

Integrating Local Voices into Programme Governance in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings

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Question

How have/do programmes in fragile and conflict-affected countries integrate local voices into their governance mechanisms?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Summary

This rapid literature review explores how local people's views and perspectives on their concerns, needs and capabilities (beyond asking about their experiences with aid) have been integrated into the national-level governance mechanisms of humanitarian assistance and development programmes in fragile and conflict-affected settings. There is limited systematic evidence available on this topic. There are a few cases of including civil society in national-level programme or sector governance bodies; there is more documented experience of including local actors in humanitarian response coordination. There is also relevant learning from feedback mechanisms, analysis and research, and people-centred approaches to aid planning and management more generally. The literature highlights the importance of conflict-sensitive approaches underpinned by regular conflict and political economy analysis; consulting with local actors on how they want to communicate and engage, and setting up safe and effective spaces for engagement; investing in long-term partnerships and capacity building to strengthen local organisations; and undertaking participatory, qualitative research that starts from 'people's own reading of how their lives are changing over time' (Daigle, 2022: 15).

Focus of the review

The review is concerned with national (meso-) level **governance mechanisms** of humanitarian/development/peacebuilding programmes: the structures (boards, steering committees) and processes (regular meetings) that oversee and guide programme operational decisions. Governance functions may include, for example, providing strategic direction and approving work plans, as well as reviewing risk management strategies and financial and progress reports.

'**Local**' is understood to be in practice 'multi-local', given 'the diversity between communities, differences between local and national state and non-state actors, and variation within bodies such as the different layers and institutions of the state' (Melis and Apthorpe, 2020: 371; see also Barbelet et al.'s (2021: 27) discussion of 'Who or what is local?') This review has focused on the voice of non-state actors at national and community levels, and is interested in particular in how civil society views and perspectives on their contexts, needs, concerns and capabilities (beyond feedback on experiences with a particular aid intervention) are listened to and acted on within programme governance mechanisms.

The review has focused on learning from donor-supported programmes in FCAS. It has looked in particular for experiences when donors are not physically present due to security risks and deploy remote management. In these settings there tends to be a complex mix of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding programmes: this review has looked for examples across all types of sectors and programmes, with a particular focus on experiences in social protection.

Evidence base

Reviewing academic, think tank and grey literature (published by aid agencies and donors, humanitarian coordination bodies; non-governmental organisations), the body of evidence is very limited. There is attention in the literature to gender issues, with some more in-depth gender analysis. There is also some awareness across the literature of people with disabilities as a

vulnerable group, but little detailed analysis of people with disabilities' lived realities and the impacts on inclusion.

Key findings

Evidence: This rapid review has found little evidence on how, and with what results, local actors' perceptions of their lives and contexts (beyond aid) is integrated into national-level governance mechanisms of programmes in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). There is a particular lack of evidence from settings where donors operate by remote management. This mirrors findings of the 2022 independent evaluation of Grand Bargain commitments on the paucity of evidence on how views of affected populations inform programmes and projects (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022). There is related larger literature on 1) initiatives to strengthen locally-led humanitarian responses; 2) efforts to strengthen accountability to affected populations through various feedback and social accountability mechanisms (and other activities); 3) other engagement and consultation activities with local organisations and communities, to inform policy and programme/project design and implementation. For 1) and 2) in particular, there is limited detailed analysis of how in practice these activities have brought in the broader views and perspectives of local people with what impact; for all three there is little evidence of how they link with national-level programme governance mechanisms.

