

## Council of Delegates 2017

### From words to action: Community engagement and accountability in practice

#### REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP

11 November 2017, 11:00 – 13:00

[www.ifrc.org/cod17-cea](http://www.ifrc.org/cod17-cea)

**Chair:** Lazare Zoungrana, Secretary General, Burkinabe Red Cross Society

**Moderators:** Jemilah Mahmood, Under Secretary General for Partnerships, IFRC, and Charlotte Lindsey-Curtet, Director of Communication & Information Management, ICRC

**Rapporteur:** Pearl Li, Youth representative, Australian Red Cross National Board

#### **(A) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Making sure communities drive humanitarian response is important; getting them to lead is crucial. Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) must become a standard and common approach in our humanitarian action throughout the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), embraced by all levels of the organization. In short, CEA is everyone's responsibility. The Movement should ensure that approaches and activities are defined, common benchmarks to measure the quality and effectiveness of our work are established, and a more predictable, systematic and evidence-based approach is created. This will enable the Movement to truly put people at the centre of humanitarian action and implement a smarter and more localized 'community impact first' approach to humanitarian response and long-term programming.

#### **(B) GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

The session was very engaging, with extensive and vibrant participation from the chair, speakers and approximately 200 audience participants. It was repeatedly highlighted that it is essential for us to **work closer with the communities** we serve, pivotal that we **build relationships based on trust** and imperative that we **stop thinking for them**. Rather, participants conveyed that we should be ready to **devolve our relative 'power'**, putting communities at the centre of both our work and related decision-making processes.

#### **(C) KEY POINTS RAISED ON GUIDING QUESTIONS**

##### **What does CEA mean to you?**

Mr Umesh Dhakal, Executive Director of the Nepal Red Cross Society, defined CEA as an approach towards communicating and engaging with communities, particularly the most vulnerable, in the identification, planning and implementation of services. It includes rolling out appropriate modes of feedback and ensuring that all Movement responses are more accountable and transparent as we build trust, community resilience and acceptance. The Movement should enhance its capacity to provide timely, relevant, useful and actionable information to affected communities before, during and after disasters and crises and involve them throughout programmes and operations.

##### **How does community engagement contribute to operational excellence (or effectiveness)?**

Ms Pat Laberge, Director of Global Programmes for the Canadian Red Cross Society,

emphasized that there should be minimum standards for CEA. People affected by war and disaster expect us to be able to communicate with them in a timely manner and understand, analyse and respond to community concerns to deliver support that matters to them.

### **How can we ensure communities are meaningfully engaged in both times of crisis and peace?**

Mr Mohamed Fakeeh, Programmes Coordinator for the Yemen Red Crescent Society, highlighted the difficulty of CEA in times of conflict. Tensions can arise between affected groups, and the National Society might be seen as prioritizing recovery efforts for certain groups over others. We need to be aware of this and have plans to counter or mitigate the effects.

### **Are we really ready to ‘let go’ of power and truly put local views and experience in the driver’s seat?**

For Ms Mawra Mahmood, Chairman of the Red Cross Youth of the Norwegian Red Cross, if the Movement was truly ready to let go of power, we would see more young people engaging with communities when it comes to developing programmes. Letting go of power does not yet exist in the way that we are structured; whether it is power dynamics, institutional culture or financing, there are no compelling reasons to move away from being closed and centralized. We need to be innovative and decentralized to become enablers of change and ensure that young people and communities can become decision-makers in humanitarian action.

### **In a protracted crisis like the one in South Sudan, how can we leverage the force of local volunteers and staff to become powerful community engagement ambassadors?**

In South Sudan, due to the conflict’s complexities, community meetings often cannot be held. However, Mr James Abalang, the South Sudan Red Cross CEA Coordinator said that CEA can be made possible by practising the principle of neutrality and making sure that parties understand our staff’s mandate and responsibilities. Also, it is key to ensure that both communities *and* volunteers are duly consulted and engaged, e.g. by giving volunteers the autonomy to decide whether they want to participate in a sensitive activity (i.e. collection of corpses following an outbreak of violence in the capital). The Movement should work more closely with chiefs and local leaders to be CEA champions, while ensuring that volunteers are duly listened to and consulted on the work they carry out.

