Communicating with Communities and Accountability

A Current Debate

This short paper explores what is understood by ‘communicating with communities’ (CwC) as an approach, and considers its relationship with accountability. It is a synthesis of findings from interviews with 27 stakeholders who represent a core, but small, sample of actors in the CwC ‘movement’ and to a lesser extent those working through the lens of accountability. This paper does not aim to present an ‘official’ CDAC Network stance on either CwC or accountability, but rather a snapshot of current perspectives. The boxed quotes in this short paper demonstrate the range of opinions expressed by the individuals interviewed.

Interviewees were drawn from CDAC Network Members (INGOs, UN, Red Cross, media development agencies (MDAs), research agencies and technology providers) as well as academic and policy institutions and industry representatives. A review of a first, longer version of this document that engaged all respondents (and a wider stakeholder group) was also conducted, and resulted in this shorter version being produced. Many of the points made during the review have been addressed and several recommendations for ‘next steps’ incorporated.

A number of perspectives are missing; these include the first-hand viewpoints of affected communities, local NGOs and humanitarian stakeholders beyond Europe and North America.
The CDAC Network’s starting point is the principle that information and communication are critical forms of aid. Almost all respondents indicated that CwC and accountability are inextricably linked and, through mutual reinforcement, the effectiveness and quality of both approaches can be maximised – ultimately improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response. Common efforts are required to ensure that the value and impact of both CwC and accountability are realised. Interviewees stated that multi-stakeholder engagement is crucial to realise this goal, and in order to improve humanitarian action.

Interviewees spoke of the need for further understanding about how to ensure that both approaches are supported to develop to their full potential. Respondents indicated that this could be achieved through a better understanding of the roles and relationships between practitioners of accountability and CwC at field level. It was felt that this would help to create a shared understanding of common values, aims and practices between CwC and accountability. There was a request that this be demonstrated through the generation of case studies which detail good practice and lessons captured from CwC and accountability in action. The CDAC Network is currently seeking to generate such case studies, the first of which will be drawn from experience in the Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines.

‘[CwC is] less about us, more about them... The capacity [for communities] to communicate with each other, not just us, is an essential prerequisite for communities to lead their own response and recovery, and ultimately rely less on humanitarian assistance’

UN

‘A constructive approach is to look at what CwC can bring... How can we celebrate and promote the ways that CwC can deepen and contribute to improving accountability approaches, and the response more broadly?’

INGO

“What people want is an international assistance system that integrates the resources and experiences of outsiders with the assets and capacities of insiders to develop contextually appropriate strategies for pursuing positive change...Real help (as opposed to delivery of resources) would involve mutual insider/outsider analysis of the context, generation of options, and shared decisions about the best strategy for pursuing the desired changes...”

CDA (Time to Listen 2012)
Summary of Interviews

The interviews highlighted a need for improved understanding about the aim and scope of CwC. Different people, both within and external to the CDAC Network, have divergent views of the approach: some tend to view CwC as a rights-based approach aimed at community empowerment and resilience building, while others tend toward seeing CwC as the ‘how to’ and ‘enabler’ of accountability. CwC is viewed by respondents from aid agencies as a more recent and less formalised field than accountability, with no defined standards or quality frameworks. Interviewees from media development agencies did not share the understanding of ‘CwC’ as ‘new’. For example, the BBC’s Great Lakes Service started a ‘Lifeline’ project in 1994 in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide – interestingly the point at which many of the humanitarian sector’s main quality and accountability initiatives were initiated. The flexibility of CwC in-as-much that it is not captured in formal standards was viewed by many respondents as a real strength, enabling approaches to be contextualised and field-level action to be needs driven.

Perhaps surprisingly, many respondents indicated that accountability in practice is limited to humanitarian programming and therefore only affects communities immediately impacted by humanitarian aid delivery. Proponents of social accountability, which addresses the rebalancing of community power dynamics, oppose the understanding of the approach as solely a humanitarian issue. This perception of accountability may be attributed to stakeholders being more familiar with elements of donor accountability and compliance rather than a broader rights-based approach. Some interviewees saw the certification and standardisation of accountability practices as one of its limitations, restricting the adaptability of approaches at field level to uphold it as a principle.