Cases: The review found examples of:

- Integrating refugee voices in government-led high-level refugee response coordination and decision-making body through peer-elected representatives and pre-existing Refugee Welfare Committees (Uganda).
- Attempts to foster civil society participation in coordination of, and/or dialogue on, social protection systems and programmes at national and subnational levels (Mozambique), many very recent (Cambodia, Iraq), one with a focus on the inclusion of IDP voices through participatory roundtables (Colombia).
- Including Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and civil society actors' views and perspectives in humanitarian response, through national partners co-leading or being represented in national and subnational clusters, working groups and advisory groups (Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Afghanistan; DRC).
- An example of collaboration between a qualitative research and analysis unit, a large-scale feedback mechanism and a national coordination commission (DRC);
- Examples of where programme feedback mechanisms (in a project in response to protracted drought emergency in East Africa) and third-party monitoring (deployed by a UN agency) elicited community broader perspectives, which then informed operations.
- Other examples of local voice informing policy planning, and programme/project design and implementation, including through adaptive management.

Prominent themes: Given the limited evidence, this review includes learning from broader experiences of community consultation that aim to elicit, learn from and respond to people's perspectives of their lives and contexts. Key themes in the literature centre on exploring a context-specific approach to:

- Undertaking regular conflict analysis to inform conflict sensitive approaches.

- Involving local actors in the design of consultation processes and mechanisms; creating safe and effective spaces for the participation of local actors, including vulnerable and marginalised groups; and engaging with local actors and groups already working on inclusion and keen to engage, as well as broader civil society actors, including media, private, sector, academia and diaspora.
- Strengthening local leadership and action through empowering partnerships and capacity development (Barbelet et al., 2021).
- Undertaking qualitative participatory research that ‘start from displaced people’s own reading of how their lives are changing over time’ (Daigle, 2022).

2. Context

Aid agencies and donors working in and across development, humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors have committed to make aid more participative and accountable, including as set out by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.7 aiming to “*Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels*”. The literature is replete with recommendations on the importance of international actors engaging in dialogue with, and learning from, local people, rather than just concentrating on the one-way emission of information (Austin, 2017b; UNHCR, 2015). In particular the literature highlights the importance of listening to local voices when, due to security concerns, donors are working remotely, in order to ground remote methods of data collection and avoid a disconnect between programmes and their broader contexts (Jaspars, 2020, summarised in Birch, 2020; Rivas et al., 2015).¹

¹ Detailed commitments include:

The 2021 DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance includes the commitment to: ‘Pursue civil society actors’ participation, especially in partner countries or territories where appropriate and feasible, in Adherents’ policy and programme priority-setting, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation through more structured, institutionalised, inclusive, and accessible dialogue, including with parliaments, the private sector, and the public.’ (OECD 2021)

The IASC ‘Accountability to Affected Populations’ (AAP) commitments, the IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) set out three components required of humanitarian responses in relation to community engagement: participation; feedback and complaints mechanisms; and information provision (Austin, 2017a). This rapid review is concerned with evidence pertaining to the participation component, which sets out to ‘Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practices to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence’ (*ibid.*: 4).

There is a related agenda on localisation – the push to strengthen locally-led humanitarian and development responses. The Core commitment 6.1 of the Grand Bargain, aims to ‘Improve leadership and governance mechanisms at the level of the humanitarian country team and cluster/sector mechanisms to ensure engagement with and accountability to people and communities affected by crises’. In 2021 IASC published guidance on strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms (IASC 2021).

3. Evidence

This rapid review has found limited evidence on how in practice local perspectives and concerns (beyond feedback on a specific intervention) are being integrated within national-level governance mechanisms of programmes in FCAS.

This reflects the finding of the 2022 independent evaluation of the Grand Bargain that donors self-report activity on participation as mainly constituting ‘the establishment of mechanisms to receive feedback and manage complaints about aid programmes and on measures to prevent and respond to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA)’ (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022: 15).

Contrastingly, there is **‘scant evidence on how aid organisations are using that feedback to inform programming decisions, or how the views of affected populations are factored in from the outset of a programme or project design phase’** (*ibid.*).

Overall the interim progress review of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (OECD 2022) found **‘little visible progress ... in strengthening the voice and participation of people affected by crises and fragility’**. Crisis-affected people have repeatedly shared that they ‘do not think humanitarian aid meets their needs, that they feel unable to participate in decisions about aid ...’ (as shared via Ground Truth Solutions’ surveys, and summarised in Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022: 67).

