

OCHA on Message: Community Engagement

What is Community Engagement?

Community Engagement is a two-way dialogue between crisis-affected communities, humanitarian organizations and, where possible, within and between communities. It should enable affected people to meet their different needs, address their vulnerabilities and build on their pre-existing capacities.

Engaging with affected communities ensures that accurate and timely information is shared with them, and that their feedback and participation are integral parts of humanitarian response. This is based on the principle that communities' meaningful participation in humanitarian processes is essential and that information is a critical form of assistance.

In the case of self-help information, such as how to treat diseases at home, Community Engagement ensures the effective delivery of information as a form of life-saving assistance. Without it, disaster survivors cannot be empowered to make the best decisions for themselves and their communities.

The term "Communicating with Communities" (CwC) is also used to describe this work. However, Community Engagement is now the preferred term, as it implies a more pro-active process that should sit with all response programming, distinct from conventional public information and advocacy.

The link between Community Engagement and Accountability to Affected People

Community Engagement should be a part of all humanitarian programming; it is the means by which aid organizations attain accountability as an end. It

includes three components: participation, feedback and complaints, and providing information. It harnesses the power of all communication channels, including traditional media, mobile and digital technology and face-to-face exchanges. Relief actors recognize that providing connectivity to affected families is a vital humanitarian service in its own right.

To ensure that humanitarian needs are addressed effectively, Community Engagement should be continuous and happen at every stage of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle.



What is OCHA's role?

OCHA advocates for Community Engagement activities to be a central component of disaster response, and for the funding of Community Engagement programmes.

OCHA also brings in emerging partners and technology so that communities can be

connected and have a say in the international response.

As part of its 2014-2017 Strategic Plan, OCHA is ensuring that its information products, services and data are accessible to response actors and affected people by prioritizing a cross-sector approach to Community Engagement as part of its

inter-sector and cluster-coordination role. OCHA is also a founding member of the Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities network. Since 2010, OCHA has supported many projects in countries such as Haiti, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, South Sudan and Sudan.

“Information is a vital form of aid in itself... People need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. Information can save lives, livelihoods and resources.”

- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,
World Disasters Report 2005

What does OCHA say?

1. Without access to reliable information, affected families may not know how to access aid, make informed decisions or be effective leaders in their own recovery.

2. Community Engagement is a two-way process. Efforts to ensure disaster survivors can communicate with responders and participate in processes designed to help them are particularly important.

3. Effective Community Engagement is an operational issue that requires adequate resources and a consistent, clearly articulated approach.

Nepal: communities at the heart of life-saving activities

The 2015 earthquakes highlighted more than ever the need for a comprehensive approach to community engagement. The dispersed nature of response activities and attempts to reach people affected in some of the most remote areas presented significant logistical challenges to engaging with communities. The Communicating with Communities Working Group and an [inter-agency common feedback project](#) were rapidly established to ensure that the public could obtain information on humanitarian services and provide feedback through face-to-face meetings, suggestion boxes and mobile technology.

Based on this feedback, aid groups provided the Government of Nepal and the humanitarian community with recommendations in responding to community concerns and needs. The overarching goal is to increase accountability and allow affected families to have a say in the way they are helped.

Sudan: improving lives, one phone call at a time

In 2013—the tenth year of the conflict in Darfur—partners observed worrying gaps in basic services in the region’s camps. To address these gaps and increase accountability to conflict-affected people, humanitarian partners agreed to pilot a [call centre](#) to empower displaced communities to report issues in real time, such as broken water pumps, closed schools or medicine shortages. The project was rolled out in West Darfur, and by March 2014 it covered all five of Darfur’s states. Two years after its launch, the programme has received more than 1,000 phone calls, facilitating tangible improvements in Darfur’s IDP camps, which are home to more than 1.4 million people. In the first months after the Darfur call centre was set up, just one third of reported gaps were addressed. However, as of May 2015, the rate had climbed to 77 per cent. This was due to an elaborate follow-up system to ensure that no reported gap is ignored. Hotlines are increasingly included in humanitarian response efforts worldwide to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

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To find out more:

- [Core Humanitarian Standards on Quality & Accountability—Guidance & Indicators](#)
- [Humanitarianism in the Network Age](#)
- [Communications with Disaster-Affected Communities \(CDAC\) network](#)