The Communication Imperative

◎ **Objective of Chapter 2**
Chapter 2 presents the essential ingredients for successful participation and the building of trust between stakeholders:

- two-way communication, entailing the capacity to listen and to share information;
- formal and informal communication tools; and
- transparency throughout the life of the programme.

Communication is central to any participation strategy. Participation involves an encounter between individuals, cultures, values, beliefs and skills; its success depends on the ability of those involved to **understand and trust** one another.

Here probably lies the greatest challenge for humanitarian aid organisations, as the contexts in which they work and their modes of operation often create a certain distance between aid workers and affected populations. Building bridges between stakeholders is the first step towards engaging in participation.

'Proximity as an anchoring point for tomorrow's humanitarian aid'[3]
Some aid workers are concerned that emergency NGOs' attachment to the principles of impartiality and independence, the growing size of projects, the political and security contexts, and the greater focus on the 'technical dimension' to the detriment of the 'human dimension', has led to the

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[3] Chevalier, E., 'Le travail de proximité comme point d'ancrage du travail humanitaire de demain', Cuadernos para el Debate no. 5, (Barcelona: Medicos Sin Fronteras, 2001).

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creation of a certain distance between humanitarian aid workers and affected populations.

White 4x4s, radios, guards, aid workers on short-term contracts moving from one crisis to the next, all form a barrier between those providing and those receiving assistance. Some aid workers have called for the value of **proximity** (to affected populations) to be given new prominence, one of the foundation stones of Médecins Sans Frontières.

This entails developing a relationship with the community—feeling concerned and building trust—even if it requires taking some risks. Such an attitude may indeed necessitate abandoning 'the protective rituals that regulate the distance'. It also means refusing to act as a substitute for local initiatives; respecting members of the affected population as determinants of their own fate; taking care not to make moral judgements on situations encountered; and being available and willing to listen.

2.1 COMMUNICATION: A TWO-WAY PROCESS

In regard to humanitarian action, the balance of power is often skewed between the humanitarian organisation (as an aid provider that retains access to key resources) and the affected population (as a potential aid recipient). But it is difficult to engage in meaningful participation on the basis of hierarchical power relations.

Communication is a **two-way process:** information is both received and transmitted. It involves **information sharing** and **listening.** Re-establishing the **equilibrium** between humanitarian aid organisations and affected populations is, therefore, central to participation; it often comes down to one's personal approach, mindset and attitude.

2.1.1 TRANSMITTING INFORMATION

While not necessarily aware of it, humanitarian aid workers send out many messages, verbal and non-verbal, which create a distance between themselves and the affected population. This makes it difficult for members of the population to engage confidently with aid organisations.

Non-verbal messages include: driving fast in big white 4x4 vehicles; using HF or VHF radios loudly; carrying computers; wearing particular clothes; utilising a certain body language; and having guards stationed in front of offices and houses.

> 'All we see of NGOs is the dust of their 4x4s, when they drive through our village at full speed.'
> Afghan villager

Even the employment of participatory tools can result in members of the affected population feeling ill at ease. People are easily dazzled by high-tech procedures; participants in workshops, focus groups or meetings may be embarrassed to speak or afraid of appearing ignorant or less 'knowledgeable' than aid workers, or they may simply not dare to contradict them out of respect.

Verbal messages include: differences in language and accent; the use of technical phrases and acronyms; and the tone of voice. Humanitarian jargon includes terms that imply a certain amount of condescension towards the affected population and local stakeholders, such as 'beneficiaries', 'the locals' and 'going down to the field'.

Of course, it is very difficult to alter many of these tendencies. The first step, though, is to become aware of what can generate distance, and what can lead to the construction of bridges.

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▶ **Simplicity** and **humility** are essential to creating space for communication and participation. Other ways of building bridges and opening doors include:

■ **listening,** but also **providing information** on oneself, even personal facts. People relate more easily to individuals they can identify with;

■ **adapting one's behaviour** to the local context and customs, since this can help to generate mutual respect;

■ adopting **traditional forms of dialogue and participation;**

■ telling (culturally appropriate) **jokes** and reciting **anecdotes**;

■ **embracing error:** do not be afraid to recognise your mistakes, or *faux pas.* They can offer an opportunity to enter into dialogue and to assess how errors are made and how they can be avoided in future.

