Community Engagement

Partnering with communities so they can lead the change process

What is Community Engagement and why is it an important approach?

Nothing about us, without us. This is the spirit of Community Engagement. Definitions differ across organizations and programmes, but at the heart of each one is a focus on increasing the participation, collaboration, and voice of communities for more effective results. Community Engagement can be transformational. Beyond including the people we serve and creating space for dialogue, effective Community Engagement ultimately builds a relationship of trust in which communities are empowered to take action and use the systems in place to identify and address their most pressing issues.

Community Engagement 101

Empowering community members to explore, plan and act together on their priority issues can be a powerful way to strengthen collective capacity and improve programme equity and effectiveness. This requires community members, leaders and organizations to play a central role in the development of humanitarian initiatives that affect them.

Community Engagement also seeks to strengthen the link between people and the systems, structures and services—both formal and informal—that have been designed to meet their needs. This means strengthening governance, quality of service delivery and systems, and improving accountability mechanisms. Through Community Engagement, UNICEF aims to support countries in establishing lasting mechanisms for participatory ideation, planning, implementation and monitoring. By collaborating with external partners, especially governmental and community-led organizations, UNICEF strives to enhance social accountability.

Effective Community Engagement requires systematic commitment. This means prioritizing community participation in design and implementation, integrating Community Engagement into wider systems strengthening approaches, and mobilizing resources for meaningful, long-term relationship building. For more information on how this can be done, check out the 'Strengthen local systems and ownership, leverage trusted partners' tool.

Social and behavioural objectives

Community Engagement lies at the heart of humanitarian and development work. Its a powerful process that can be particularly valuable when seeking to work with local knowledge, systems, structures, and groups that are historically hard to reach. Community Engagement is fundamental to the human rights-based approach. When done effectively, Community Engagement can improve the quality and utilisation of services by making decisions more accountable and transparent to the communities they concern, increasing the diversity and representation of communities in policy and practice design, and ensuring that communities have a voice in decisions that directly affect their lives. It is difficult to imagine any community-oriented project that would not benefit from sincere and long-term engagement. The key social and behavioural objectives of Community Engagement include strengthening relationships, building trust and promoting sincere collaboration, and increasing collective self-efficacy and resilience.

Community Engagement is often seen as a discrete intervention serving specific SBC outcomes such as changing awareness, knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and norms, as projects require. When used in such a narrow manner, Community Engagement initiatives are likely to be less effective. But when used as a more explicit intervention to create lasting dialogue and collaboration mechanisms, Community Engagement can be invaluable in designing programmes that cater to the needs of the people they aim to support, and are therefore more likely to be implemented and create lasting behaviour change. Community Engagement also establishes platforms to rapidly interpret and influence community behaviour, greatly improving emergency response in times of crisis.

Community Engagement levels and potential challenges

Community Engagement is a necessary approach in both development and humanitarian contexts; however, how it is applied will vary. Communities can be engaged at a range of levels: from providing advice and co-designing the process to undertaking aspects of the engagement and delivering projects to meet the outcomes. No matter what level of engagement you decide on, systems should always be designed for long-term sustainability, ensuring they can reliably meet current and future needs of the population. This is especially important in humanitarian contexts, where we need to support community capacity to prepare and respond to disasters, emerging diseases and economic volatility, in order to increase resilience and recovery.

Engagement can be considered at four different levels:

1. Inform and mobilize the community to participate in addressing immediate short-term concerns, with strong external support

2. Consult and involve the community to improve the delivery of services and programmes, with some external support

3. Collaborate with the community to enable priority settings and decisions from the community, with or without external support

4. Empower the community to develop systems for self-governance, establish and set priorities, implement interventions, and develop sustainable mechanisms for development with partners, as part of a support network

It is important therefore to determine the level of Community Engagement based on the context.

There are challenges to implementing Community Engagement to keep in mind to minimize the risks to the programme:

- **Limiting participation to leaders or influential actors leaves out the needs of the most marginalized**. Community Engagement approaches that don't consider existing power dynamics will fail to reach their intended results. According to the Time to Listen report, communities feel that international aid benefits the local elites. Remember that communities are never uniform—not everybody shares the same needs, opinions, and vulnerabilities. To ensure equity in consultations and decision-making forums, various engagement techniques should be employed so that all needs are taken into account.

- **Community Engagement is often not institutionalized and therefore not adequately funded or staffed**. This can lead to ad hoc implementation. For Community Engagement and community-led initiatives to become a standard and sustained practice, they need to be embedded in governance structures. Otherwise, Community Engagement is likely to rest upon personal relationships built between particular professionals and certain community members—connections that are easily lost if the people involved change.

- **Community members can become disillusioned with the process if they don't see their input being taken forward**. If the community believes their consultation was just a 'tick-box exercise' and their feedback wasn't considered or acted upon, they are likely to feel anger and to not re-engage again or favourably. Managing expectations around how much of a say the community has in the final decisions is paramount. Engagement that is superficial and gives rise to feelings of tokenism should be avoided at all costs.

- **Taking shortcuts with discrete and surgical interventions instead of long-term meaningful engagement works against community ownership and sustainability**. Community Engagement works best when done over time, not on a project-by-project basis. Communities should be engaged before solutions have been decided, with a sincere willingness to give communities a systematic role in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes that affect them.

- **The routine collection and use of data for action continues to be a challenge in Social and Behaviour Change programming**. Standardized and timely evidence collection should be conducted regularly to ensure that programming and decision-making reflects the current needs of the community. Data collection should focus on equity and representativeness, opinions, perceptions and needs.

