

CHANGE IS IN THE HANDS OF LEADERS

WHAT IS THIS BRIEF?

In 2019, [CDA Collaborative Learning \(CDA\)](#)¹ and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) jointly investigated Movement members² in institutionalizing participatory approaches to improve how they work with local communities. Findings and recommendations presented in this brief emerged from this research and illuminate key areas where the Movement and state institutions can enhance how they listen and respond to local people. This brief is part of a series of briefing notes that provide supplemental evidence for the Movement Minimum Commitments on Community Engagement and Accountability presented at the 2019 Council of Delegates.

Across many sectors – from the private to the humanitarian – there is strong evidence to demonstrate that the most successful organizations have dynamic and strong leaders at the helm. Bold commitment and well-articulated motivation by leadership can catalyze system-wide change, while the lack of interest or strategic thinking by leaders can stifle and undermine even the most innovative approaches. To foster change from within an institution requires leadership and responsibility at all levels.³ [Research with the Kenya Red Cross Society](#) demonstrates that when an engaged board responds to community feedback, it establishes accountability to communities as an organizational priority. The research explained that, “Having leadership support [accountability to communities] has a trickle on effect in that the issue becomes a strategic and organizational priority, which means that staff are allocated time and space to work on this, and partners are financed to do this.”⁴

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR ACCOUNTABLE LEADERSHIP?

If strong engagement by leaders is fundamental to successful institutional practices, why is it so often the missing ingredient? Evidence from this research illustrates a diverse set of challenges that encumber leaders from being able to shift their or-

ganizational culture for greater accountability to local communities. Doing so challenges existing power structures, risks missing small grievances that become larger problems, requires significant flexibility at all levels of the organization, and changes who is listened to and how. Each of these points is further explored.

- **Power structures** – Ultimately, increasing participation of affected communities requires a shift in decision-making authority. Creating an environment to elevate the voices of local people often challenges the structures and processes that placed management in their positions of power to begin with. Leaders who have the greatest leverage may even find that working as agents of change runs counter to their own self-interest. [As one study notes](#), “Those with the greatest power to affect reforms are often not those with the strongest interest in their success...But the proposed reforms are only partially in line with their self-interests or, in the case of accountability to affected populations, even run counter to them.”⁵ **Leaders are both a product of these power structures and hold the greatest potential to reform them.**

1. For more see: <http://cdacollaborative.org>

2. Africa Movement members engaged in this process as part of the IFRC CEA Africa Roadmap. The Roadmap engaged over 400 people from IFRC, ICRC, Partner National Societies, and Africa National Societies, and included in-depth visits to the Sudan Red Crescent, Malawi Red Cross, Burundi Red Cross, and the Nigeria Red Cross. To achieve a more global perspective interviews were conducted with global movement members and in-depth visits to the Italian Red Cross and the Ukraine Red Cross.

3. Brown, Dayna. 2018. “Participation of Crisis-Affected People in Humanitarian Decision-Making processes.” The Humanitarian Accountability Report: 2018 Edition: CHS Alliance, 2018.

4. Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society. CDA Collaborative Learning and International Federation of the Red Cross.

5. Steets, J., Binder, A., Derzsi-Horvath, A., Kruger, S., Ruppert, L. (2016) Drivers and Inhibitors of Change in the Humanitarian System. Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute.

- **Small grievances that become big problems** – Seemingly minor community issues can quickly add up to larger problems if they go unaddressed. Prioritizing and valuing local voice and perspective can help organizations catch small grievances before they challenge the operability of the program or the reputation of the organization. Leadership of a National Society in Africa explained that the importance of listening and engaging local people became blatant when community feedback exposed a pervasive corruption scandal. They said, “We have evidence of [community engagement] impact. Issues of corruption in the North were identified because of this, and we have seen it increase program quality. Leadership sees and knows this.” It should be noted that leaders often have many competing priorities, which means they only take on the most urgent issues or ones they feel personally invested in – which may not necessarily include strategic issues like community accountability. This is reinforced by the fact that community engagement is not often seen as important until it is ‘too late’ and that failure to engage has resulted in a problem. Lessons from the research highlight the importance of staff to have time and space to address and use community feedback to adapt their work. **The responsibility is therefore on leaders to set aside time and encourage staff to listen and respond to emerging issues among the community.**