Wearing the *tchador* (veil) and exercising a certain level of restraint in the presence of men may be hard for expatriate women to tolerate when working in **Afghanistan,** yet they are essential to gaining the respect of one's Afghan colleagues, members of the community and local leaders.

'I have observed you when you use your calendar chart. I don't feel very comfortable with that tool. Please ask me questions directly, and I will explain to you everything that is happening on my farm.'
Guinean farmer[4]

⚠ Be careful to avoid misunderstanding when working through a **translator.** Nuances associated with certain terms can easily be lost or distorted!

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[4] Quoted by Boulier, F., 'La diversité des stratégies paysannes dans la zone de Koba (Guinée)', in Delville, L. et al (eds), Les Enquêtes Participatives en Débat, (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

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2.1.2 LISTENING

Listening skills are essential to engaging in meaningful communication and participation. Many participatory techniques, if not employed carefully, result in simple information extraction exercises, where field workers, preoccupied with their own learning curve, unconsciously select or interpret information according to their own interests and level of awareness.

One can ask oneself questions like:

■ am I really listening to the other person's concerns and ideas, or am I using participatory techniques to advance my own agenda or to validate decisions that I have already made?

■ Am I ready and able to hear different points of view, and am I granting the other party enough space to express his/herself?

■ Am I approachable enough that people feel free to speak openly and frankly to me?

Research carried out in **Sri Lanka** showed that good intentions can be misunderstood. Aid recipients can view supposed beneficial and voluntary measures as burdensome and obligatory. Civilians make active choices and their willingness to engage in participatory projects is probably influenced by perceptions of the potential impact that they will have on their wellbeing.

A few tips on how to enhance one's listening skills:

■ **sit down;**

■ do not be afraid to remain **silent;**

■ **listen with your eyes:** looking at people while they talk enhances their confidence and helps you to listen;

■ **'pass the pen'** or '**handover the stick**' in brainstorming exercises; this can help people to express themselves;

■ in group discussions, **pay attention to those who remain silent;** try to include them by using your eyes to invite them to speak out, or by asking them questions; and

■   feel free to rephrase what has been said in order to **make sure that you have understood the point correctly.**

Again, **humility** and **open-mindedness** are important to listening and truly comprehending people's concerns and ideas.

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2.1.3 EXCHANGE AND NEGOTIATION

'Solutions to problems are not the product of a consensus, but of a negotiation between the various groups … The wealth of solutions is found in their diversity rather than in their uniformity.'[5]

Communication is the exchange of ideas, which involves negotiation in decision making. To listen and to understand each other, with mutual respect, requires flexibility and adaptability.

One can ask oneself questions such as:
■   am I able to review my priorities and objectives according to what members of the affected population say and propose?
■   am I able to explain my position in a way that is understandable to them and does not hinder dialogue?

Key to communication is having a mindset that is conducive to dialogue and mutual respect. But communication also means taking opportunities as they arise to engage with people, listening to them and learning from them, or creating conditions conducive to discussion and swapping ideas. A number of guidelines and tips are presented in the following section.

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[5] Guèye, B., 'La Methode active de recherche et de planification participative (MARP): acquis, limites et défis actuels', in Delville, L. et al (eds), Les Enquêtes Participatives en Débat, (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

KEY QUESTIONS

- Do the messages that my team and I transmit, verbal and non-verbal, serve to establish a relationship of trust between equals, or do they create a distance between us (the affected population and the team)?
- Is our attitude and mindset favourable to building trust?
- Am I really listening?
- Am I flexible and do I leave enough space to consider openly the concerns and propositions raised by members of the affected population?

