

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

2015 HIGHLIGHTS



HIGHLIGHTS:

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Why it matters...

For years now, we have been talking about ‘accountability’ and ‘community engagement’, including in the lead-up to the upcoming **World Humanitarian Summit**. But many still ask: “what does it all mean in practice?”

Like ‘impartiality’ or ‘neutrality’, accountability is a principle that responders must commit to uphold, as set forth recently in the **Core Humanitarian Standard**. ‘Community engagement’ is a means to be more accountable to the very people humanitarians are meant to serve. It is about 1/ providing timely and accurate **information** to affected people, 2/ continuously seeking their **feedback** and acting on it, and 3/ ensuring that they actively **participate** in decision-making. Formerly coined ‘communication with communities’ at OCHA, ‘community engagement’ is now a preferred term: it implies a more dynamic process, and ensures that people are active participants in their own recovery.

No doubt, inherently, humanitarians have always listened to affected people as part of their work. But community engagement should be much more than discussing with people sitting under a tree and conducting needs assessments. It is also much more than asking people, “did you get enough food?”

Ebola claimed hundreds of lives because of mistrust, misinformation and general confusion among local populations. Evaluations in Iraq and Syria have shown that systematic collection of feedback at the collective level would make humanitarian response more effective. For example, tracking rumours and concerns in a crisis and responding to these, can often prevent further displacement.

What is clear is that the humanitarian community needs to come together to better engage with communities—it should not be seen as a stand-alone and should be an integral part of all operations. In 2015, OCHA and **CDAC Network** members came together to propose a new approach: a ‘common service’ for information provision and feedback collection to influence decision-making at strategic levels. The model was piloted in the wake of the Nepal earthquakes in April, demonstrating that it’s possible to bring a diverse group of partners to work together. Much was also done to strengthen information systems: various humanitarian hotlines were launched and two charters with the mobile and satellite industries were created to help ensure that people have continued access to communication channels during emergencies, and thus have access to tools to make their own decisions. These of course are only some of the highlights.

“If humanitarian workers were surgeons, we would be failing: we would be taking people into emergency rooms and cutting them open, but not monitoring their vital signs to see how they are doing all along.” – ECOSOC 2015

But as we head towards the World Humanitarian Summit in May, OCHA and its partners must work together to strengthen community engagement in conflict settings. The complexities and sensitivities involved do not mean it cannot be done or prioritized. They mean that we need to come together and find solutions to make it happen. ■

Hotlines: the hottest way to connect with communities?

With global mobile phone penetration is increasing daily around the world, setting up humanitarian hotlines is often seen by aid organisations as a tangible solution to be accountable to local communities, especially in areas where insecurity is high and physical access is limited.

Over the last year, the humanitarian community has witnessed a proliferation of humanitarian hotlines and call centres. For example, in Yemen, a country with 26.7 million people and nearly 19 million mobile subscriptions, three distinct hotlines were being proposed by different international organizations at the end of 2015.

While it is promising that aid groups are embracing the potential of mobile technology and networks, the lack of track record on impact and cost-effectiveness requires research and innovation in this field.

Hotlines are often set up without first establishing whether they are the most appropriate, relevant means of disseminating information or dealing with feedback and complaints.

Assumptions are often made about how people who are affected by a

crisis want to communicate. Even if people have access to mobile phones, it does not mean that a hotline will be their preferred way to communicate with aid groups.

Additionally, initiatives that rely on new technologies might further exclude and disenfranchise substantial numbers of marginalized people.

As Ground Truth observed, "class,

gender, race and ethnicity all affect how helplines are used (or not) and can prevent them from achieving their purpose." There are therefore indications that the percentage of affected people using humanitarian helplines is small, that the hotlines are often not used by callers for their intended purpose and that the follow-up on caller feedback and queries is inadequate. ■



A face-to-face information session in Darfur, Sudan, on the existence of the hotline and its purpose.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **It's not just about technology:** to be successful, a hotline needs to be backed up by a robust response system that ensures that feedback and complaints can be addressed efficiently, and that timely and accurate information can be provided to callers. A referral system on how to deal with serious, protection-related information, regardless of the purpose of the hotline or call centre, must be established.
- **Avoid duplication:** one common hotline may be more efficient and less confusing than one hotline for each humanitarian issue or organization.
- **Manage expectations:** any outreach activity should be clear on the purpose of the hotline and what callers can expect. Aid groups must clearly state that they cannot operate a '911' emergency line.
- **The importance of partnerships:** agreements with mobile network operators and government regulators should be made before disaster hits, especially regarding short codes to ensure toll-free access and/or subsidized SMS awareness campaigns.