4. Approaches

Civil society / community voices in national steering committees

This review struggled to find examples of where civil society and/or community voices are integrated through representation on national-level governance bodies of programmes in FCAS.

In Uganda the Refugee Engagement Forum is a reportedly successful model (and first of its kind) that systematically integrates refugee voices into decision-making by the Comprehensive Response Refugee Framework (CRRF) Steering Group, the Government-led high-level refugee response coordination and decision-making body. Supported by U-Learn² (Uganda Learning, Evidence, Accountability and Research Network), the REF has 37 members elected from pre-existing refugee community leadership structures in Kampala and settlements (the Refugee Welfare Committees), with 50% of seats for women, 5 seats for youth, as well as representation for each of the 10 refugee nationalities found across Uganda. Regular meetings are held to discuss key issues from each member’s community (Ankunda, 2021). Then two refugee representations (one man and one woman) represent the refugee community at the high-level quarterly Steering Group meeting, presenting key feedback, and conveying responses to the REF, who in turn inform their refugee communities (Trân and Deleu, 2021).

A REF member (a refugee from Somalia) reported: ‘Overtime, [...] the most significant change [has been] the shift from just soliciting for our opinions as leaders to empowering us to reach out to [our] community and collect their views for consideration up to national platforms ... I’m a

² <https://ulearn-uganda.org/> [Accessed 7 July 2022]

representative of the people, when I speak, [...] I'm empowered. I'm given the means and supported to take in the opinions of my community, [...] the voices of over 50,000.³

In their review, Trân and Deleu, M., 2021 (2021) find that:

- Outcomes include influencing policy-making and programme design. Examples include dispensing cash assistance in Kampala during the COVID-19 pandemic as advocated, and concerns raised by urban refugees included in the 2021-22 National Plan of Action.
- Lesson learned include the importance of REF drawing legitimacy from building on existing democratic structures; being intentionally inclusive by reserving leadership positions for minority groups; ensuring close working relationships to help consensus building and motivation; making sure operational structures and systems can adapt to changing context and allow for continuous improvement; and strong and broad stakeholder support (financial and staff time) from the outset.
- Going forward, while a key strength of REF is the members' direct links with affected communities, there could be more regular and inclusive community consultative meetings, which will require capacity building, financial support or toolkits/resources. There is good participation by women and youth from all settlements and Kampala; there are plans to support the inclusion of people with disabilities or those less educated.

Another example is the inclusion of civil society in Mozambique's National Results Based Financing (RBF) Steering Committee (NSC) in the health sector, co-chaired by the Government and a lead development partner. Witter et al. (2019) provide some insights into the challenges this NSC has faced in facilitating effective participation. These include complex programme design and management arrangements leading to 'a pretence at participatory meetings, then they go back to hotel rooms and do things on their own'; a large membership (38 people listed in one set of minutes); and challenges in gathering 'committed members, willing and able to attend regularly and spend time to study the issues scheduled for debate' (*ibid.*: 9).

Focus on local participation in national social protection systems and programmes

Good governance ideals for national social protection systems shape the broader context for initiatives to integrate local voices in national-level governance mechanisms of social protection systems in FCAS. McClanahan et al. (2021: 73) set out that, beyond grievance redress mechanisms, good governance of national social protection systems involves 'increasing the opportunities and channels for rights holders and stakeholders to shape decision making around programme design and management'. This stakeholder participation can be integrated into national high-level policymaking 'through tripartite dialogue and collective bargaining or engagement with civil society organizations' (*ibid.*: 13). However, they note 'avenues for stakeholder and rights holder participation are less clear cut in many of the emerging tax-financed, non-contributory schemes in low- and middle-income countries' (*ibid.*: 75).