The divergent perceptions of accountability coupled with the differing understanding of CwC create an interesting and often confusing foundation for identifying the synergies between the two approaches, and identifying mutually reinforcing ways of working. Nevertheless the following is proposed.

‘Accountability allows for the population having an influence over the response – where simply communicating does not necessarily do that’

UN

‘For aid agencies accountability tends to be specifically targeting their operational areas; their beneficiaries’

INGO
Commonalities Between CwC and Accountability

- **Rights-based**: recognising affected communities as active decision makers and shapers of their own lives
- **Aspiring** to shift the power from aid providers to aid recipients, and to facilitate recipients’ own action
- **Aiming to** shift the emphasis from a supply-side driven response to a demand driven response
- **People-centred**, providing information for, and listening to, affected communities
- **Facilitating effective information sharing** and promoting the use of and response to feedback.

Distinctive Features of CwC and Accountability

While many aspects of the approaches are inextricably linked, the interviews highlighted several distinctive features:

**CwC**

Emphasises access to **life-saving / risk-mitigating information** to help communities make informed decisions about their recovery in the wake of a crisis. This information encompasses a range of issues; many of these are not linked directly to humanitarian response activities, including issues such as local weather, politics, security, etc.

- **CwC approaches engage a varied range of actors** to leverage improvements in communication, and as a result there is a significant emphasis on coordination and partnership.
- **By promoting dialogue within and between communities, CwC activities tend to involve the wider community, beyond those directly reached by humanitarian service delivery (including communities in non-affected areas and the diaspora).**

‘The thing that I get excited about at CDAC-N is the engagement with media development agencies… As NGO people we don’t necessarily understand each other or know we exist… Broadening our range of activities and ways of being more accountable to include all of the things that media development agencies do such as radio broadcasting or better use of technology. …For me it’s thrilling and potentially transformative and it can bring to life and accelerate what we want to do to become more accountable so it’s completely important….that work will make our accountability work really take off’

**INGO**

‘Aid agencies focus more on organisational information; the activities of the project. So larger information on the disaster is not always systematically provided to communities’

**INGO**
• There is no pre-designed toolkit, nor does CwC encompass established standards; contextual understanding and flexibility is considered key.

• There is an emphasis on investing in response preparedness, including partnership building, training and pre-positioning – of common messages and ‘hardware’ / stock.

• CwC approaches seek to build resilience by providing information on how to mitigate risk and strengthen adaptive strategies; the improved intra- and inter-community dialogue that can be facilitated through a CwC approach is also seen to have the capacity to support conflict resolution and peace-building efforts.

• CwC approaches seek to understand how the information ecosystem has changed in a crisis, with the aim of capitalising on/rebuilding pre-existing capacity and strengthening local communication channels.

Accountability

• Accountability is closely associated with the humanitarian sector’s ‘quality initiatives’ and seen to have value through formalisation and standardisation, most notably through the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Commitments on Accountability to Affected People (IASC CAAP).

• Ensures the responsible use of power, and as defined by the HAP 2010 standards currently focuses on power within the humanitarian system.

• Standardisation and formalisation enables the appropriate and timely management of complaints (including serious complaints linked to protection and child safeguarding).

• Accountability approaches provide strong guidance on vulnerability criteria and targeting, with significant emphasis on inclusivity and meeting the needs of all groups within a community, including the most marginalised.

• As accountability is a humanitarian principle, accountability frameworks are often discreetly linked to humanitarian programming and operations.

• Accountability frameworks have well-established links to other mainstreamed initiatives (including gender and protection), which involve gender and social equality analyses.
• Accountability is firmly linked with M&E frameworks, and accountability-related activities benefit from robust data collection methodologies.

• This area of work explicitly includes accountability to local and national governments and between aid actors and their donors; this emphasises issues related to programme and operational compliance.