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2.2 TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION

2.2.1 INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

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Opportunities to engage with affected populations via 'casual' or informal means of communication are often missed. Yet, they constitute a rich source of exchange, which can complement formal events like focus groups and community assemblies. They include:

■   stopping at the bar or tea house;
■   going to the market and speaking with people in the street;
■   attending public events, such as religious ceremonies and village gatherings;
■   taking advantage of minor incidents. Fixing a flat tyre or repairing a car, for instance, can lead to an informal congregation;
■   speaking with the driver and with cooks or waiters/waitresses in restaurants, for example;
■   stopping by the road and talking with farmers in fields or with herders at water points.

In many situations, if you start to converse with one or two people, it is likely that others will join in, and that a focus group will take shape spontaneously.

It is important, therefore, to take the time to speak informally with people, and to be ready to seize opportunities as they manifest.

▶ Below are a few tips for such situations:

■   try to **be aware of who is partaking** in the conversation; if you do not know, be careful when addressing topics that may be sensitive;

■ **visual supports,** such as maps and graphs, can often help to illustrate topics, and can help people to express themselves. In such circumstances, **use what you find** on the spot, including sticks, stones, sand and drawings on the ground;

■ **let yourself be 'carried away' by the conversation,** do not try to control or direct it, as you may end up hearing what you already know or what you want to hear. 'Erase' yourself, so that people have the space to articulate themselves freely, and to put ideas on the table as they occur to them.

2.2.2 FORMAL COMMUNICATION

Formal means of communication include:

■ interviews;

■ formal focus groups;

■ traditional assemblies, such as *shuras* (Afghanistan), *cabildos* (congresses of indigenous peoples in Latin America) and *l'Arbre à palâbres* (the tree under which village meetings and debates take place in Africa); and

■ discussion with targeted audiences like women's groups and children's focus groups.

Remember that group sessions create **extremely formal** social contexts, within which freedom of speech is not equal, but, instead, reflects power inequalities. Furthermore, 'as a public event, they encourage the expression of what is general and normative to the detriment of what is specific and real'.[4]

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[6] Delville, L. Mathieu, M. and Sellamna, N., 'Living up to Ambitions: For a More Rigorous Practice of Participatory Appraisals and Enquiries', Scientific Directorate working paper no. 28, (Paris: GRET, 2001).

Consequently, it is important to be aware of social and political dynamics among participants. **Triangulation** of information, whereby you verify information collected by one means through another means, is also essential. This entails, for instance, cross-checking information gathered during a focus group with that gathered in different groups or through interviews with key informants.

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Most of the tools presented in this handbook are collective exercises. Although each will differ in terms of objectives and participants, a number of **basic principles and general guidelines** can be defined, which are detailed in the table below. They are presented in the form of **questions, which one should ask oneself when preparing for any formal group session**.

Organisation of a formal group session is a difficult undertaking, which is not improvised on the spot. It is important to **prepare yourself,** to make sure that the methods used, the objectives, the choice of participants and the location are adapted to the issue to be discussed.

In order to prepare for a group exercise or session, it is necessary already to have some knowledge of the local context. This can require collecting preliminary data through, for example, key informants, observations and informal discussions.

In particular, it is important to have basic information on **security and protection** matters, to ensure that you do not put participants or members of your team at risk when conducting group sessions, to be aware of local political and social dynamics, and to avoid **excluding** or **marginalising** individuals or groups of people. This is crucial to making certain that you are not compromising your **independence** and **impartiality,** or the perception of your independence and impartiality, by carrying out exercises with certain participants, or in particular areas.

