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ARE PEOPLE REACHED LISTENED TO?

Executive summary

How do development and humanitarian organizations know that their programmes and operations do benefit the people they are targeting? How can they measure whether a general sense of satisfaction is present in regard to the assistance the people receive? Stakeholder involvement has been high on the agenda of development and humanitarian organizations for the past few years, but does practice keep pace with the current debates?

Humanitarian and development organizations are becoming better in engaging stakeholders in the planning stage but are less prepared to adequately engage them in the evaluation of programmes and operations.

This paper discusses experiences with a survey tool adopted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Europe to find out whether the people assisted were satisfied with the help received and whether they have any recommendations for improving the quality and appropriateness in the future. Although the survey tool is currently used in a systematic way only after disaster response operations, the long-term aim is to boost a culture whereby consulting the people on the goods and services they received becomes an integral part of all programmes and operations, and the conclusions of this kind of evaluation feed back into the programming of the organization. Such feedback mechanisms empower stakeholders, build ownership, and reinforce the mutual trust between an organization and the people it seeks to serve.

The paper will further address some questions around how much people feel comfortable with expressing their real needs or complaining about the services they received, given the uneven power balance between the agencies and the people they seek to help, which is specific to the humanitarian and development sphere. This uneven balance, however, makes it even more an ethical responsibility for the organizations to involve all stakeholders in planning their interventions as well as assessing their success or failure.

1.0 Introduction and background

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (International Federation) zone office for Europe promotes a culture of performance and continuous learning within and between the National Societies that it serves. Like many organisations, the International Federation is facing a challenge in delivering quality services in a climate of increased scrutiny and clamour for rigorous accountability. In the International Federation's specific context accountability means to support its members (the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies) deliver to their clients (the vulnerable people) and also to be transparent in reporting on use of funds to donors.

The financial crisis is sharpening this focus on accountability as competition for dwindling funds intensifies. At the same time, the crisis is increasing the need for humanitarian services as the vulnerable communities are most sharply affected. This can, we feel, be used as an opportunity, following the logic that necessity is the mother of innovation. Put simply, if we take this increased interest to improve in terms of quality, and the cultures and processes that need to be encouraged to deliver, it is a real opportunity. Having a twofold policy of improving the quality with which we perform, while at the same time building the confidence of donors in these systems and cultures is vital. As such, there is no question the International Federation has to do better in terms of being accountable, while also fostering such a culture among our members and supporting them with systems that enable them to be so.

2.0 Accountability and stakeholder satisfaction in the humanitarian sector

The approach which exemplifies how quality can be built by using innovative tools is the *Are people reached listened to?* It is a simple survey tool to find out whether the people assisted, the principle shareholder, were satisfied with the help received and whether they have any recommendations for improving the quality and appropriateness in the future.

The *Accountability to Disaster-Affected Populations: A Peer Review by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response*¹ (see section 2.0 for further details on its emerging findings relevant to the International Federation) suggests that word “accountability” is overused and not well understood. There are too many policies and tools related to accountability, with overlaps and redundancies. There is some gap between rhetoric and reality on how we engage with disaster-affected populations.“

There are a myriad of publications and industry standards reminding of the importance of accountability and participatory approaches. Likewise, guides outline how this should be done, primarily in the planning and design stages, such as *The Good Enough Guide*, or the International Federation’s *Guidelines for Emergency Assessment*. In spite of this progress, in recent years, many documents written by, or on behalf of, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement bemoan the dearth of a systematic tool to gather the views of beneficiaries on small scale emergency operations. The pervading sentiment is that routinely gathering such data from those affected by disasters on the relevance, timeliness or the effect the operation has had on their lives/situation would raise the standard of operations.

Supporting this are requests from disaster management practitioners across Europe for a simple tool they can use to gather the views of beneficiaries during or at the end of an operation. Specifically, five main sources can be cited as providing motivation for the development of such a tool. Firstly, the World Disasters Report (WDR) of 2005, devoted to information, contains calls for putting beneficiaries in a more central position. As it correctly reasons, “information bestows power... people affected by disasters have few opportunities to challenge the information overlordship of powerful relief agencies.”