³ <https://ulearn-uganda.org/refugee-voice-and-choice-including-refugees-in-high-level-response-decision-making/> [Accessed 10 July 2022]

There are some recent initiatives which intend to foster civil society participation in coordination of, and dialogue on, social protection systems at national and subnational levels, but this review found little detailed information on them:

- **In Cambodia the Fostering an Inclusive and Shock Responsive Social Protection System in Cambodia project (FIRST)** led by Oxfam (part of the EU Support to Social Protection Reforms programme) is starting in 2022 with 11 partners including civil society organisations, trade unions and local associations, and aims to promote participation in social dialogue⁴. The aim is to support a more organised, informed and active civil society in national policy debates on social protection (Joint SDG Fund, 2019).
- In June 2022 a press release announced the **formation of the multi-stakeholder Government of Iraq led Social Protection Sector Coordination Committee** which aims to function ‘as a consultative platform for a broad range of partners and stakeholders involved in social protection programmes, including national and sub-national authorities, and bilateral and multilateral partners, and local NGOs, civil society organizations and communities’ (EU et al., 2022).
- McClanahan et al. (2021: 73) provide some **examples of citizen participation in social protection programme management, one of which is from Mozambique** where: NGOs and civil society groups ‘worked collaboratively to strengthen national and sub-national engagement with the government’ on social protection policy and programmes, involving beneficiaries and citizens in monitoring the programme and improving programme awareness amongst the wider public.

An interesting case comes from **Colombia where the Victims’ Law of 2011 guarantees internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other conflict victims the right to effective participation in the design, implementation and fulfilment of the plans, projects and programmes created under that law** (which includes preferential access to social assistance) (expert comment; Ham et al., 2022: 19-20). The Universidad de los Andes-ODI study on *Social protection responses to forced displacement in Colombia* found that enshrining IDP rights and assistance entitlements in law supported IDPs to hold the state to account for those provisions (Ham et al., 2022; expert comment). The key mechanism for IDP participation is the national and local ‘Mesas de Participación’, which reserve seats for vulnerable groups often disproportionately affected by violent conflict (such as women, Afro-Colombians, indigenous peoples and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals)⁵. There is contestation and criticism over the way these participatory roundtables are run, with observers noting that participation by IDPs tends to be reduced to them listening to information, while their contributions are depoliticised (these and other points are summarised by Schouw Iversen, 2022). This experience points out the distinction ‘between participation as the right to be listened to and participation as the right to make decisions’ (Schouw Iversen, 2022).

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/european-union-partners-oxfam-ilo-and-unicef-support-government-kingdom-cambodia> [Accessed 9 July 2022]

⁵ <https://www.ndi.org/publications/victims-participation-roundtables-guide-colombia> [Accessed 8 July 2022]

Local actors in humanitarian response coordination

This rapid review found **examples of the involvement of local actors – namely local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) – in the coordination structures of humanitarian response, but with little systematic evidence of how their participation brings local views and perceptions (beyond specific aid programmes) to the table with what outcomes.**

At the same time the widely-shared perception⁶ is that **local NGOs and CSOs play a vital role ‘in sharing knowledge, experience and analysis drawn from their close contacts with civil society and other actors on the ground in partner countries**, which can assist members to develop and implement better-informed policies and programmes in partner countries’ (OECD, 2020). However, there has been a tendency for international actors to limit the input of local organisations ‘to tightly controlled, subcontracting relationships’ which ‘stifle the potential added value of local actors’ (as found by Dixon et al. (2016: 112) in Syria).

There is a large literature reporting on the involvement of national and local NGOs and CSOs in humanitarian country teams and cluster coordination groups, and initiatives to strengthen their involvement. The 2022 independent evaluation of the Grand Bargain found that ‘aid organisations have made efforts to empower local leadership at country level, including in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) and national and sub-national clusters’, but **‘overall, progress against localisation objectives at the institutional and system levels remains slow, with increasing frustration among local actors’** (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022: 14)⁷.