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Table 3 Planning a focus group

Questions	Warnings	Tips
What is the objective of the exercise? What information needs to be gathered/shared? What do I already know about the subject? Do decisions need to be taken and what do they entail?	Some subjects/objectives can be sensitive. Does the subject risk creating tension between individuals or groups? Can I put individuals at risk or marginalise them by discussing certain topics? Are participants likely to remain silent or to stop partaking in a process if I bring up particular issues?	Collect preliminary information on issues related to the topic before engaging in the exercise. Clarify the objective of the exercise with participants, but be prepared for the unexpected (such as complaints or new ideas). WHY?
Who will participate? Should separate discussions be held with different constituencies (based on gender, socio-economic class and ethnic group, for instance)? Or should they be mixed? What is the balance? How many people should attend?	Mixed focus groups can *de facto* exclude minorities or 'voiceless' groups that might not be willing or able to speak out in a public arena. The presence of local leaders or influential individuals might discourage others to speak. Gathering people together from opposing groups can aggravate tensions. If there are too many participants it becomes difficult to facilitate the discussion.	Carry out a basic stakeholder analysis, and have at least fundamental knowledge of the local culture and social dynamics before conducting the exercise. Draw on your own experience, or ask those who have experience of collective discussion with the population for advice, so as to be aware of what group composition may be most appropriate. WHO?

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Table 3 Planning a focus group continued

Questions	Warnings	Tips
Who should facilitate? Should I facilitate the discussion? Do I need a translator or a local facilitator? With what profile? Should I employ traditional facilitation mechanisms (open floor or the use of local leaders as facilitators, for example)?	The profile of the facilitator will influence the discussion. Be careful to choose someone of appropriate gender, origin (including ethnic group) and age, and with the right experience. Make sure that you or your translator can speak the local language or dialect well enough to understand nuances and to avoid misunderstanding.	If you are facilitating, do not be afraid to 'erase' yourself, so that people feel comfortable expressing ideas as they occur to them. If you are not facilitating, take advantage of this opportunity to sit back and listen. Be sure to give the floor to individuals who are more reluctant to speak. WHO?
Where should the discussion be held? In a place where local people gather? In a family home? In my organisation's compound? In the field? At a water point? At a traditional meeting point (such as in a community house in Latin America)?	Be careful when choosing the gathering place, as it can be culturally, socially and/or politically 'loaded'. Discussions held in the home of the chief can discourage dissent and create a very formal context. The choice of place can affect the population's perception of your independence and impartiality. For reasons of security and anonymity, it may be necessary to gather in a discreet location.	Collect information beforehand (through key informants, visits and informal discussions, for instance) on where might be an appropriate place to hold the meeting and why (pros and cons). WHERE?

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Table 3 Planning a focus group *continued*

Questions	Warnings	Tips
When should the discussion be held? On which day? At what time of day? How long should it last?	Be careful not to plan sessions when all or some of the participants are unavailable, as this can exclude key groups and/or individuals. For example: during religious holidays/ events; when labour demands are high or just after labour-intensive activities; at meal times or while food is being prepared; or when the demands on women are high in regard to childcare.	Collect information on activity times, labour patterns and constraints on time and transportation, through informal gatherings and discussions with key informants. When planning a session, allow time for local practices and customs (such as people arriving late, introductory speeches and meal times and breaks). WHEN?
What tools and resources do I need to carry out the exercise successfully? Do I require pens and coloured cards, for instance? Can I make use of local materials like sticks, stones and grass? Should I arrange food and drink for the participants? Do I need to organise transportation?	Be careful to use methods that are adapted to the needs of illiterate groups and individuals. Much can be done with maps and drawings on the ground, for example. Be careful when using sophisticated elements, such as videos. Although they can stimulate interest, in some circumstances, they can embarrass people.	Be prepared: do not expect to find everything on site. But do not hesitate to use local tools and materials and communication techniques. Despite all of your preparation, remain casual and impulsive, as excessively formal conditions are not conducive to spontaneity and to free expression. Allow yourself to be welcomed in accordance with local custom. Do not worry if things do not go according to plan! HOW?

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Once you have prepared the focus group, the next step is to make it happen! Below are some guidance notes on how to run a focus group.