Participation and consultation with stakeholders is not a concept that is alien in Red Cross Red Crescent circles, and there is a strong desire to put into practice the fine words of policy and strategy documents. However, WDR notes, in uncompromising language, that “while the value of consulting with disaster-affected people may be recognised, the benefits of learning from them seem to be less apparent.” It goes on to present an example that ALNAP conducted, interviewing 37 of its field workers as part of its 2003 review. Interestingly, and disappointingly, not one of the interviewees- both men and women, international and national staff- mentioned learning from affected people. This led ALNAP to conclude that “*the lack of learning about and from affected populations and other local actors when all agencies strive for a participatory approach- at least in their policies- seriously undermines the credibility of humanitarian action.*”

Even in large scale operations, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, the situation is painted as less than rosy. A review of the aid response in Aceh six weeks after the tsunami struck by McCluskey and Choudhury for the Joint Quality and Accountability Initiative, representing the Sphere Project, ALNAP and others, found that there had “been no consistent consultation with beneficiaries [and]... there appeared to be no formal (and very limited informal) feedback mechanisms.”

Focusing now specifically on the International Federation’s Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF), as part of the 2006 review conducted by Chris Hurford, he points out that there is “no system for learning lessons, applying them to future allocation decisions or strategies, and monitoring the difference DREF is making on a global level.” This observation may have greater resonance for the more strategic direction of DREF, but lessons can be drawn for the grass roots level too. More tools, and tools that are simple enough to use to draw pertinent information, are needed to be put into the hands of practitioners involved in DREF operations. Hurford (2006) continues that “there is little deeper analysis of the effect of those goods and services (delivered).”

¹ Action by Churches Together (ACT), Care International, Caritas Internationalis, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Oxfam and the International Save the Children Alliance.

There are, however, some positive developments, one being the wide enthusiasm for a tool in recognition of the importance, and usefulness of recognizing the central role that those affected by the operation can have for shaping it and ensuring its relevance. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami from January 2007 reported that, "One of the welcome innovations in the tsunami response ... was the use of beneficiary surveys." One clear point made was that "*the way in which agencies delivered aid, and not just the amount of aid they delivered, influenced beneficiary satisfaction.*" The report goes on to caution that measuring beneficiary satisfaction will encourage agencies to try to match their programmes to the affected population's view of their needs, and not just the agency's views of what those needs are.

However, conducting beneficiary surveys should not be seen as a remedy to all ills; there are many decisions that need to be taken in the design phase to ensure that optimal value comes not only from the data collected, but also from the process itself. The tsunami report notes that, "third parties, rather than aid agencies, carried out many of the post-tsunami beneficiary surveys." The conclusion is that, "while such third-party surveys have been useful in highlighting issues, such surveys are only effective when answers to survey questions lead to change in aid agency policies. Otherwise, surveys become yet another burden for the affected population." This observation is well noted by the authors of this proposal, and efforts will be made to identify the "right" people to conduct the survey and the data used.

Evidently, it is not sufficient to simply collect information. The charge oft made is that aid organizations have focussed on gathering information for their own needs and not enough on *exchanging information with the people they aim to support*. The WDR suggests that if affected people understand an aid agency's capacity and perspectives, they can give better advice. It is the dialogue rather than the data that is the challenge. Again, this is a message that is taken on board in the design of this tool.

Finally, the beneficiaries themselves, as is highlighted in a recent Netherlands Red Cross report (final version to be made available soon), often want a chance to say thank you to those who supported them. However, once this basic system is in place, more useful observations that can influence operations will be taken. To factor this into the tool, the experience of the British Red Cross will be garnered. Their caution about making the tool provocative enough to encourage more useful feedback from beneficiaries about how they view the International Federation and National Societies' support to them, their families and their communities will be noted.

