Participation is Power: Keep it, Share it or Give it away?
Humanitarium, Geneva, 22 January 2018

Summary

Key take-aways:

- Participation is not just about meeting project/programme objectives, it’s also about affected people using their own agency to improve their situation.

- Humanitarian organisations and donors have approached participation as a technical issue to be addressed at the project or programme level, whereas achieving a better balance of power between those providing assistance and protection and those on the receiving end requires sustained leadership and whole-of-organisational drive.

- Why is participation and letting go of power so important for humanitarian organisations? Two schools of thought:
  - One which sees that this question is no longer relevant, as it is given that people affected by crisis will be taking power from humanitarian organisations in the years to come. The most that humanitarian organisations may be able to achieve is to anticipate and adapt, to continue playing a relevant role. This will require a radically different business model.
  - The other which sees participation and shared power as an essential component to ensure organisations’ accountability to quality and relevant humanitarian action.

- Letting go of power requires humanitarian donors and organisations’ acceptance that the outcomes of their work may not be those initially planned for.

- Localisation of humanitarian action does not necessarily equate more participation and a better balance of power between affected people and those delivering assistance.

- A paradigm shift is required for humanitarian action to become truly inclusive of all people at risk or with specific vulnerabilities

- A consumer model in low income environments is not only possible, it can contribute to rebalancing power between the service provider and those accessing the service
Framework

The Conference brought together a “healthy” mix of humanitarian organisation leaders, donor representatives, people who have lived through crisis and been on “the receiving end of humanitarian assistance”, academia and leaders from outside the humanitarian sector who have experience of initiating / contributing to a shift in power in their sector. We all came together to unpack the notion of “participation”, recognising that it is fundamentally about power and leadership, and foster a forward-looking agenda for a power shift in the humanitarian sector in favour of people affected by crisis.

Participation: experiences and aspirations

Different participants, who had been on the “receiving end” of humanitarian assistance and protection shared experience and thoughts.

The need to go back to the essence of participation, namely that people have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, was put forward. Participation is an approach, a way of doing things. It does not have an end in itself, you never reach the stage of saying “now I have achieved participation”. Participation is a necessity for people who’ve been affected by terrible or traumatic events as it contributes to their own ability to rebuild their lives. Participation fosters individuals’ agency and “post-traumatic growth”.

The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young people frames participation as a right, not a privilege or a gift. Refugees today have the tools, the skills, the agency and the knowledge to challenge and seize power, in ways that they did not have in the past. Nevertheless, the issue of representation is a tricky one. Even though all refugees are legitimate in participating, it’s often organisations or donors who have power who try and decide which refugees should participate. In doing so, they tend to focus on those with whom they can interact most easily, because of language, education, connections, etc. While all refugees have the right to participate, not all opinions are legitimate (for example, when advocating for discrimination within refugees).

Participation and power also depend on the context. When a person is in a state of need, s/he is often at the very bottom of the participation and power chain. As individual, family and whole-of-society needs evolve, a person’s understanding and opportunities for participation increase. It’s important that vulnerable individuals and groups self-organise, to mobilise their own agency, and try and break away from humanitarian organisations’ short-term project cycle time-frames and engage in long-term rebuilding. To identify and support self-help groups’ capacities, humanitarian organisations must invest in contextual analysis. Too often, they enable or create local power structures which disenable affected people’s participation and agency.

Participants argued that the organisations in the room are already getting better at participation and that the framing of the issue in terms of power is helpful. One of the challenges for humanitarian organisations is to respond rapidly in extremely complex and large-scale situations, such as in the case of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. They attempt to engage with community leaders and to go deeper within society to hear the voice of specific individuals and groups, such as children for example. Participants agreed that humanitarian organisations need to get better at listening and leveraging capacities that exist, to enable affected people to design their own approach.
The lack of actual incentives in the humanitarian sector for organisations to let go of some of their power was put forward. While certain donors are beginning to shift to results-based financing with participation as a central component, the subsidy and grant model to date has been centred on action rather than results. It has encouraged participation only as a means to achieve specific outputs.

Nick van Praag, from Ground Truth Solutions presented the results of perception surveys carried out in six countries. People receiving humanitarian assistance, the staff of humanitarian organisations and various humanitarian stakeholders were asked about service quality and their perception of aid delivery on several points: respect, safety, participation and empowerment. Several issues came out of the presentation and the discussion which followed:

- Affected people’s perceptions of participation may be a leading indicator of performance
- Aid workers and affected people are perceiving aid outcomes very differently
- There are cultural differences in distance to power, which impacts on expectations and perceptions around participation and respect
- Participants agreed that cash was the preferred form of aid when appropriate but challenged the notion that cash automatically equated participation. The example of Kenya was given where a survey had shown that 88% of people did not know how beneficiaries for cash assistance were selected. Cash gives people a lot more choices, but it doesn’t replace participation.
- There are two dimensions to what we should be measuring as a matter of course, people’s feeling of a) agency, respect, self-worth and shaping their own future and b) relevance and quality of aid.

