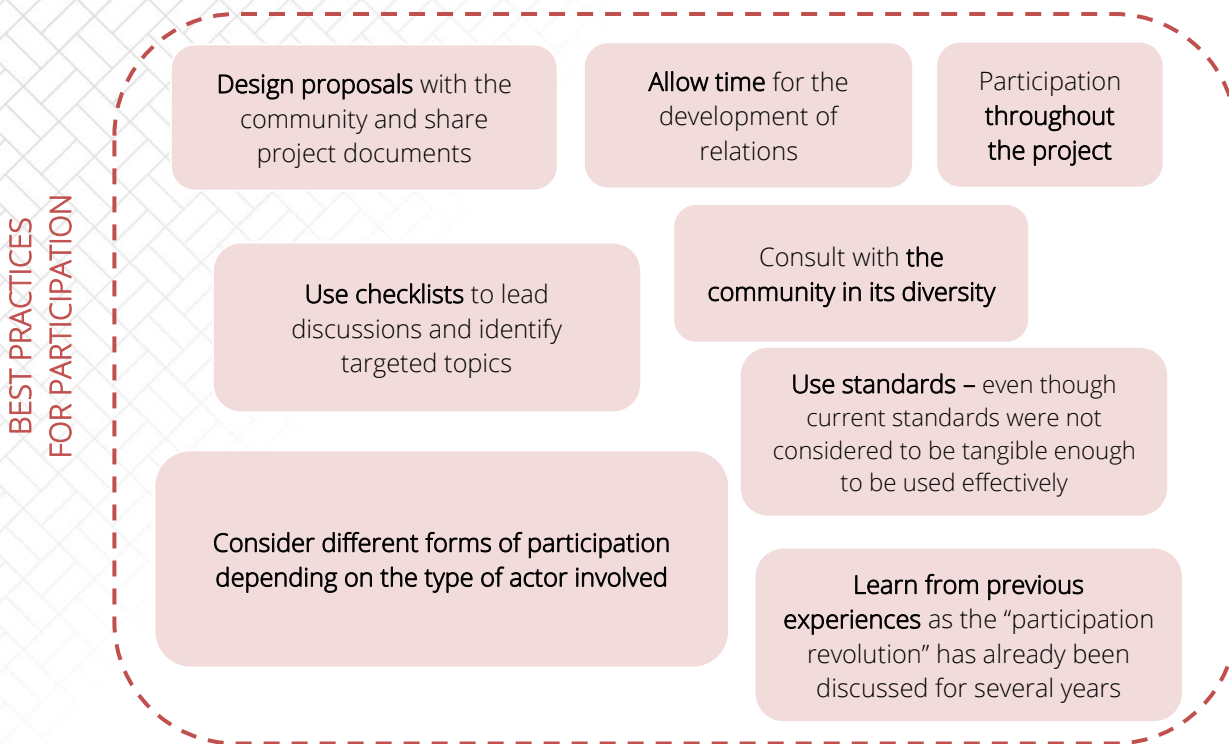
Beyond effectiveness and efficiency, other benefits of participatory approaches were highlighted during the workshop, and some of them are related to a rights-based approach. For example, respect for human rights was mentioned, as was community empowerment, in relation to the notion of “agency”.

“Participation tends to encourage communities to speak up and take actions. It allows them to be very clear about what they need and what they want.”

Participants also highlighted that participation is deeply linked to the notion of **accountability**: involving communities in the interventions and programmes developed by aid actors contributes to the responsible use of power and should even be a prerequisite to it.

BEST PRACTICES

Several best practices were identified in relation to participatory approaches during the workshop.



OBSTACLES

Several obstacles to participation were also identified during the workshop. One of these is related to the **challenges of gaining access to vulnerable groups**. Indeed, participants mentioned the difficulties involved in organising representative focus group discussions (FGDs) notably due to cultural barriers. They highlighted the need for a systematic analysis of the political economy in the area of intervention.