- **Balancing digital outreach with in-person engagement. Digital technologies are increasingly used for engagement interventions in order to reach as many people as possible**. However, digital outreach fails to reach those in vulnerable positions who lack reliable access to technology. This includes women, poor families, people with disabilities, people who live in conflict-affected or remote, rural settings, and people who lack stable housing. Thus, relying on a solely digital Community Engagement strategy will exacerbate inequities and leave the most vulnerable out of the decision-making process. In low-technology settings, increased investment in safe interpersonal and collective interactions (home visits, community meetings, facility-based counselling, etc.) can ensure that people without access to technology are not left out of the equation.

Community Engagement can be very challenging to resource, measure and undertake, but being cognizant of these barriers and identifying ways to overcome them will help empower communities to contribute to the creation of more sustainable programmes.

Case studies

- **ERITREA** Ongoing community dialogue and sensitization reduces female genital mutilation (FGM).

- **NAMIBIA** Community Engagement initiatives that strengthen relationships between schools and communities increases school attendance and decreases bullying.

- **KENYA** Ongoing dialogue around contraception misconceptions and family planning shifts social norms and increases reports of modern contraception use among targeted married women and men.

- **INDIA** Participatory women's groups and counselling improved minimum dietary diversity for women and children, more mothers washed their hands before feeding children, fewer children were underweight at 18 months and fewer infants died.

- **MALI** Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach significantly decreases open defecation rates among adults, increases access to private latrines, and improves child growth.

- **SIERRA LEONE** The Community-Led Ebola Action (CLEA) approach significantly increases safe burial practices and referrals to medical care within 24 hours of symptom onset.

- **CAMEROON, NIGERIA, AND UGANDA** The application of the Community Directed Intervention (CDI) approach was shown to be significantly more effective than existing delivery approaches for vitamin A supplementation, use of insecticide-treated nets and home management of malaria.

- **PAKISTAN** A targeted community engagement approach utilising immunisation camps effectively increased oral polio vaccine coverage in conflict affected areas.

Key principles

1. **System building**

Community Engagement should be systematic in order to have sustainable impact. Community Engagement should be integrated in policy design, planning, budgeting and financing, execution, and monitoring of interventions.

2. **Two-way communication**

An open line of communication should be maintained to allow communities to give and receive clear, appropriate and accurate information on a regular and predictable basis. Two-way communication gives communities a way to reach out, request information, and keep stakeholders accountable to them.

3. **Participation**

Create participatory spaces that bridge barriers, foster two-way dialogue and build trust—which is central to development and humanitarian programmes.

4. **Inclusion**

The power imbalance among stakeholders and community groups will make it challenging to reach members of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Create space for these groups to have their voices heard.

5. **Empowerment and ownership**

Empowering communities requires acknowledgement of the value within the communities, such as resources, assets, structures and networks. Maximizing the strength and potential of these existing facets will help foster autonomy and ownership.

6. **Adaptability and localization**

Community Engagement approaches should be developed around local contexts, and should be flexible and responsive to the evolving needs, conditions and concerns of local populations.

7. **Building on local capacity**

Community Engagement should build upon existing skills and resources within communities, and work with local groups and organizations that already serve them.
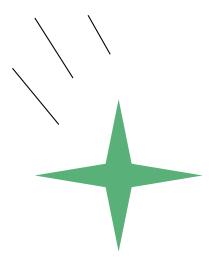
More information

- Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement

- Guidance for achieving multi-sectoral results through working with local governments

- Community Engagement and Accountability toolkit – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

- Principles of Community Engagement for Empowerment

- The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

- Community-Driven Development Overview – World Bank

- The Communication & Community Engagement Initiative

- Community Engagement: A health promotion guide for universal health coverage in the hands of the people – WHO

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Key definitions

Community Engagement:

A way of working with traditional, community, civil society, government, and opinion groups and leaders that facilitates their active participation in addressing the issues that affect their lives. Community Engagement empowers social groups and social networks, builds upon local strengths and capacities, and increases local participation in finding solutions that they can adapt and have ownership over. Through Community Engagement principles and strategies, all stakeholders gain access to processes for assessing, analysing, planning, leading, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the actions, programmes and policies that will promote the survival, development, and protection of community members.

Institutional Community Engagement mechanisms can be categorized as follows:

Governmental: led by governments with the mandate to deliver services universally. This includes mechanisms led by quasi-governmental organisations (e.g., community-led cooperatives with formal linkages to institutions) as well as community oversight on services delivered by the government and community participation in the planning and design of policies and services.

Community-led: mechanisms owned and operated by communities through which community members and civil society organizations and community-based groups coordinate and respond to challenges that affect them. These can be small-scale and informal or can involve several organizations and various subsystems. For example, a large care system may have distinct subsystems for comprehensive home-based care, providing nutritional support, counselling, advocacy, legal support and referrals for access to services and follow-up.

Social accountability to affected populations: an approach in which ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations demand accountability from their governing bodies. Mechanisms for accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both. However, they are often demand-driven and operate from the bottom up. Accountability initiatives aim to improve the quality of governance by enhancing transparency and exposing corruption, for example. Such initiatives work to increase the effectiveness of development strategies, particularly by improving delivery of public services, and ensuring that crisis response is appropriate and equitable. Having mechanisms for accountability empowers marginalized and under-served groups by arming them with information about their rights and amplifying their voice in the management of public affairs. All accountability measures have good Community Engagement at their core, particularly in terms of information provision, participation and feedback and complaint processes. However, accountability also relies on data management and decision-making –ensuring that feedback from communities informs the actions that are fed back to communities.