New power: what could it mean for the humanitarian sector?

People’s participatory energies have dramatically increased in today’s world, while what really matters is the quality and relevance of participation. More participation does not necessarily mean that anyone is getting more power, nor does it guarantee better outcomes. What’s important is the mindset and the method. Jeremy Heimans, founder and CEO of Purpose put forward different approaches to power, which he characterised as new and old power. In old power, power is used like a currency: it is hoarded, it is inherently scare, its release is carefully controlled by a few. At the opposite, new power is released, not controlled, it spreads sideways and triggers explosions of energy everywhere. With these come a sense of belonging and empowerment.

The question for humanitarian organisations, who probably want to aim for a good blend of old and new power, is whether they are structured for effective participation. Jeremy suggested the following questions for humanitarian leaders as they consider mastering the tools of new power:

- Strategy: do we need participation to achieve the results we aim for?
- Legitimacy: do we have legitimacy with the crowd we’re trying to engage? If we don’t, it will “crowd jack” our initiative.
- Control: are we willing to give up control, to accept outcomes which may be sub-optimal? Participation and consultation both imply that we have an answer. We should try and evolve beyond that point.
- Commitment: are we willing and able to commit to invest in the agency we have helped trigger? We cannot commit to something that engages people and then allow the energy to fizzle without investing in it. Accepting this goes against our need to measure results, as this is not something we can easily measure.
One challenge for humanitarians is that the connection between people having power and improvements in society is fuzzy.

The humanitarian sector, very much dominated by old power, does not inherently give space to meaningful participation. It is something which it feels it must do, rather than have it as a core strategy. Humanitarians should focus on the upside of letting go of control, such as for example acceptance and access, rather than on the risks related to losing control over outcomes.

The question of trust and legitimacy was asked in relation to local humanitarian actors. While legitimacy is grounded in an existing relation with affected people, there can be a tension between participation and inclusion, as participation can exacerbate existing power dynamics and structures. To manage that, it is essential to have transparency about roles and responsibilities, especially in relation to decision-making. Legitimacy gives space for organisations to stand back from the participation process and make decisions based on its outcomes as well as on international law and norms.

Donors as a matter of course hate risk and want predicted results. Nevertheless, certain donors are willing to take risks if they enable results, which is where the need for measurement of results comes in so strongly. Demonstration of participation and associated decision-making is a good measure of results.

There is a hierarchy of types of participation: there is a difference between a donor saying here is one hundred thousand dollars, we are going to gather some people in a room and decide how to spend it, and giving one hundred thousand dollars to a community and letting them decide. The higher up the participation scale you go, the more loyalty you earn.

We should also not assume people’s eagerness to participate. Certain individuals will have a great deal to say while others may not. Access to participation is what is essential.

Bringing different perspectives:

Shifting power: What can we learn from the health sector?

Asymmetry of power is inherent to health care. It’s accepted that the doctor knows more and that the patient has little or no say in how healthcare is distributed. Dr Nthabiseng Legoete, founder of Quali Health, shared her experience of turning this on its head, to develop a service that would be accessible and relevant for South Africans who did not access any health care. Quali Health started with focus group discussions around what would make people come to seek health care. Participation, which was initially needed to ensure that the business was sustainable, became the business’ actual strategy. Quali Health care services are informed by dialogue with patients and communities to ensure that the services meet their needs and requirements. The services are grounded in an equal relationship between medical staff and patients – medical staff understands that they need patients as much as patients need them, and patients are made to feel like and referred to as guests, affordability of services, which comes with predictability and convenience: facilities are open for long hours so that guests can come without having to miss work or wait long hours, and quality of service – measured in terms of guests’ perceptions of whether they are treated with dignity, respect and compassion.
Quali Health demonstrates that people will participate and continue to do so, if they see that their participation matters. Putting forward the co-dependence between staff and patients from the onset was key to success.

The power of inclusion

Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, Global Disability Advisor in the Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice of the World Bank Group stressed the need for a paradigm shift in the humanitarian sector to stop framing disability as a charity issue and see it for what it is, a social and economic issue, one that is influencing global frameworks such as the SDGs and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Such frameworks have galvanized people with disability as rights holders.