The current Accountability to Disaster-Affected Populations: A Peer Review by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, an alliance of eight major international humanitarian organisations and networks has provided a useful backdrop and point of reference with which to gauge the relevance of this tool as part of a collaborative peer review of their accountability to disaster-affected populations which SCHR agencies are using to facilitate learning. Learning is derived from the reflection, self-examination, sharing and questioning that will go on at various levels of each of the 9 organisations which has as its purpose of the peer review to help bring about important and lasting changes within organisations in terms of 'culture' and capacities, and within individuals in terms of their attitudes and capabilities.

Some of the emerging themes have been extremely instructive and valuable. One of the major themes is that there is a tendency to associate accountability to disaster affected populations only with measures to be taken at the project level, rather than the organization as a whole routinely monitoring performance at a higher level against principles, values and accountability standards. Institutional mechanisms need to be set for regular evaluation at different levels, with resources provided for thorough follow up and implementation of lessons learned. Beneficiary complaints and feedback mechanisms should become a requirement of every project we support, along with other improved communication to target populations. The Secretariat should develop a global system and support the membership to develop their own adapted mechanisms where necessary.

3.0 Are people reached listened to?

The ***Are people reached listened to?*** does not reinvent the wheel, and is based on existing tools, both International Federation and external, as well as existing good practice. However, it pulls them together and goes beyond merely outlining what tools exist, by guiding the reader through using them, with tips from experienced practitioners, highlighting potential pitfalls and giving examples of how the tool was used in different DREF operations. As such, the tool is being reviewed, modified and updated on a regular basis.

Building on the findings of the documents briefly presented above, and crucially on the Red Cross Red Crescent's Code of Conduct which states that "aid agencies must strive to reduce future vulnerability and not just address the immediate results of disaster", this tool is designed to be a useful and useable complement to existing Red Cross Red Crescent tools.

An area of accountability that is played down, but which is addressed in the ***Are people reached listened to?*** tool is to our staff and volunteers. A genuine question that should be addressed is over motivation and people's contentment if monitoring and evaluation is overly complex or is reduced to a menial pen-pushing one. Effort must go into focussing on what is important (this is motivating for people too), while offering quality training in the skills most needed to perform their roles well.

3.1 Emergency operations and the disaster relief emergency fund (DREF)

The Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF), created in 1985, is a central part of the secretariat-coordinated disaster response portfolio. It is a financial rapid response mechanism designed to provide National Societies with the financial ability to carry out their mandate in responding rapidly to disasters, without having to wait for donor funds to become available.

DREF is managed by the International Federation's secretariat headquarters. It is one of the largest rapid response funds of the non-UN aid organisations, and its basic design and purpose is something of a model for similar funds, most notably the recently redesigned UN CERF. Since 2003 DREF has had a target reserve of 10 million Swiss francs, and in 2005 its turnover was 9.8 million Swiss francs. DREF's original usage was as a loan facility to support operations for which an emergency appeal is being launched. Disbursements from DREF are recovered from subsequent appeal income.

The fund is sustained partly through unearmarked donor contributions to an annual DREF Appeal, and partly by recovering allocations from subsequent unearmarked contributions to an Emergency Appeal. After a formal Review in 2001, DREF's overall target reserve was raised from Swiss francs 3 million to Swiss francs 10 million. The internal funding parameters were also increased.

The number of response operations reported by National Societies globally during the first half of 2009 was lower than during the same period in 2007 and 2008. However, the overall number of operations that DREF supported remained much the same as last year. In Europe zone there were five allocations made in the first six months, amounting to 1,258,712 Swiss francs.

4.0 The current paper

This paper is written based around a case study of an emergency operation funded by DREF in response to severe flooding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In its present format it betrays its roots as a practical, working tool designed to improve the quality of operations by engaging stakeholders- both volunteers and people reached- in reflecting on the operation and using that information to improve the quality of that, or more commonly, subsequent operations. However, the initial demand and impetus to develop the tool comes from a policy debate that engages much of the humanitarian and development sector. As such, platforms such as ALNAP which are discussing what accountability means to the humanitarian actor, primarily in emergency situations and the SHCR process of in-depth peer reviews have influenced the approach. This paper attempts to tap into such debates, and presenting at the current conference will help the authors interact further.