Some notable hotlines in 2015:

IRAQ: The first-ever large-scale **inter-agency call centre** was launched in July 2015 and is now receiving an average of 150 calls a day.

BURUNDI: An **inter-agency hotline** was set up to get a better sense of people's immediate needs and keep them informed.

NIGERIA: In **Adamawa State**, a **toll-free Information hotline for IDPs** was set up by OCHA and the local government.

SUDAN: The **OCHA-run hotline for displaced people in Darfur camps** celebrated its second year of existence.



Last October, when heavy El Niño-related rains pounded his village in Burundi for three consecutive days, Laurent Hatungimana, 32 and father of five, immediately called the number a volunteer had given him three weeks earlier. Within 48 hours, he and his entire family were given shelter in a temporary settlement built for the 697 people affected by the landslides.

Looking ahead: "Hotline-in-a-box"

OCHA and ICRC, together with other [CDAC Network](#) members have identified the need for a new method and product to:

- 1/ help responders determine the conditions under which a hotline could be a useful mechanism to improve engagement with affected people or not,
- 2/ provide specific human-centred tools that can be adapted in different contexts.

The proposal of a toolbox, or hotline-in-a-box, evolved from an open-sourced idea on the [ICRC RED Innovation Platform](#) that directly came from humanitarian practitioners with wide-ranging experiences and a common frustration with the deployment of humanitarian hotlines. The message was clear: we seem to keep reinventing the wheel and still seem unable to get it right.

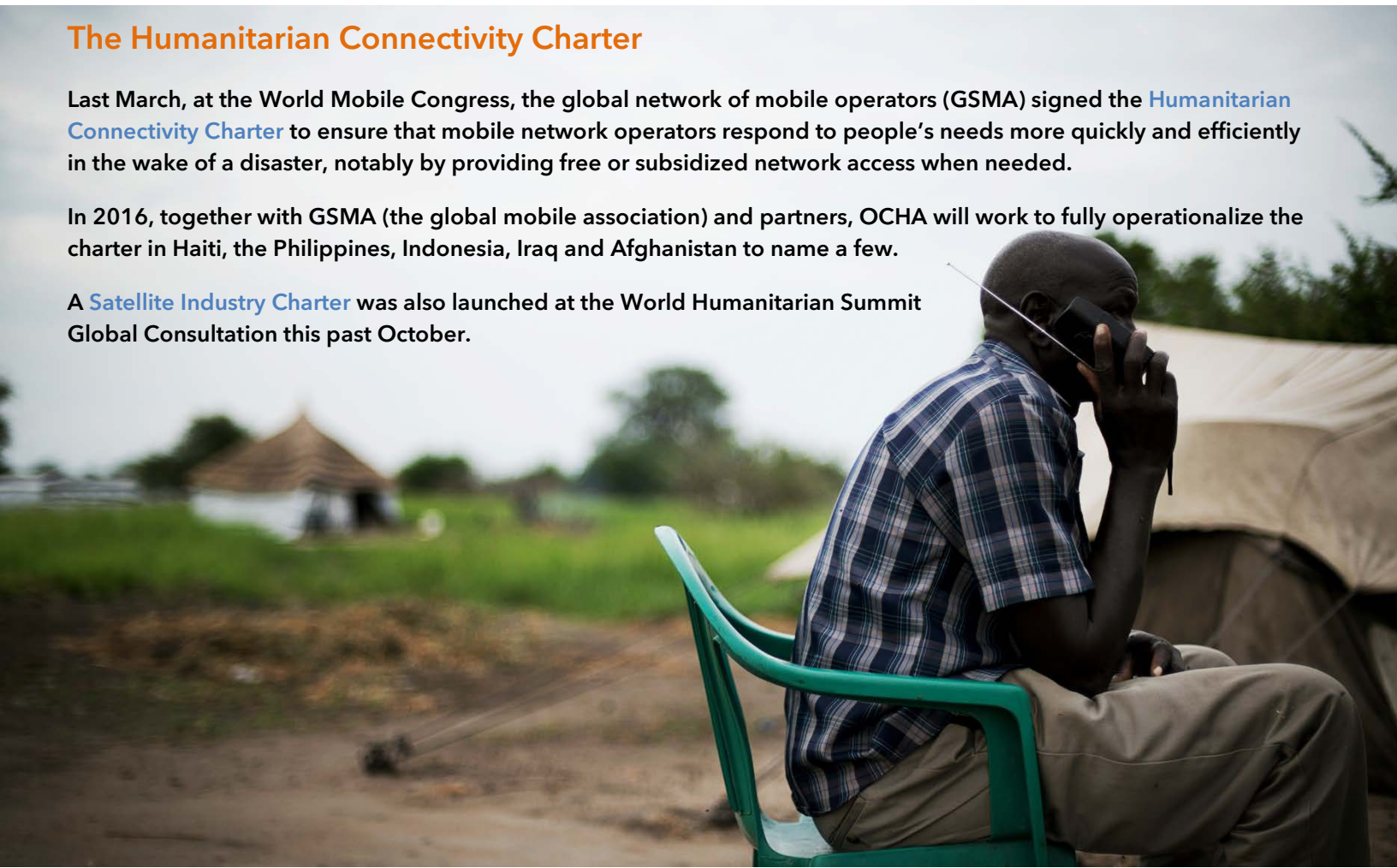
The 'hotline-in-a-box' would be designed by the [Dalberg Design Impact Group](#) and would positively change the way humanitarian organizations set up hotlines and complement how they deal in real time with feedback and complaints, assess their programmes reach and effectiveness. ■