- **Inflexibility at all levels of the organization** – The success of a project or operation is generally predetermined leaving little room to make changes based on local need or contextual fluctuations. Growing calls for more flexible funding and adaptive approaches have yet to gain traction among donors (see box). Therefore, even if a leader is committed to community accountability, the rigidity of institutional arrangements, funding mechanisms, and project structures may make it challenging to actually put community accountability at the centre of the work. Leaders from many National Societies expressed a desire to negotiate with donors when fresh approaches that enhance community participation are removed from budgets or proposals. **Effective leaders do not just work within a system, rather they help to shape the systems they work with – including advocating for changes that enable community engagement.**

LEADERSHIP-DONOR DILEMMA

The [2018 Humanitarian Accountability Report](#) explains, “Some donors are disappointed that after offering different funding modalities and allowing for program adaptation, they are not seeing more creative proposals from humanitarian agencies, but rather continued resistance to change. Even in multi-mandate organizations with unrestricted funding, many still fall back on the model of results-based management and restricted approaches to program management due to organizational cultures and a lack of senior leadership to working differently.”⁶

- **Who is listened to and how we listen** – The sector has increasingly become an “expertocracy” with siloes of technical specialists hired for their specific expertise. Hiring however is usually done without consideration of “softer skills” that enable these experts to achieve successful outcomes with the actual people they are serving. In addition, organizational structures often lead to community participation being seen as an “add-on” or a project-based activity, and not a cross-cutting priority that is relevant to all aspects of programming and operations. This often means that staff find themselves comfortable only engaging with those who are the loudest or easiest to access and without the “essential skills” to effectively listen, respond, and work with the local community. Placing communities at the center of decision-making requires staff to listen differently and to listen to different people. Leaders are responsible for establishing organizational incentive structures for staff to understand the short and long-term benefits of taking the step to listen, reflect on, and share community perspective in order to be responsive. **It is necessary for leaders to create institutional space for staff to reflect on community perspective, while also mandating structures that encourage staff to change behavior and listen differently – through shaping the criteria of who and how staff are hired.**

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM LEADERS?

Commitment to community engagement and accountability is important, but insufficient for positive change. While there is no one formula for success, there are practices that can foster greater impacts across organizations and state institutions. Many of these practices build upon one ano-

6. Brown, Dayna. 2018. “Participation of Crisis-Affected People in Humanitarian Decision-Making processes.” The Humanitarian Accountability Report: 2018 Edition: CHS Alliance, 2018: 35..

ther, which suggests that when leaders prioritize the perspectives of local people it can have a ripple effect across the organization and can shift institutional culture. The research for the [Movement Commitments on Community Engagement and Accountability](#) captured four fundamental actions that leaders need to undertake if they want to foster change.

MODEL accountability

Who leaders listen to demonstrates whose voice is important. Leaders set expectations within institutions by the way they act, engage with, and are accountable to their staff, the communities they serve, and the donors who support them. Experience demonstrates that when leaders listen to and engage with staff, those colleagues are more likely to see the value of being listened to and are in turn more likely to adopt similar behavior with the communities they serve. An [International Rescue Committee report](#) highlights this, noting “senior management has a critical role to play in cultivating an institutional culture where feedback is valued and acted upon. For teams at the front-line to be responsive to the needs and perspectives of their clients, they need to feel that their own views and perspectives are also taken into account in informing the decisions and actions taken by the agency they are working for.”⁷

WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP MODELING ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE?

There are many practical ways for leaders to model internal and external accountability. Recent research captured options:

- **Establish a staff feedback mechanism** – Listen to, respond to, and use staff feedback regularly, share with staff when feedback influences action. This can exhibit how accountability, transparency, and trust is important internally and externally.
- **Increase staff participation in decision-making** – Create more shared opportunities for all staff across the organization to contribute to organizational decisions. Seeking feedback about such opportunities to enhance effectiveness.
- **Include community voices in decision-making** – Demonstrate the importance of community perspective by asking for data from community feedback in decision-making processes. Discuss with staff about why, how, and with what information decisions were made. [One report](#) notes, “Leaders of a response cannot act on community feedback if they cannot see it. There is a need for greater sophistication and coordination in the gathering, analysis, visualization and sharing of community feedback and perception data so that it can be overlaid with response information and shared, regularly, with leadership.”⁸

- **Put it on the agenda** – Make community feedback a standing agenda item for senior management meetings. That means that it will be regularly seen and reviewed, which will demonstrate that it is a priority in decision-making.
- **Create policies** – Include listening and using community feedback into existing policies and processes and/or develop new ones that require staff to listen to and include community perspectives in all phases of programs and operations. Share these policies with community partners and staff in onboarding, periodically revisiting to adjust for effectiveness.