Table 4 How to run a focus group
Step 1 Make sure you invite all the participants
Step 2 Ask everyone to introduce themselves
Step 3 Designate a facilitator
Step 4 Clarify the objectives of the focus group
Step 5 Don't hesitate to vary the group set-up (plenary to working group sessions and vice versa) as the discussion evolves
Step 6 Summarise the discussion and take a decision

Table 5 A few rules
Rule 1 Make sure all participants are on board and are able to follow the discussion
Rule 2 Keep the discussion to the point. Try not to get too side-tracked, however …
Rule 3 … remain open! If participants' main concerns lie outside the stated objectives, and if other important issues arise, do not be afraid to stray slightly from the planned
Rule 4 Keep an eye on the clock and ensure that all participants have a chance to speak and share their ideas
Rule 5 Make the best use of the time you have – use it effectively and appropriately
Remember Rules are made to help you, not to paralyse a process!
When you engage in a participatory process, you may know where you are starting from, however it is unusual to know where you will end up!

2.2.3   LET YOURSELF BE SURPRISED

Whether you engage in formal or informal communication, be open to what can happen. You may be surprised by what people have to say and by ideas that surface.

But remember that communication is a two-way process, requiring that all parties involved get to know one another. Humanitarian aid workers tend to focus their efforts on understanding the affected population, often omitting to explain who they are, what they do and why. Yet transparency is essential for successful communication, negotiation and participation.

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2.3   TRANSPARENCY: A PREREQUISITE FOR TRUST

People will only engage meaningfully with individuals or institutions that they believe they can trust. But can one have faith in the unknown?

In many instances, aid actors do not realise how frustrating their actions and interactions are for members of the affected population for whom they may be incomprehensible. White land cruisers come and go, notes are taken, questionnaires filled in, lists drawn up, and triangulation exercises carried out, while the population, lacking explanation, wonders why and for whose benefit.

Elucidating why one is here, how one works and what constraints one faces, can go a long way towards establishing a climate of trust, and generating the will to work together. Failure to clarify these factors, can create a sense of suspicion, especially since affected populations, which have been through difficult or traumatic events, look for people who they can count on and trust.

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2.3.1   EXPLAIN WHO YOU ARE AND HOW YOU WORK

Clarify your organisation's mandate and explain why you are here

Explain the history, mandate and work of your organisation. Be precise in presenting your guiding principles. Provide information about yourself, and do not hesitate to offer personal details (such as about your family). People have greater confidence in those who they can identify with.

> Participants in a workshop organised by DIOBASS (a discussion forum for Congolese NGOs, in **Eastern DRC**) requested that international organisations clarify their mandates for Congolese NGOs and the affected population.

Relate the above to the reason why you are visiting the area. Make sure that people understand the purpose of your visit exactly and that you do not create false expectations. In general, people prefer a good rather than a bad surprise.

Explain how you work

When engaging with the community, a group of IDPs or refugees, it is very important to clarify as soon as possible how you and your organisation function, the constraints under which you have to operate, and what you can and cannot do.

What you can and cannot do

After years of encounters with aid organisations, stakeholders in chronically affected areas know how to engage with the aid system, and are prepared to ask for '200%' in order to ensure that '75–100%' of their needs are met. Transparency in regard to what you can and cannot do is the only way to deter this. It is crucial to be clear at the outset and

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consistent to the end. Avoid the danger of going beyond your initial objectives without the capacity to do so successfully.

The procedures involved and the techniques you employ

Certain project procedures, such as procurement, are long drawn out affairs, with cumbersome and administratively demanding tendering arrangements. The affected population might not understand why so much precious time has been lost. It is important to explain these processes before people start to think that you are trying to make money out of their suffering. Involving a community representative in the development of a tender and the responses to it can be a good way of avoiding misunderstanding.

When using particular techniques (like lists, maps, triangulation exercises and focus groups) make sure to explicate, *inter alia,* why you are doing so, how they will be used, and how the information collected will be managed.

The resource mobilisation process

Explaining the 'bumpy road' between the NGO and the donor, and the different aspects and processes involved, can go a long way towards preventing misunderstanding and maintaining trust.