The tool itself is also a work in progress, developing as it is used. This is healthy, as it has a built in mechanism that the users of the tool feedback on its usefulness, thereby developing/improving it, but also it is hoped, taking ownership. This is especially important given the recurrent nature of disasters and hence emergency operations in Europe. A case in point, and one in which the case study portrays is extreme weather conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the early part of 2009, the International Federation supported the Red Cross Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina with three DREF allocations, all to respond to floods or cold spells. Using the survey with volunteers and staff from local branches in the first operation means that: lessons learned can be incorporated in the later operations; volunteers are more confident in conducting the survey as they have experience; observation shows that the needs of people reached² is discussed in a more aware way, and informally; and how learning can be used to engender a wider, pervasive culture of accountability, and also to spread the learning.

² Federation-wide reporting system (FWRS) DRAFT version 1, 14 August 2009. Unpublished

What follows below is an edited version of the mission report by the planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting officer from the International Federation's Europe zone office, who coordinated a three-person team to conduct the survey and also to reflect upon how the survey could be developed further. It is important to stress that the purpose of the mission was learning, so what is presented certainly does not gloss over failings in the operation or in deficiencies in the survey.

5.0 Case study: Survey in Bosnia and Herzegovina floods operation

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, serious flooding affected the south of the country in January and February 2009. After assessments had been carried out, a DREF allocation of CHF 100,000 was requested to bring assistance to 2,630 people. The National Society's disaster management structures, including Regional Disaster Response Team (RDRT) members, were able to provide vital assistance to the affected population. The DREF allocation was decisive in this respect as the National Society lacked material resources, such as food and hygiene parcels in stock.

As part of this operation, the *Are people reached listened to?* survey was conducted between 31 March and 3 April 2009 among the people assisted by the DREF operation in the locations of Glumina, Zalenikovac, Medugorje, D. Zalenikovac and Ravno in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Trebinje and Popovo Polje in the Republika Srpska.

The operation was postponed due to some misunderstanding and lack of defined roles, therefore the operating timeframe was extended until 17 April, and the distributions took place only 1-2 weeks before the mission. The number of families reached with assistance was around 765 families.

5.1 Methodology

The methods used for data collection included mainly individual and household interviews and to some extent observation. However as a result of the lack of clearly defined roles for the team members during the interview situation, observation was rather conducted as an ad hoc element. If resources allow, it is advisable to designate one team member whose main task would be observation, using a detailed observation form with previously defined criteria.

The data collection was based on a questionnaire. *Data analysis* was carried out by team members continuously, and on the last day a final analysis was done.

Identification of beneficiaries and locations: A pre-screening was done by the local branches to assess the people's ability and willingness to participate in the survey. This pre-screening was rather ad hoc, and people who were considered to be interesting in regard to the survey were identified as potential interviewees. When it comes to the sample size the team did not aim to reach a scientifically representative sample, but rather focused on getting a good enough impression from the group of people interviewed.

Selection of beneficiaries representing all groups of the assisted population: this was not really taken into account, other considerations prevailed, like selecting people who are on the way with little detours, thus ensuring time efficiency.

Survey team dynamics: The roles and responsibilities had not been clearly defined among team members prior to conducting the interviews. It would have been advisable to agree on who will be the focal point during the interviews, and what each person will focus on in order to have the best outcome and to obtain a sufficient level of information from the people interviewed.

Validity and reliability of the data collected: It is crucial to pay attention to the way questions are asked in order not to influence the answer that people give, but to let them speak for themselves. This has to be clear for other stakeholders accompanying the survey team (local branch secretaries or volunteers) who might possess the information to answer some of the questions. It is important to remain open to get a different point of view from the people assisted, and not to look for only a confirmation of the information that is already available.

Meeting with stakeholders and their involvement in the implementation of the survey: The survey team had the opportunity to meet secretary generals of local branches, which was a good opportunity to listen to their points of view on the operation and added value to the overall picture. When arranging such a meeting, and if the branch secretary or volunteers are joining the team for the

interviews, it is important to have the possibility of sitting down quietly and talking through a few issues before actually going to the field to do the interviews.