Examples of the kind of findings available include:

- In a review for the Global Protection Cluster, Nolan and Dozin (2019: 10) report good practice as including: National partners co-leading Protection Cluster and Child Protection (CP)/Gender Based Violence (GBV) Area of Responsibilities at the sub-national level (South Sudan, DRC); national partners represented and playing a pivotal role in Protection Cluster and GBV/CP Strategic Advisory Group or Core Group (South Sudan, Libya); national partners co-leading specific working groups or time-bound task forces (Pakistan); some HCT including local representation through one or more dedicated seats for civil society organizations (Myanmar, DRC).
- Metcalf-Hough et al. (2022: 57) report that ‘In Afghanistan, UN Women and partners have supported the establishment of an Afghan Women’s and Girl’s Advisory Group (WAG), comprising Afghan women activists and women-led civil society organisations (CSOs), to act as an independent advisor to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in its response to the deteriorating situation on the ground.’ Following the catastrophic June 22

⁶ For example representatives of the UN and international NGOs reported in Somalia and Somaliland that ‘among their primary reasons for working with LNGOs is their ability to access complex areas, their contextual knowledge, and their “community ownership” (Howe et al., 2019: 12). Meanwhile in Sudan CDAC found that ‘Generally, the CBOs and NGOs with local teams have good community access, good relationships, and trust with the affected populations in very remote areas. As access to affected communities has been a key challenge for many humanitarian actors, leveraging and investing in maintaining, and where needed, creating, networks of local actors should be prioritised’.

⁷ For a comprehensive review of the evidence base on localisation see Barbelet et al. (2021): this includes examples of country-level localisation strategies and initiatives.

earthquake the WAG, with the GiHA WG, collated reports from women civil society actors in Paktika and Khotso on the challenges faced by women, men, girls and boys (GiHA Working Group and WAG 2022).

- In a CDAC-commissioned review of communication, community-engagement and accountability in the 2021 Haiti Earthquake Response, Betz (2022) found significant efforts to ensure local actors take part in international coordination efforts. From prior to 2021 no national NGOs on the HCT, to adding five national organisations, including some with a focus on youth, women and people living with disabilities. The UN resident coordination is quoted as saying: “It has made a huge difference. They are engaged, and they question the issue of financing to local NGOs. They ground us. It’s a breath of fresh air. It’s not UN talk, it’s fantastic.”
- In the analysis of collective approaches to risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) in the Ebola response in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dewulf et al. (2020: 29) found that local NGO representation in the RCCE Commission⁸ and the Community Feedback Working Group (CFWG) was marginal at the central level and only the largest local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) participated. LNGOs, faith-based organisations and other civil-society organisations received grants for implementation, but ‘their participation in coordination meetings was inconsistent and very much linked to whether they had active funding and could dedicate staff to attend meetings. One interviewee confirmed that lack of funding for civil society organisations hindered their participation, citing the PSEA Network’s struggle to engage with local women’s associations as an example’ (ibid.).

Nolan and Dozin (2019: 12-13) report⁹ that common barriers to local actors’ effective participation include: ‘resource constraints and simple administrative hurdles’ (consistently raised as biggest barrier); difficulties associated with language and comprehension, ‘use of humanitarian jargon/acronyms and complex humanitarian planning processes’; perception of local actors ‘as implementers or data collectors and as such, are often not involved in strategic processes, including the analysis and interpretation of data’; difficulty in accessing core funds impacting on capacity to strategically participate; and overall lack of understanding of the cluster system and the humanitarian planning and response processes limiting confidence and knowledge of how to influence meaningfully. Similar barriers are listed in IASC’s (2021: 6) guidance on strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

Feedback and monitoring mechanisms

There is a larger literature on how humanitarian and development agencies are trying to improve accountability of aid to affected populations, which can involve a wide variety of measures involving communicating and engaging with communities and local actors (see for example the review by Kelly, 2019). However, **this rapid review struggled to find documented**

⁸ Co-led by WHO and then UNICEF with the Ministry of Health.