> In an area of **Afghanistan,** an organisation was so sure that it would get funds for a project that the team in the field did not explain that, following the assessment mission, there would be a project writing phase. The population in the affected area thought that the organisation had the means to implement the project and started to mobilise its own contribution in order to participate in it. However, project funding was declined, creating significant tension.

As far as is possible, explain yourself using vocabulary and expressions that are accessible to your audience. Be open to questions, make sure to ask if you have been understood, and do not hesitate to clarify again and again.

2.3.2   JOINTLY ESTABLISH THE RULES OF THE GAME

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Negotiate lines of responsibility on each side

Participation usually requires that both or all of the parties provide resources for the project (in terms of time, material input and labour, for instance). The nature and the amount of each party's contribution should be clearly stated from the beginning and respected throughout the process. Commitments can be formalised through a contractual arrangement (see chapter 4). In all cases, commitments should be realistic, creating an incentive for participation.

> Without prior discussion, an aid agency determined the type and the level of assistance that it would provide for a shelter construction programme, as well as the contributions to be made by members of the affected population. Suddenly, however, the organisation had to reduce its level of assistance. Instead of negotiating a way out of the problem, it stood steadfast to its position that 'nothing had been promised formally'. Members of the affected population believed that the organisation was trying to cheat them, since they were under the impression that, by providing sand and gravel, they were meeting their commitments. The incident almost resulted in a violent confrontation; the organisation's personnel were expelled from the area.

Establish jointly, and in advance, problem-solving mechanisms and options for appeal

In general, people are well aware that things do not always go according to plan. They also know that this can result in difficulties that can

generate tension. Most societies have their own problem-solving mechanisms. Nobody will be surprised to see you trying to establish such mechanisms as part of the programme set-up.

Crucial to these different exercises is transparency of the overall process of which affected populations are a part. Public announcements at general meetings or on local radio, notice boards and leaflets, for instance, are essential communication tools to ensure such transparency and that individuals are aware of the space for participation and the opportunities for feedback. In particular, it is important to choose media that are accessible to all and to avoid discrimination in the dissemination of information (utilise all local languages, for example).

Disseminating information widely will facilitate social control mechanisms, whereby members of the population themselves ensure that programme modalities are respected. This is an effective way of avoiding manipulation or diversion of aid, and discrimination.

> During the preparation stage of a food distribution project in northern **Afghanistan**, the ICRC discussed the selection criteria of who was going to be assisted from the affected population with village representatives. Once they were approved, it announced widely, in *shuras* (village assemblies), that, if anyone were found to be cheating in regard to distribution, their entire village would be sanctioned. Village representatives found this to be a fair process. Social pressure within villages was enough to prevent abuse.

2.3.3 BE TRANSPARENT THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

Explain delays and difficulties as they occur

Given the plight of affected populations, it is important not to increase through poor communication the sense of uncertainty, anxiety, frustration and even betrayal.