5.2 Findings, conclusions and recommendations

The biggest value of conducting the survey was that it shifted the emphasis of the analysis from output or outcome level indicators to the voices of the people assisted and managed to emphasize the very essence of the Red Cross work which is improving the lives of individuals. It is important to have the voices of the people heard not only during the initial assessment but also in the following phases of the project cycle.

Apart from obtaining information on the way people felt about the goods and services in terms of appropriateness and timeliness, anecdotal information and individual stories can add value to the analysis and can put the people reached in the focus of the reports and in the focus of our thinking again. After all, the operation was done to address their needs.

The conclusion of the survey team was that it is highly recommended to make this kind of survey a routine after emergency operations and therefore to include the corresponding costs in the budget.

Although surveys might be laborious and costly, they provide valuable information on the overall success of an operation. It is important to not only provide assistance to the people but to also get their feedback about it.

It also has a value in itself to visit some of the families in difficult conditions and talk to them a little bit, it makes them feel that the Red Cross/ Red Crescent cares about them. Again, this proves that the aim is not only to collect information. It is the dialogue and the exchange of information that adds value to the work.

5.2.1 Findings and conclusions regarding the remote villages in Herzegovina:

Out of the 12 families visited (middle-aged/ elderly people working on their lands), all families mentioned that their land was damaged and that they lost all crops. They mentioned that they had no fodder to feed their animals anymore (mainly cows, some goats and sheep), so some of them had to sell their livestock. They had no seeds to be replanted. Four families mentioned that they lost their wine stocks, and one family mentioned olive trees damaged by the floods.

When asked about their needs, five families mentioned that they needed seeds, seven mentioned fertilizers to prepare the land for the autumn seeding season, and two families mentioned that they would need clover to feed their animals. Four families also mentioned the need for wheat. When it comes to replanting, one of the people interviewed was on the opinion that it was already too late to replant the seeds and that they would rather need to focus on preparing the land for the autumn planting season.

They all knew that they received the food and hygiene parcels from the Red Cross, and they said that only the Red Cross asked them about their needs.

All families interviewed confirmed that the assistance was provided a week before the survey, which was around 40-45 days after the floods.

They all received the assistance at home, so the questions around the details of the distribution were not relevant. All of them also confirmed that the local branch informed them about the planned distribution.

All of the families except one confirmed that the volunteers were wearing an emblem when they distributed the food and hygiene parcels to them, and they also confirmed that the behaviour of the volunteers was good. They also know how to make a complaint if they are not satisfied with the assistance provided.

When asked about any changes they would recommend in regard to the operation, one family said that they would like to see seeds and fertilizer or money being provided, but the most important would

be the fertilizer. Another person said that the Red Cross was a lot more active right after the war, then it is now, whereas the needs have not decreased since then.

Observation: one of the first people interviewed seemed to be very frustrated, and even said that he would have refused the Red Cross assistance. This reaction however cannot be unequivocally attributed to his attitude in regard to the Red Cross assistance, but is probably the result of several factors, including the fact that the state did not help him, and that being a hard working person he is now in a position to receive external help.

Appropriateness/ relevance: People mainly mentioned other needs than those addressed with the food and hygiene parcels. Although the Red Cross assistance has temporarily improved their situation, it did not reduce the damage which the floods had on their lands. These families could not replant their seeds, and will not have anything to harvest.

Timeliness: Although the people interviewed were not asked to judge whether the assistance came in time or too late, it is quite clear that providing assistance to the people 40-45 days after the floods cannot qualify as immediate disaster response. At the same time the fact that the items distributed did not address the primary needs of the people downplays the importance of the timeliness of the assistance.

Information dissemination: There seems to be a very close relationship between the Red Cross and the local communities. The local branch secretary accompanied the survey team to the villages, and it was observed that they knew each other well, were in regular contact with each other. People also seemed to feel comfortable about complaining to the local Red Cross if they had any problems.