VALUE community perspective

Priorities and values are set by leaders not only through their words, but also through their incentive structures, their resourcing decisions, and the data they include in decision-making processes. As [one report](#) explains, “...values are not just words on posters or periodic reminders at staff meetings. They are observed daily in interactions between staff, managers, partners, and community members. A multitude of implicit ethical messages are communicated and absorbed in the process and the way organizational commitments and philosophies are modelled is important.”⁹ Leaders of National Societies who aligned their organizational values for increased community engagement with concrete accountability and incentive structures were often the most successful. This includes establishing policies and protocols that hold staff accountable, such as performance indicators or elements of their job description.

WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP THAT VALUES COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES LOOK LIKE?

There are many practical ways for leaders can demonstrate how they value community perspectives. Recent research captured options:

- **Hire staff with skills necessary to engage the community** – Pay attention to who is hired for community-facing roles. Review job descriptions to ensure they include the appropriate expertise: inclusive communication, managing feedback, analysis for decision-making, and dispute reso-

7. Seris, Nicolas and Chloe Whitley. 2017. “Designing for a Change in Perspective: Embracing Client Responsiveness in Humanitarian Project Design.” International Rescue Committee: New York, NY.

8. Alice Chatelet and Meg Sattler. 2019. “Communication and community engagement in humanitarian response.” Humanitarian Practice Network: Humanitarian Exchange. Special Feature: Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Response. 74, ODI: London, UK.

9. Jean, Isabella. 2017. “Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice.” CDA Collaborative Learning. Bond, London, UK.

lution. “These are not specialist skills. They are essential to development practice and should be non-negotiable.”¹⁰

- **Review Performance Indicators** – Work with human resources and include indicators related to community engagement and participation into staff performance evaluations. For example, require staff to: share and discuss timely, accurate and relevant information regularly with communities, about program activities and progress, using the best communications approaches to engage with different groups.

- **Request feedback** – Ask for community feedback frequently. If you ask for it, staff will have to gather and analyze it, which creates incentives for the organization to listen, analyze, respond, and act on community feedback.

- **Establish compliance mechanisms** – Create or strengthen compliance and enforcement mechanisms that require staff to live up to their and the organization’s commitments to local people. Share with partners and review periodically to strengthen.

- **Be an Advocate** – When donors say they cannot fund initiatives that engage the community, leaders need to stand up for organizational values and respectfully advocate for options or reconsideration. Communicate to your donors that we do not take on programs where the voices of local communities are not at the center of the work.

ENGAGE in accountability-related opportunities

When leaders demonstrate their priorities and values through active engagement and responsiveness to these initiatives there is stronger institutional practice. In Nigeria, for example, senior management’s presence in a three-day workshop focused on community engagement and accountability commitments sent a direct message to staff about the importance of the event and its content. A leader of the National Society explained, “When the SMT [senior management team] take part in the CEA [community engagement and accountability] discussion, even for a day, people take it more seriously.” Another manager said, “Leadership participating sends a strong message that this is important, and that there is nowhere to hide.”

ENGAGEMENT IN PAKISTAN

During a case study in Pakistan, staff observed a program manager who gathered his frontline team members at the end of each day for a 10-15 minutes long huddle. This was a standing meeting with no laptops or phones allowed with staff standing in a circle. A single question started the meeting: “What did you hear today that concerned you or surprised you?” As examples and issues were brought up, staff were asked to sort them into categories: a) “we can resolve

this within our team”; b) “we need to communicate this to senior management for decision/action”; or c) “we need to refer this outside our organization.” The manager took note and assigned responsibilities and asked for status reports on previous issues. The meeting ended with: “What are you proud of today?” His staff reported a sense of empowerment when categorizing issues into “we can resolve this right here” category. This was a daily practice of problem-solving that made the incoming complaints and issues less daunting. Staff began to listen for and bring in more examples of how program aspects could be tweaked or changed significantly in order to solve the recurring issues.

Source: Jean, Isabella. 2017. “Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice.” CDA Collaborative Learning. Bond, London, UK.

Leadership can also establish a business case for increase community engagement. In Kenya, for example, enhanced community participation was linked with a value-for-money matrix. This created a strong case that community engagement contributed to improved institutional efficiency, effective, and equity, which helped leadership to see the value of investing resources into participatory approaches.¹¹

WHAT DOES ENGAGED LEADERSHIP FOR ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE?