Language was also identified as an important obstacle. It may be difficult to have a conversation with communities about their situation and participation in a language that is not their own. Translation may lead to some information being lost and can have a negative impact on the collective dynamic. And the sector tends to use a specific jargon which people and communities are not necessarily familiar with, and which makes it difficult for them to work with.

RISKS

One of the key risks mentioned during the session was **to reproduce and/or increase power inequities within the population**. Indeed, as not all members of a community can be involved in decision-making processes in practice, aid actors tend to rely on local leaders as community representatives for the development of participatory approaches. However, these local leaders may not have a thorough understanding of the whole community's situation and needs, especially that of vulnerable groups. They may also use the process to advance their own personal interests. Participants also highlighted that power inequities may be reproduced and/or increased due to aid actors' own biases and lack of understanding of the local cultural and social context. They also noted that **power inequities represent an obstacle to participation and more specifically to the “truly representative participation” mentioned earlier**. Indeed, pre-existing stigmas, discrimination and exclusion in a society may mean that aid actors will only be able to work with elites or certain groups with social capital. Access to vulnerable groups (women, children, disabled persons, the elderly, etc.) generally represents a challenge and all the more so in terms of implementing participatory approaches.

Finally, the risk of reproducing and/or increasing power inequities was mentioned in relation to **cultural sensitivity**. Indeed, participants explained that it may be difficult to find the right balance between cultural sensitivity and adapting to a local language, and thus reproducing power inequities. This can also be the case for norms, behaviours, and any other socio-cultural element.

Another risk identified during the discussion was **tokenism**. This can be defined as “something that a person or organisation does that seems to support or help a group of people who are treated unfairly in society, such as giving a member of that group an important or public position, but which is not meant to make changes that would help that group of people in a lasting way” (Cambridge Dictionary). This can also be linked to the notion of “purported participation”. Indeed, aid actors are often criticised for being participatory only to confirm activities they were already planning to develop. Communities are often consulted when the project has already been validated by the donor – communities may provide inputs on how to develop activities, but the activities themselves were already selected. The organisation may not be willing to change them based on community feedback, but it may also depend on the donor’s flexibility in accepting modifications.

Finally, risks were mentioned in relation to **security, both for the people participating and the aid organisation engaging with them**. Particularly in conflict zones, people’s participation can put them at risk as their involvement can be interpreted as a way of taking sides with one particular group or political discourse. Participation can also create a security risk for the aid organisation, if they are perceived to be taking sides or favouring one group over another.

OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond risks and obstacles, the workshop also identified opportunities to strengthen community participation. One of these opportunities was related to **new technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning**. Indeed, participants pointed out how these technologies could help to connect faster and share information with communities. They could be used to engage with communities in contexts where it is difficult to have face-to-face conversations. As well as being an opportunity, using these technologies also has its limits and brings risks, especially in relation to participation, as highlighted by Groupe URD.⁵

The localisation agenda was also identified as an opportunity to improve participation practices. Indeed, both participation and localisation have the same objectives of overturning current power dynamics and of putting people and communities back at the centre of the aid system. As localisation has gained more prominence in the sector in the last few years than the “participation revolution”, some actors consider that it may be easier to improve participation in practice via the localisation agenda.

The workshop also looked at **the posture adopted by aid actors vis-à-vis aid recipients**. One suggestion was to try to build trust via ‘small successes’. Indeed, trust was mentioned as a key notion in relation to participation at different times during the conversation and in relation to different aspects: as a benefit of participation, as a best practice and as an opportunity. **“Thinking outside the box”** was also identified as a means of developing participatory approaches as it is important to be open-minded and to take people’s real situation as the starting point.

“An open, listening attitude is an opportunity in itself.”