Visibility: Volunteers were wearing an emblem during the distribution of assistance.

5.2.2 Findings and conclusions regarding the towns of Trebinje and Popovo Polje

During the six interviews conducted very different problems and needs were mentioned by the people assisted through the DREF operation, therefore it is difficult to draw clear conclusion on the appropriateness of the Red Cross assistance.

Most houses were located on the bank of the river or close to it, where it has been prohibited to build houses, and the houses and gardens were flooded. Four families mentioned that they had lost their crops, two of them managed to replant some of the lost seeds. The water stayed for around 15 days in the houses, damaged the furniture, food reserves, in one case even the windows. One family mentioned that they had no electricity for 20 days, and that they were cold.

When asked about their needs, two families answered that they needed food, another said that they needed everything including food, and another family although not saying explicitly that they needed food but mentioned that it was important to receive flour. Transport was mentioned by five families as a significant problem, they had no means of transport for weeks, children could not go to school, one family said that they could not reach the town for two weeks. One person mentioned that he would have needed seeds and fertilizers but also said that it was already too late for seeds now. One of the people suggested an emergency escape road to be built which could also allow of neighbours helping each other in emergency situations.

Besides the Red Cross asking them about their needs, three families mentioned that the fire brigade came to help them and to ask them about their needs, and four families mentioned that civil defense visited them. One person said that he knew that Red Cross would come and help.

All families confirmed that they received the Red Cross assistance two weeks before the interviews, which means some 30-35 days after the floods, and one family said that it could have come earlier and that she would recommend to provide assistance earlier in the future.

When asked whether they knew who funded the Red Cross response, one family said that the Red Cross of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the International Red Cross, another family said that they knew funding came from the Red Cross family, and that is all they needed to know. It became apparent that volunteers were not wearing a visible emblem when distributing the food and hygiene parcels, and this

was confirmed by a volunteer who was accompanying the team during the interviews. All families received assistance at home, so the questions around the details of the distribution were not relevant.

Appropriateness/ relevance: It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion on whether the assistance met the needs of the people reached. Four families out of the six mentioned the need for food, so this can be considered an appropriate assistance. Hygiene items were not mentioned as something they needed or as something that turned out to be useful for the families. Also there was one family who said that this assistance was just a nice gesture from the Red Cross and could happen more often. But this very same family did not answer the question about whether they needed anything after the floods, they said they were born there and learnt how to handle these kind of situations.

Another interesting finding which is in line with the fact that the Red Cross used to be very active after the war, is that one of the people interviewed said that he actually expected the Red Cross to provide assistance after the floods. It was also confirmed by a volunteer that some people do appreciate the assistance, others not so much, and that actually people are expecting quite a lot from the Red Cross. Most probably in the case of these two locations (Trebinje and Popovo Polje) the number of families interviewed do not allow of getting a good enough impression on the relevance of the operation. Not everyone was at home when the visit took place, some of the people were probably working on their lands. Besides that it has to be mentioned that the follow-up questions to the answers of the people were also limited as a result of lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities between the team members.

Timeliness: The assistance by no doubts arrived very late.

Information dissemination: There were no issues identified in regard to information dissemination.

Visibility: The volunteer accompanying the team said that sometimes they do wear emblems and sometimes they do not. It is rather on an ad hoc basis. However the emblem was on the car that the volunteers were provided with for the distribution.

6.0 Next steps for the tool

The *Are people reached listened to?* tool will be used in the near future in three DREF operations currently ongoing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Russian Federation. These three operations present an opportunity to put into practice some of the lessons learnt so far, and to further experiment with the survey in different contexts. Mission reports, focussing both on learning from the operations, but also featuring recommendations for developing the tool further will be reviewed by the International Federation's Europe zone team as part of mainstreaming stakeholder accountability.

For us to have the opportunity to present this essentially practical tool at the current conference with a wide range of practitioners in the M&E field will generate suggestions for relating it in a conceptual way to the accountability to the stakeholders and sustainability debates.

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