Even if leaders are not overseeing or driving the conversation related to issues of accountability, remaining abreast and engaged in the topic is fundamental if they want to catalyze a shift in institutional approach.

- **Participate** – Prioritize participation in workshops and trainings that focus on community engagement. Lead by example and show staff that your engagement means that this is a topic that should be taken seriously.

- **Lead and engage in key processes** – Provide input into and spearhead relevant processes. Much like the Kenya example, being seen to lead the initiative will increase staff buy-in and encourage them to participate and take it seriously.

- **Learn from peers** – Share experience of “what works” with leaders across the Movement to collectively improve practice.

- **Create space for shared leadership** – When it makes sense, let go. Enable innovations from staff by removing hierarchical approaches. Stay engaged with these initiatives but empower staff to lead them.

¹⁰ Jean, Isabella. 2017. “Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice.” CDA Collaborative Learning. Bond, London, UK.

¹¹ Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society. <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/05/M-ATC-A4-EN-LR.pdf>

RESOURCE accountability initiatives

Talk is not enough: leaders also need to invest in institutional values. It may seem simple, but inadequate resourcing (both financial and human) leads to a lack of meaningful community engagement. Evidence highlights that pockets of success (which tend to come when funding is available for one project) do not add up to create system-wide change. In fact, it is more likely that those successes will end with the project, leaving behind little institutional memory, capacity, or structures to maintain good practices. For this research, one National Society discussed the struggle to integrate participatory processes into work outside of emergency response programming, which meant that approaches were a one-time or standalone effort.

It can be challenging for leaders to raise funds solely for strengthening accountability practices. With few indicators to measure the impact of increased community participation on the operating environment and program quality, it becomes difficult to make a value-for-money proposition to donors. Leaders need to establish systems that prioritize community engagement approaches as an unconditional component of program budgets. Leaders across the Movement expressed that the lack of Movement-specific evidence creates a roadblock to prove to donors that investment in participatory approaches improve outcomes. Sector-wide, however, there are many concrete examples that demonstrate what happens when organizations do not listen to those they serve, as well as the impact of effective community engagement on important outcomes.¹² This existing evidence, combined with ongoing action learning (including capturing evidence and impact of community engagement), can support arguments for better resourcing of participatory practices.

WHAT DOES RESOURCING ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE?

Even with the clear challenges related to resourcing participatory activities, it is essential that leaders seek dynamic and innovative ways to make the case for enhanced engagement. Recent research captured options:

- **Hire focal points** – Resource positions that can focus on providing technical support for enhanced participation practices. If resourced appropriately, these staff can support the institutionalization process, and someday their role might not be necessary as a stand-alone position.
- **Have a strategic vision** – Just as critical as resourcing positions is ensuring that those positions are in the right

position in the organizational hierarchy and are linked to the right technical and line managers.

- **Invest in capacity development** – Support the development of the “soft skills” of staff noted above.
- **Budget for it** – Design policies that ensure that accountability to communities has a dedicated budget line in every project. This can alleviate the projectization or “add-on” approach to community engagement.
- **Build an evidence base** – Invest in the development of an evidence base that leaders can point to when building the case for donors for improved participation. Strengthening how information is captured, shared, and managed can create opportunities for enhanced peer learning.
- **Improve coordination** – Movement members working in the same region can coordinate regularly to ensure consistent resourcing of participatory approaches, unified support from partners, and find efficiencies through shared resources.
- **Experiment** – Document and test innovative approaches that can increase community participation. Encourage donors to invest in rigorous impact evaluations to demonstrate advancements made with increased community engagement.

¹² For example see: Anderson, Mary B., Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean. 2012. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. Anderson, Mary B. 1999. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Cechvala, Sarah. 2017. *Mainstreaming of Accountability to Communities: An Operational Case Study. Nairobi: Kenya Red Cross Society*. CDA Collaborative Learning and IFRC. Cechvala, Sarah, and Isabella Jean. 2016. *“Accountability is a mirror that shows not only your face, but also your back.”* CDA-World Vision Ethiopia Feedback Loops Case Study. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning; Chambers, Robert and Ben Ramalingam. 2016. *“Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies.”* Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. Jean, Isabella, with Francesca Bonino. 2014. *‘We are Here’: IFRC’s Experiences with Communication and Feedback with Affected Populations in Haiti*. London: ODI/ALNP.