⁵ <https://www.urd.org/fr/publication/analyse-critique-et-messages-cles-participation-technologies-digitales-2023/>

While **language** can be a challenge, it can also **be an opportunity to change our collective representations**. Participants highlighted that rather than using “them” to refer to communities and populations, which may imply a “them and us” approach rather than equal engagement, aid actors could increasingly use other wording such as “speaking together”, “with equal engagement”, etc. which may highlight a more horizontal relation.

PREREQUISITES

The discussion on opportunities for improving participation in practice led to an exchange on the necessary prerequisites for the development of participatory approaches.

Unsurprisingly, one key prerequisite that was identified is time – time to develop relations with communities, time to understand the context and people’s situation, time to build trust with local actors and communities, time to involve key local stakeholders in decision-making processes, ... and so on. The need for time tends to be closely related to the need for money as additional time to develop participatory approaches often means additional money to be able to finance them. Money is a prerequisite as it is needed for staff capacity building, to develop additional activities and to hire new staff.

Another prerequisite mentioned during the workshop was **flexibility**. Indeed, participants pointed out that flexibility is required when developing participatory approaches in order to have the capacity to adapt to the population’s needs. This flexibility should concern the type of activities developed, their content and the way they are developed. However, flexibility during interventions requires flexibility at other levels: flexibility in the funding provided to develop activities, flexibility in the processes and procedures to develop activities (both internal and external), and flexibility in terms of programme duration. Flexibility should also be applied to the tools used by the aid sector to implement and monitor activities. Notably, this concerns current MEAL systems which participants considered to be “too linear”, and to “not reflect the real and complex world”.

“It requires huge flexibility to be truly accountable.”

CHALLENGES

The exchanges during the workshop also highlighted several challenges in relation to the development of participatory approaches in practice.

One of these challenges is **the question of what to do with negative feedback** – how should aid actors treat and act upon negative feedback? Participants highlighted that negative feedback can be an opportunity to learn, to “do better” and improve programme quality. They also noted that it could be a challenge – criticism is not always constructive and managing it can be difficult, particularly as aid actors are often unprepared for negative feedback. Participants pointed out that this was partly due to the perceived risk of being penalised by donors if negative feedback is collected.

Receiving feedback from the population that is not what was wanted or expected, or that is beyond the organisation’s scope and/or area of responsibility was also described as a challenge. This aspect was already mentioned in relation to tokenism. Even though it was recognised as “all part of the game of participation”, the workshop participants highlighted the lack of clear processes to treat this feedback either internally or with partner organisations. Should it be shared with other organisations who have the relevant mandate? What can be done to ensure that the feedback is properly taken into account by this organisation?

Other challenges mentioned during the discussion included:

- How should the time **people give for participation be compensated**? How do we ensure that we are being fair? How do we instigate a collective approach on this?
- How can **people see changes based on their participation**? How can aid actors highlight that people's participation has had a (positive) impact?
- How **should feedback, and how it has been dealt with, be shared with the communities**?

The workshop only gave us the opportunity to mention these challenges without having the time to discuss them in more detail. However, it appears important to keep these challenges in mind and to try to answer these questions as much as possible before starting to develop participatory approaches. And the best way to deal with some of these aspects and questions might be to discuss it with those primarily concerned.

CONCLUSION

The workshop on “how to improve participation practices in the aid sector” looked at an issue that is at the heart of the sector's current concerns. It provided an opportunity to discuss the obstacles, risks and difficulties encountered in developing participatory approaches. It also highlighted new ways to improve participation practices, such as with the development of new technologies or via the localisation agenda. **A key take-away from this workshop was the suggestion that the notion of participation should be reframed in the aid sector**, highlighting the extent to which participatory approaches can contribute to programme effectiveness and efficiency, contrary to what one might think.

Finally, this workshop provided an opportunity to feed into the discussions currently taking place as part of Groupe URD's study on participation. These discussions are due to continue in the coming months to identify the various aspects that can help or hinder the implementation of participatory approaches.



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