⁹ Barriers identified from focus group discussions with local actors in Nigeria, Somalia, and Myanmar and the Localisation Scoping Survey conducted with local actors in DRC, South Sudan, Myanmar, Libya and Pakistan (Nolan and Dozin, 2019: 12)

experiences of attempts to improve aid accountability through feedback mechanisms specifically seeking out broader views and perspectives; rather the focus (across humanitarian and development programmes) is on eliciting client feedback on a particular aid intervention. This mirrors Ayliffe et al.'s (2017: 40) conclusion that in social protection 'social accountability initiatives are rarely conceptualised as part of a strategic approach to citizen engagement or programme governance: complementarities with each other and with other citizen participation, empowerment or wider governance initiatives at different levels (local, regional, national) are not commonly spelled out'.

One example found is from a review of five pilot projects undertaken in East Africa in response to protracted drought emergency as part of a DFID-funded project called infoasaid. The review reported that increased interaction with communities, 'enabled by the community radio show and mobile phones, not only improved each organisation's understanding of communities' needs and priorities but also led them to make changes to their assistance' (Chapelier and Shah, 2013: 16). In two locations, communities raised needs and concerns in the interactive radio shows that were often different to those raised in agency-led meetings (*ibid.*).

In places where donors are operating through remote management, then **third-party monitoring (TPM)** may be used, primarily to monitor partner organisations activities in places where donor staff face access restrictions¹⁰. A study looking at TPM experiences in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria, found their focus tends to be "on verification and quantitative information' (Sagmeister et al., 2016: 10). However, they '**can provide a source of primary field data to inform programming**' (*ibid.*: 7). This research reports one example of where a TPM deployed by a UN agency was able to report 'compelling, qualitative findings at the impact level: they asked not only whether the outputs were delivered, but also how they affected the lives of communities in that area. Importantly, this method led to unexpected insights on local tensions and dynamics surrounding implementation that allowed the agency to adjust programming' (*ibid.*: 14).

Analysis and research

One approach for ensuring programme governance is informed by local voices, is to commission contextual analysis and research, and integrate uptake of the findings into national-level governance mechanisms. Participatory needs assessments take an inclusive approach to soliciting and including the voices of the most vulnerable. There are also examples of qualitative and participatory studies that set out to explore people's lived realities (beyond a singular focus on aid) in FCAS. However, this rapid review did not find documented explanation of how in practice dissemination and uptake of the findings from these kinds of analysis and research are embedded within programmes' national-level governance mechanisms.¹¹

There is interesting learning from the Ebola response in DRC which highlights good practice in the partnership between the Social Science Research Unit (CASS) and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) feedback mechanism

¹⁰ A K4D helpdesk review by Birch (2020: 2) found 'very little donor-published policy or guidance on remote management programming'.

¹¹ A K4D helpdesk review by Kelly found 'little evidence on the effects of Joint Needs Assessments (JNAs) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) on humanitarian organisations' behaviour and humanitarian outcomes'.

and approach. Dewulf et al. (2020) report on how IFRC set up a large-scale feedback mechanism covering Ebola-affected health zones in North Kivu and Ituri to collect communities' perspectives of the crisis and the response, relying on the DRC Red Cross Society's 800 trained local volunteers, who speak the local language and are familiar with the socio-cultural and political context. From mid-2019, the CASS and IFRC worked closely together to triangulate the feedback data with the results of broader research. While there is no systematic presence of the CASS at RCCE Commission meetings, there was collaboration with multiple examples of support provided by the CASS to the RCCE Commission, and findings from CASS research presented to the general coordination meeting as a standing point on the agenda (*ibid.*).

People-centred approaches and adaptive management

There may be relevant learning for integration of local voices in programme governance mechanisms from donors' broader engagement and consultation with local actors and communities. Donors engage with local organisations and community members for a variety of objectives: for example, to inform policy direction, and in programme/project design and implementation, and ultimately to ensure their approaches are people-centred. However, there is not detailed evidence on how the engagement of local actors in policy dialogues and programme implementation lead to people's perceptions and views (beyond their experience relating to a specific aid intervention) being integrated into programme governance mechanisms in FCAS.