Synergies between CwC and Accountability

This paper suggests that if CwC and accountability work well together in practice, improvements in the quality of humanitarian response will be made, and significant ground towards the ‘paradigm shift’ of community empowerment will be gained. This suggests a powerful and transformative potential.

Respondents explained that CwC approaches reach beyond humanitarian programming both in terms of scope and duration. By connecting communities and promoting dialogue, it is believed that CwC can help to foster secure and resilient communities to develop greater agency. Therefore, CwC has the capacity to contribute to the rebalancing of existing ‘aid delivery’ power dynamics; this helps to achieve the wider aim of accountability by empowering communities to make independent decisions – beyond the parameters of a humanitarian response.

Respondents felt that linking CwC to quality and accountability initiatives – including existing frameworks – would be a key step toward embedding the principle of ‘communication as aid’ as a predictable, resourced and reliable component of humanitarian preparedness and response, and have a positive impact on how CwC is perceived through association with ‘quality’ initiatives. Some respondents indicated that CwC activities were often ‘gender blind’, not recognising the gendered nature of information and communication – placing information and communication methods in the hands of those with power. To address this it was felt that accountability experts could support actors with a CwC focus, particularly the media development agencies, to follow principals of inclusivity and equity and improve the effectiveness of CwC activities through well-targeted programme design. This was felt to be particularly useful, in places affected by conflict.

Preparedness: Given the significant emphasis on preparedness (for example through partnerships, trainings, prepositioning and message generation), CwC approaches can be seen to encourage agencies to better respond in emergencies, and to provide timely and appropriate services – contributing to improving the effectiveness and accountability of a response.

Needs assessment: In order to provide the information that people need in an emergency, it is critical to understand the communications and information ecology of affected populations. Ensuring communities are engaged in needs assessments can help humanitarian efforts by contributing to a better understanding of local

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3 Time to Listen, CDA 2012, page 137-138 (Elements of a two paradigms: A comparison)
communications ecosystems, thereby encouraging those focused on accountability activities to explore the potential to use new channels (for example, local media). Participants didn’t consider sex and age disaggregated data collection to be common practice in information and communications needs assessments. Accountability specialists can provide guidance to those working in CwC to follow principals of inclusivity and equity – starting with the collection of sex, age and ability disaggregated needs assessment data. This, in turn, will improve the effectiveness of CwC activities. Ensuring that assessments define the needs of, and are therefore accountable to, all groups within a community will ensure that CwC activities adopt the most appropriate channels which enable specific vulnerabilities to be addressed.

Programme design: Respondents indicated that both CwC and accountability need to engage innovative technologies, broker new partnerships, strengthen local capacities, and adopt an anticipatory approach – one with a strong emphasis on preparedness, resilience and community engagement. This will help to strengthen both in practice.

As CwC approaches are predicated on partnership, they can bring together new technologies and multiple-stakeholders to help foster innovative programme design and drive efficiency. Respondents were keen to highlight the importance that partnerships with ‘Information and Communication Technology’ (ICT) service providers should adhere to humanitarian principles and be based on accountability frameworks. It was felt that field-level efforts that process information and deploy new technologies need to be strengthened and supported to facilitate dialogue and community engagement in decision making.

Programme implementation: a CwC approach can help determine and provide the best means for establishing the most appropriate and effective communication and information channels. Collaborative action at field level was considered key. The use of common messaging and communications channels can help strengthen accountability mechanisms by supporting improved coordination across sectors and agencies. Minimising duplication of messaging and channels at community level would help drive efficiency of complaints response handling, and enable agencies to more effectively provide feedback.

Monitoring and evaluation: Several respondents indicated that the CwC evidence base and ‘proof of concept’ remains weak. Accountability
frameworks which support humanitarians to measure the effectiveness of programming can help those working in CwC to monitor their impact on communities. Equally, CwC can also support M&E through the deployment of new technologies – examples such as smart phones and the creation of information portals were cited. Better generation of evidence will enable both approaches to demonstrate their impact on the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action. This could have a positive impact on advocacy and fundraising, helping to embed the principles of accountability and CwC at the heart of a response.