The Humanitarian Connectivity Charter

Last March, at the World Mobile Congress, the global network of mobile operators (GSMA) signed the [Humanitarian Connectivity Charter](#) to ensure that mobile network operators respond to people's needs more quickly and efficiently in the wake of a disaster, notably by providing free or subsidized network access when needed.

In 2016, together with GSMA (the global mobile association) and partners, OCHA will work to fully operationalize the charter in Haiti, the Philippines, Indonesia, Iraq and Afghanistan to name a few.

A [Satellite Industry Charter](#) was also launched at the World Humanitarian Summit Global Consultation this past October.



Q&A: Common Engagement Services in Nepal and Yemen

In 2014-2015, from West Africa to Iraq, from the Central African Republic to Syria, evaluations of humanitarian responses, including OPRs, highlighted the need for a more meaningful, formal and collective engagement with affected communities. In light of this, agencies came together to propose and establish a “common service” model with three purposes: provide timely, life-saving and actionable information to affected people; collect, aggregate and analyse feedback/complaints from communities; support responders on course-correction and to act on the feedback collected.

This model does not mean that the responsibility to engage communities is lifted from individual UN agencies, NGOs, or clusters – all humanitarian actors must continue to fulfil their commitments in terms of accountability. However, with a common service approach, agencies are able to see the “big picture” on how affected people perceive the response, and communities can participate in their recovery in more accessible, streamlined, and systematic fashion.



Stewart Davies is a Humanitarian Affairs Officer for OCHA who deployed to Nepal in the wake of the 25 April 2015 earthquake to initiate the first-ever Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (CFP), funded by DFID. He recently surged to Yemen to help launch a similar initiative for improved system-wide accountability in 2016.

1. Why was the Nepal earthquake an interesting context for the first implementation of a Common Service?

The existing capacities in country made it extremely interesting, specifically in terms of humanitarian coordination, local media as an effective communication modality, and local civil society partnerships. Leveraging a pre-existing communications working group that had been working on preparedness and risk reduction initiatives pre-crisis, ensured the model had foundations in place from the outset. It was activated in the response to support meeting the feedback gap.

Less than 60 per cent of Nepalese can read – the rate is even lower in rural areas – so verbal communication means, such as face-to-face dialogue, radio programmes, and hotlines, were essential. Equally significant, working with hundreds of radio networks across the affected areas presented challenges for effective coordination.

2. What are some of the challenges you faced?

Reaching the most vulnerable with information was extremely challenging: inequalities were massive in terms of socio-economic means, language, religion, caste, ethnicity, gender and disabilities. For marginalized communities living in the mountains, access was nearly impossible.

In terms of setting up and coordinating a new common approach to community engagement, what was challenging was the lack of experience in this area of work among humanitarian personnel in Nepal. It took about a month to get partners and donors to agree on priorities. In a sudden onset emergency, that is too much time.

3. What, according to you, are the main achievements of the Nepal CFP?

By asking and listening to people’s needs, perceptions and complaints, aid groups could adapt their response to people’s specific circumstances and concerns. It enabled

communities to have a say in critical aid decisions, and increased their ability to be more resilient after the crisis.

Research shows that data collected through the CFP helped improve processes in programmatic communications with communities, coordination, adaptive programming, monitoring, and strategic decision-making.