For example the United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines On Peacebuilding And Sustaining Peace (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2020: 14) sets out that, to achieve a people-centred approach, staff should 'proactively engage with diverse local civil society actors, especially marginalized groups', and enable the 'meaningful participation of local civil society actors in decision-making, analysis, design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and reporting of peacebuilding programmes.' One case mentioned is from Kenya, where 'The national conflict prevention strategy 'UWIANO platform for peace' provides space for collaboration among peace actors and coordination of national and local stakeholders to promote initiatives that mitigate electoral violence. This platform is also an early warning/early response mechanism which enhances community security, cohesion and resilience between actors and at different societal level through innovative technology.' (*ibid.*: 16)

To take another example, at policy level, donors may integrate local voices into planning processes by conducting consultations to hear local views and perspectives.¹² There is relevant learning from CSO feedback of recommendations to improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of donor policy dialogues. Recommendations include providing regular platforms for dialogue and consultation and including CSOs beyond direct funding partners; holding 'less formal, ad hoc dialogues that allow for more frequent exchange with members on varied topics'; and setting transparent and clear criteria for participation informed by analysis of the civil society sector ('e.g. power imbalances among CSOs, representation of the most marginalised groups, geographic spread, civic space, etc.'). Other recommendations were to address capacity challenges (human

¹² A DAC survey of, and consultation with, CSOs (in member and partner countries) found that a few DAC members (five out of 29 respondents¹²) reported that they engage in consultations with partner country CSOs across all or most of their policies, while more (20) hold some ad hoc consultations with partner country CSOs.

resources and time needed); respond to 'linguistic and cultural diversity to enable effective participation; and relay consultation outcomes.'¹³

There is some literature on how local actor engagement and feedback can inform adaptive management, leading to adaptations in programme operations, including in FCAS (Christie and Green 2019). To take one example, Root Change's Malawi Social Labs programme convened government officials, NGOs, civil society actors and constituents at programme design stage, helping 'to create a shared understanding of the problems facing the local development ecosystem, including poor relationships and distrust among community-based organisations, government, traditional authorities and citizens. The programme helped ensure that constituent feedback led to adaptation by supporting teams to undertake two-month 'micro-actions' – short-term experiments designed to test solutions and strengthen relationships within the development ecosystem.' (Buell et al., 2020: 16). However this rapid review did not find detailed accounts explicitly linking adaptive management initiatives with integrating broader local voice (beyond feedback on an individual aid intervention) into national-level governance mechanisms.

5. Key themes

This section summarises prominent themes in the literature reviewed. Given the limited evidence base on experiences of integrating local voices in national-level governance structures of programmes in FCAS, this summary brings in findings from the broader literature.

Conflict sensitivity and voice in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

In FCAS it is critical to understand the impact of conflict dynamics when seeking to elicit and listen to local voices. Here are some examples from the literature:

- In their study of collective approaches to communication and community engagement in Yemen, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al. (2020: 7) point out '**Like all resources in conflict, communication is controlled, politicised and intimately bound up in conflict dynamics.**' In Yemen, some respondents were fearful to communicate openly in case of repercussions with local authorities and their access to humanitarian assistance, with face-to-face (and particularly large group) communication considered threatening (*ibid.*: 16-17). Meanwhile Smith et al. (2019: 14) report that in Lebanon 'For a period, UNHCR used their network of outreach volunteers to seek opinions and suggestions from the population. This was stopped due to concerns about risks to their safety and their role on the [Multi Purpose Cash] programme is now limited to information sharing.'
- From the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme, Gaventa and Oswald (2019: 7) **summarise findings from Myanmar, Pakistan, and Mozambique on the role of fear in these contexts**, noting that: 'In settings with long histories of authoritarianism and violence, internalised norms of fear shape the possibilities and

¹³ Similar recommendations and good practice tips are summarised in the IASC (2021) guidance on strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms (see section on participation and representation starting page 6).

nature of 'voice'. Despite the creation or existence of formalised mechanisms for citizen engagement, citizens may hesitate to challenge authority in public ways.