Feedback and complaints: CwC activities emphasise listening, dialogue and feedback at field level. CwC activities can help foster improved participation in programme design and evaluation by providing multiple communications channels and ensuring that all groups in a community are engaged. Some respondents indicated that CwC activities prioritised messaging (talking) rather than listening. Accountability initiatives which seek to ‘close the feedback loop’ ensure that affected populations have an influence over response by ensuring that feedback from communities is not just solicited, but acted upon. It was felt that ‘listening’ should not be exclusively adopted by humanitarian organisations but all stakeholders in the response, including technology providers and MDAs, to ensure they remain responsive to feedback to assure quality and build trust.

Next Steps

Feedback on the initial draft of this paper strongly emphasised that together CwC and accountability stand to strengthen humanitarian action, but a greater understanding of the ‘how’ is required through:

• Demonstration of practical application through case studies, promoting the value-add of CwC.
• Developing tools and practice guides; the CDAC Secretariat is working to develop a ‘How To’ guide for the First Six Weeks of a CwC response which outlines essential CwC elements and guiding principles.
• Further advocacy by the CDAC Network regarding the aims of the CwC approach.
• Improved understanding by all stakeholders on the roles and added value of all those engaged in CwC.
• Drawing on lessons from organisations who currently work to empower communities to help shape a common understanding about ‘how’ to shift the paradigm and promote a community first approach.
• Continued efforts to strengthen accountability frameworks (building on the IASC AAP) to ensure that CwC approaches are integrated and synergies between both continue to be forged.
In closing, the agenda for the 2014 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) states that: ‘The humanitarian system needs to change and improve. But for this to happen, humanitarians must look beyond their systems and processes and seek inspiration and innovation in new technologies and partners. This will enable them to identify new tools, products and services to respond to more complex humanitarian needs.’

The views reflected in this paper indicate that there is a significant desire to seize the opportunity to address this challenge ‘to change and improve’ the humanitarian system by building on the synergies between CwC and accountability. Common efforts are required to ensure that the value and impact of both CwC and accountability are realised. These efforts should seek to harness innovative technologies, broker new partnerships and strengthen local capacities, so that a more anticipatory approach can be adopted – one with a strong emphasis on preparedness, resilience and community empowerment. At all times, and in line with the WHS’s recommendation, multi-stakeholder engagement will be crucial in order to improve humanitarian action.

4 http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WHS_At%20a%20Glance_FINAL.pdf
Working towards communities having more power – equitable relationships, equitable access & equitable processes.

The Linkages between CwC and Accountability

Accountability

- Ensures the responsible use of power and resources
- A humanitarian principle and therefore linked explicitly to humanitarian programming and operations
- Standards exist
- Requires the appropriate and timely management of feedback and complaints
- Includes compliance and reporting
- Supports robust M&E methodologies
- Promotes inclusivity
- Provides guidance on vulnerability criteria and targeting
- Well-established links to other cross-cutting issues, including conflict sensitivity, gender and disability

CwC

- Provides life-saving/risk mitigating information – including non-programmatic information
- Crisis-affected people have better information to enable them to make decisions
- Reaches beyond the humanitarian response to communities not directly receiving assistance
- Involves a range of stakeholders (including media development agencies & local media)
- Strong emphasis on preparedness
- Often done in partnership
- Promotes intra-community dialogue
- An emerging field of practice (not standardised)

Quality & Effectiveness

- Emerging from rights-based approaches
- Aspire to share power with aid recipients
- Aim to shift emphasis to a demand-driven response (based on local priorities & capacities)
- People centred
- Facilitate listening, feedback, dialogue (engagement)
- Establish information sharing and communications channels

Capitalising on the synergies

- Maximising the ‘community first’ approach
- Effective use of ICTs
- Innovation supported thorough listening, M&E and learning and rigorous needs assessments
- Preparedness for information sharing, feedback and complaints handling
- Collaboration with diverse stakeholders (including those external to the humanitarian sector)