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There are nearly always unforeseen difficulties due, for instance, to delays in acquiring funding, negative donor responses, hold-ups in relation to shipments and deliveries, the supply of incorrect or spoiled goods, and problems associated with the climate and insecurity. Members of the affected population and the structures with which you work will most likely be understanding if the risks and complications have been fully explained to them. What is totally unacceptable is not keeping them informed—an absolute minimum in establishing a relationship of trust.
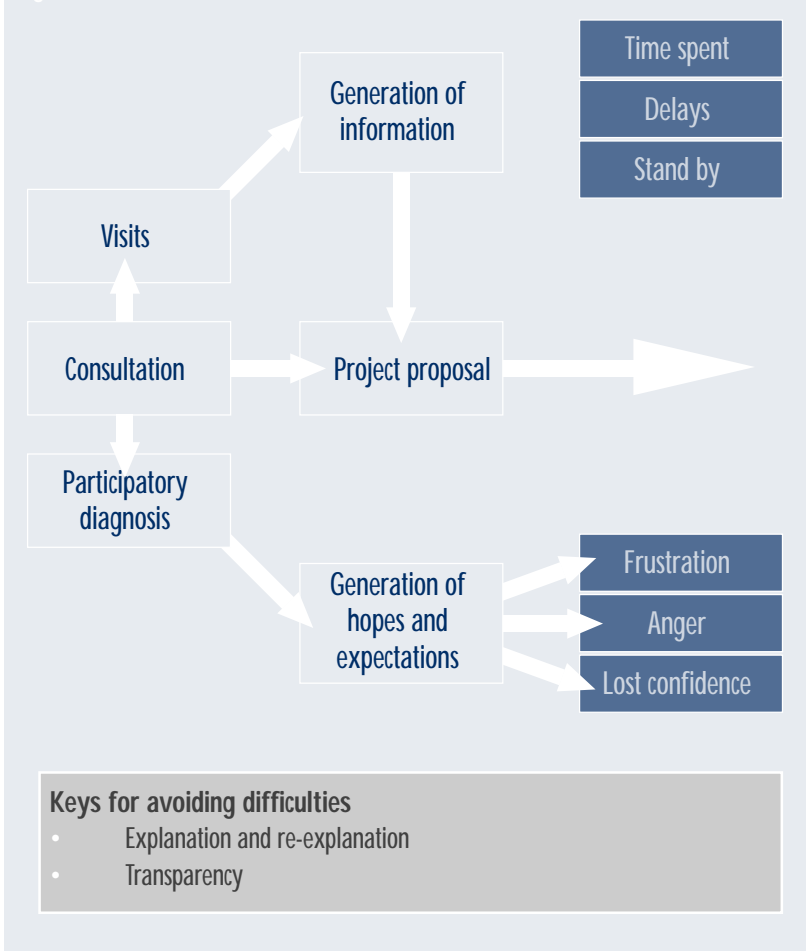
> Following large-scale floods in **Southeast Asia,** an organisation tried to set up a programme to rehabilitate flood-control dykes and the irrigation infrastructure. There was conflict between the local governor and the central ministry for irrigation, resulting in a stalemate that prevented the organisation from getting clearance to import some equipment. The level of trust and the commitment of the population to the project were so great that the villagers decided, after a meeting at which the problem was elucidated, to send a delegation to the capital. The matter was resolved rapidly.

Be consistent!

If you say that you will do something, you must do it, otherwise, the trust that the affected population has invested in you will be undermined. In the same way, if you say that you are not able to do something, then you must not do it, or you will lose credibility!

Additionally, if sanctions are threatened when commitments are not respected, as part of the 'rules of the game', they must be applied. Failure to do so could result in loss of credibility and encourage people to cheat, thus creating a disincentive for other potential participants. This is particularly important in situations where cost-recovery mechanisms have been put in place, or in interventions where participants are committed to contributing some financial or human resources.

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Figure 7   Generation of information

Figure 7: Generation of information. Flow diagram with boxes: Visits, Consultation, Participatory diagnosis, Generation of information, Project proposal, Generation of hopes and expectations. Associated labels: Time spent, Delays, Stand by, Frustration, Anger, Lost confidence.

Keys for avoiding difficulties
- Explanation and re-explanation
- Transparency

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❓ KEY QUESTIONS

■   Am I able to elucidate clearly, and in a way that my audience understands, why I am here, how my organisation works, and, among other things, the factors that can affect the programme?
■   Have I identified appropriate information-sharing channels and intermediaries to ensure that all relevant people are reached?
■   When difficulties arise, am I able to explain them?
■   Am I being consistent in regard to what I say and what I can do?
■   Does this information sharing contribute to the building and preservation of trust?

CONCLUSION

Participation in humanitarian action is based on the creation of a space for negotiation and on the establishment of trust, in a context of instability or, at best, uncertainty.

In general, lack of transparency, poor communication and failure to listen to members of the affected population, and associated structures, paralyse programmes, and, in some instances, generate security problems.

Reacting to this communication imperative should be an integral part of disaster-response management – especially in relation to the participation of affected populations in humanitarian action. Effective and inclusive participation is based on the growth of a fragile flower: whose name is mutual trust and confidence.