Additionally, one of the key achievements of launching such a project in the early stages of the response was that it provided empirical evidence on the efficacy of a common approach to information provision, feedback and meaningful participation. The CFP helped use resources more efficiently, improve coordination and build local capacity, providing critical lessons for global discussions such as the World Humanitarian Summit.

4. What are some lessons learned?

Institutional support – from the Humanitarian Coordinator, the Resident Coordinator’s Office, OCHA and donors – is key: the project gained traction at the leadership and coordination levels. This allowed for integration across the humanitarian programme cycle including in key planning processes such as the [Flash Appeal](#), the HCT Monitoring Framework and other coordination forums.

Second, the project requires a coordinator, with expert knowledge of community engagement mechanisms and an acknowledged place in the humanitarian architecture.

It is also important to note that community feedback is collected through monthly perception surveys thanks to local implementing partners and volunteers. Given that the aggregation and analysis of this feedback is such a key component of the CFP, it is critical to ensure that these collectors receive continued trainings and support so they remain committed to the methodological approach. This must include regular debriefings to understand the challenges they encounter in data collection as well as quality assurance checks.



Furthermore, the use of technology (such as smartphones/tablets and data analysis software) greatly reduces the margins of error and the burden of data entry, allowing for increased sample sizes and shorter reporting and analysis turnarounds.

In terms of survey design, many found that the broad perception questions left little room for stakeholders to use the data and take direct action. Issue-specific perception surveys are more actionable, therefore more effective.

Finally, it is clear that the data collected has very tangible results at the district level: great buy-in by the local governments and NGOs, especially in districts where the project has direct access through field staff. It will be absolutely critical for future projects to have a strong presence at the district level so partners are aware of the feedback and can participate in the survey design.

5. From your recent experience in Yemen, what are the specific considerations for complex/conflict crises?

In addition to the lessons I just listed, the context of the Yemen response requires at least three additional considerations.

The first one is that, due to the difficulties of access, a lot of the data has to be gathered remotely. This can be achieved by piggy-backing on other mechanisms including remote assessments and third-party monitoring if necessary.

Two, for the Common Engagement Service model to work well in complex emergency settings, the staff would need

to receive an extensive specific training, including conflict-sensitive two-way communication, use of media for humanitarian purposes, and protection/ethics discussions. All this would of course require additional funding.

Lastly, for conflict-related humanitarian responses, it will be important to put the emphasis on flexibility, with “light” and “substantial” models that can be scaled up or down according to the circumstances, and have a strong integration with existing programmes in the field. ■

THE NEPAL CFP IN NUMBERS:

More than **50 partners** have joined forces in the CFP, including:

- **8 UN agencies,**
- **7 clusters,**
- **8 media development agencies,**
- **14 INGOs,**
- **5 NGOs,**
- **armed forces**
- and members of the **private sector** such as the mobile network operator Ncell and the Microsoft Innovation Centre.

More than 400 community and private radio broadcasters shared common humanitarian content across the 14 worst-affected districts.



2016: Community Engagement and the World Humanitarian Summit

The **World Humanitarian Summit** (WHS) consultations throughout 2015 were loud and clear: people affected by crises are not systematically listened to and included in decisions made by humanitarian actors.

The **WHS synthesis report** recommended that crisis-affected people should be “enabled to exercise greater voice and choice in humanitarian action, including through better two-way communication and feedback mechanisms, the increased use of cash-based assistance where feasible, and concrete measures to increase accountability.”

Significant shifts will be necessary to achieve this. It will include changes in the social and cultural foundations of the humanitarian system, as well as the creation of external and internal incentives for aid groups and their staff to be more accountable.

The **perceptions research company IPSOS**, as part of the WHS process, is currently conducting extensive community consultations in Ukraine, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Guinea, and Syria to better understand the perceptions and expectations of crisis-affected people regarding humanitarian aid, especially in conflict settings. These will be used



to inform commitments for the Summit in May.

WHS will be the opportunity for aid groups and member states to set forth constructive actions and change how the global humanitarian system engages with affected populations collectively. **Applications for side events, the innovation marketplace and the exhibition fair are open until 12 February.** ■

Useful Resources

- [OCHA on Message: Community Engagement](#)
- [Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities \(CDAC\) network](#)
- [Core Humanitarian Standard Guidance Note and Indicators](#)
- [Accountability to affected populations animation video, by the Food Security Cluster](#)
- [Have those hard-won accountability reforms had any impact?, by OXFAM](#)
- [Rhetoric or Reality? Putting Affected People at the Centre of Humanitarian Action, by Dayna Brown and Antonino Donino](#)

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