It is only once each of us starts recognising our biases, often unconscious, that we can start overcoming them and work effectively to include persons with disabilities in our humanitarian and development action. This requires deliberate action:

- Leadership support, resources and strategic decisions about whom to bring it to drive this agenda
- Staff training and capacity development
- Inclusive policies developed based on consultations with and representation of those who do not typically have a voice within their societies – we must avoid perpetrating the domination of “gate-keepers”
- Equally important is the way we deliver services: it is essential that organizations partner with persons with disabilities and/or local groups, who often have existing ideas and solutions as they know where the major obstacles are
- Inclusive participation must be sustained: It’s about building a relationship with a group, responding to them as a facilitator and a broker

When we look at who we are trying to reach in terms of people-centred action, we must drill down whom we are not talking to and why. The more inclusive we are, the more innovative we can be.

In the discussion which followed both interventions, some participants suggested that humanitarian action should start framing itself as a business catering to clients, to enable a more balanced power relationship between those providing assistance and those receiving it. Even if most people on the receiving end of humanitarian assistance do not have the choice of provider, it would help change mindsets. In reality though, treating humanitarian action as a business would mean navigating a distorted market place as the direct connection between “customers” (affected people) and “buyers” (donors) is missing.

The changes proposed by these two interventions require leadership that is open and willing to drive them. It also requires the ability to design solutions at the local level, where clever and innovative solutions can be found, and the means to plan several years ahead. The way that the humanitarian system is structured does not enable this: leadership is not present at the local level, funding decisions take place at the global level and resources are made available for short timeframes.

Foundation for an agenda for the humanitarian sector

In an attempt to pull together key suggestions from the discussion, Sara Pantuliano, Managing Director at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), suggested that humanitarian actors are all
signalling about the value of participation, but fall short in how they work and the structures they have in place.

**Mind-shift:** Humanitarian leaders need to make a conscious choice to put people in power who have experience of the issues that affected people are struggling with – they need real diversity in their leadership as well as in their teams. This will stimulate creativity and innovation. Feedback is a powerful vector of change, they could be using social media as a space and means for feedback instead of as a space for promotion. The humanitarian market is imperfect, so donors play a core role in enabling and bringing transformation to scale. A lot will rest on them.

**Incentives:** the right leadership and resources are needed to drive this change. We find ourselves stuck in global processes and decisions. It is possible to trigger or facilitate and support initiatives that are led, shaped, managed and conceived at the local level. We can create our own incentives to make this happen, there are examples that can be built upon.

**Moving beyond humanitarian exceptionalism:** Humanitarians have to start working with other players, independently from whether they are labelled humanitarian or not, who understand the local context and power dynamics better. They need to move away from needs assessment and focus on analysing the context instead. Understanding and relating to the local culture and context informs and brings trust. Moving beyond the humanitarian exceptionalism also means being prepared to respond in the way that is prioritised by affected people, which in post conflict situations tends to be education and jobs.

Participants then started thinking aloud about how to take forward this “participation is power” agenda.

The change will come from leaders driving humanitarian values – people have rights and want effectiveness – and recognising the inequality of power as their starting point. As leaders, we need to be sure that our staff understands where we sit on the participation “continuum” in relation to the context and the crisis. We need to be clear at every stage on what we are setting ourselves to achieve and what we are achieving in terms of participation. We have to recognise and act on the realisation that project–based participation is not enough; our organisations need to live participation as a value. This means findings the right organisational models.

Humanitarian leaders cannot rely on building structures and approaches to enable new power in the midst of crisis, we must be proactive. We need to identify how to make this happen and train our staff, recognising and integrating the very genuine drivers of old power, such as counter-terrorist legislation, security of staff and affected people, donors’ accountability requirements. How do we make sure we incentivise these changes, so that we ensure the safety of our staff, funding and resourcing, support and recognition from within our own organisations?

The questions to monitor will be: what part of business has engaging with affected people led us to do differently? What impact is this having on our work’s outcomes? We will also need to make sure we get the measurement of our progress and achievements right: have we identified the right parameters, such as satisfaction, feedback given, transparency, etc. and are measuring them in a meaningful way?

The suggestion to facilitate the development of a global charter on humanitarian response was also made, to clarify once and for all what is meant by participation and identify good practice.
Others suggested that key to progress is our ability to stay away from big political processes and declarations to focus on getting things right at the local level, accepting that mistakes will be made but that we will learn from these and improve.

A system and mindset change is needed for organisations and donors alike, to find ways of meeting new needs emerging in protracted crisis, integrating new technologies and digitalisation to be more effective, rethinking partnerships to ensure space and means for affected people’s participation. This will require changes in funding parameters and indicators. The Grand Bargain provides a forum for these discussions and a possible driver for change.

A lot of efforts are required at the level of individual organisations, yet there is a lot (more?) that can be achieved through collaborative platforms. Different approaches and models need to be tried, experimented with so that we can all share and learn together.