### **We talk a lot about the amazing opportunities that new technologies present for engaging local communities, but what are the threats? How can we respond when technology is misused?**

The Mexican Red Cross has a Community Resilience Programme focusing on social diagnosis and assessments of communities. As RFL National Coordinator Mr Rafael Becerril remarked, there is an increased need and demand among migrants to have access to Facebook, Whatsapp and other ways of being in touch and reconnecting with their families. Yet there is no clear guidance within the Movement on how to better use these technologies without jeopardizing people’s data and while protecting their dignity and right to information. A uniform approach and guidance on using technologies is urgently needed; the recently published guide [‘How to use social media to better engage people affected by crises’](#) was held up as a good example.

### **Let’s talk about roles and responsibilities: What is the role of management? What is the role of donors?**

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is progressively being adopted globally. Mr Robert Tickner, Chair of CHS Alliance, reminded us that donors want the Movement to work more cohesively as part of the global humanitarian family. Likewise, in the aftermath of a disaster, various aid agencies using different terms and languages in their dialogue can lead to an inconsistent and confusing response.

### **Ultimately, who is accountable for being accountable? You can’t tell everyone that they’re responsible.**

Mary Werntz, ICRC’s Deputy Director of Programmes, said that we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the CEA Advisor is the person that will hold us all accountable. We all

need to take responsibility and bring CEA to the centre of everything we do. CEA is a cross-cutting issue that must be integrated from the very bottom to the top of the Movement. This means including CEA in everyone's job description and performance management process, so as to better institutionalize CEA and establish common benchmarks.

### **How can we ensure accountability for the quality of our work?**

The Myanmar Red Cross Society ensures that all staff and volunteers understand how to engage and work with communities by having a set of [minimum standards](#) to guide their programmes and operations. Ms Shwe Cin Myint, Deputy SG, said that these standards ensure a high quality of work and monitor how communities are consistently engaged before, during and after an emergency. As highlighted by the Chair of CHS Alliance, the CHS focuses on quality and accountability, which are two sides of the same coin.

### **Group discussion: What does success look like?**

Success will be achieved when there is a shift of power towards affected people, when this shift is carried out as part of an integrated approach to programming, when CEA is a clear measure of the quality of our work and when all of the aforementioned contribute to the resilience of communities. Success will also be achieved when the Movement is recognized as a global leader in CEA, both in conflicts and crises.

### **Group discussion: What should we stop doing and start doing and what should we do differently?**

The Movement should stop viewing affected people as 'beneficiaries' whose need for participation and dialogue is, oftentimes, still an afterthought. We should start recognizing communities' invaluable insights and let them inform both our understanding of the operational context and how we respond to it. This means actively listening and having an approach to identify community needs and ways to achieve them in coordination with other actors. We must also start including CEA as a core part of all National Societies' programmes. We should continue to be innovative with new and relevant technologies in a creative, proactive and responsible manner, without forgetting that technology is not necessarily accessible to all. We should continue to seek complementarity across the Movement, according to our respective strengths and weaknesses, while ensuring that all of this work is based on a common set of quality standards. We should prioritize CEA as a way to deliver quality programming which will complement the fulfilment of donor accountability.

## **(D) CONCLUSIONS**

Participants called for a *Movement-wide commitment to further integrate CEA across all programmes*. There is already a wealth of knowledge and experience within the Movement. Many National Societies have made great progress in making CEA their standard way of working, offering a unique and timely opportunity to learn and capitalize on these experiences, share lessons and strengthen horizontal collaboration. There is a strong commitment on the part of the IFRC and the ICRC, expressed by the two senior leaders who acted as moderators in the panel discussion. A similarly strong commitment was manifested by the panellists. Participants in the workshop agreed that there is a clear need to institutionalize CEA within the Movement, as CEA is fundamentally linked to our values as a Movement, to our relationship with those we serve and to the quality of our work.