However, while conflict analysis is key when considering how to integrate local voices in aid programming, the OECD DAC (2022) reports that 'Despite some progress on enhancing the systematic use of conflict analysis among some actors, the Nexus Interim Report Survey indicates that **conflict and political economy analysis are the least-used input to inform planning and programming**'.

Reaching and engaging with local communities, vulnerable people and broader civil society

On the one hand **local actors such as community leaders, government social workers and local religious leaders 'have substantial reach and influence at the community level'** and may be considered an entry point for engaging with local people (CDAC, 2022: 6).

On the other hand, the development and humanitarian literature on accountability and communication with affected populations in FCAS makes repeated points on **well-known challenges in ensuring participation is not stymied by self-appointed gatekeepers, local dynamics of discrimination and exclusion (within and between communities and regions), local politics and elite capture** (Haver and Carter, 2016; Daigle, 2022). Metcalfe-Hough et al. (2022: 67) highlight that 'Humanitarian organisations often use community leaders as the main information channels about aid, but the majority of respondents in Burkina Faso, CAR, Chad and Somalia said that they do not always trust their community leaders to share information or represent their best interests.'¹⁴

Daigle (2022) finds that rather than treating communities as 'passive blank slates', there will be people and groups already working for change, and keen to engage. These include 'feminists and women's rights activists, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and allies (LGBTQIA+) advocates, disability activists and other allies, among both displaced and host populations' (*ibid.*).

The CDAC Network's assessment of communication, community engagement and accountability in Sudan found a gap in engagement with the media and private sector to share skills and deepen engagement. The review found that many of these agencies and organisations 'outside of the traditional humanitarian space have a great deal of [Communication, Community Engagement and Accountability] expertise and despite this, there remains a minimal level of collaboration and linkages between them and the humanitarian system'. (CDAC 2022: 6) Nolan and Dozin (2019: 11) also note the value of bringing together multi-stakeholders in humanitarian cluster groups, such as 'local partners and women-led organisations, but also diaspora, academia, private sector' as this 'ultimately results in a diversification of technical

¹⁴ Also see detailed findings from Yemen (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2020) and Sudan (CDAC, 2020) of how ignoring conflict and power dynamics in community engagement risks influential local leaders limiting participation in what El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al (2020) term a 'false localisation', leaving marginalised voices struggling to be heard.

expertise, greater information collection and analysis skills, coverage capacities and quality of services; which leads to better overall coordination outcomes.’

CDAC (2022: 18) also highlighted that **“the “one size fits all” approach of having a single engaging mechanism to cover everyone very rarely covers all affected people satisfactorily**, this is especially important when dealing with marginalised or minority groups. Protected pathways are especially important for anyone fearing discrimination or persecution.’ In one example, in South Sudan humanitarian actors have used a mix of consultation approaches such as satisfaction surveys, focus group discussions, listening groups, call-in radio shows, and community and town hall meetings to support the meaningful participation of vulnerable groups such as women, youth, people with disabilities in community governance structures in Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites (OCHA, 2019: 32-33). Women and youths are now democratically elected to be community representatives (*ibid.*).

Investment in ICT capacity in hard-to-reach areas with limited accessibility could foster more effective two-way communication (UN Peacebuilding, 2020: 16). UN Peacebuilding (2020: 16) highlights that ‘Various social media platforms could also be used for local civil society actors to informally report on project implementation and/or communicate situations at the local level, including opportunities and challenges, good practices and lessons learned in order to allow more effective community engagement’.

Recommendations include:

- **Undertaking ‘political economy analysis from below to better understand how institutions and authorities are perceived’ by marginalised groups** (Gaventa and Oswald, 2019: 9). They go on to highlight that ‘Understanding local context also means understanding cultural and social norms around authority, and the role of religious, military, traditional or other authorities’ (*ibid.*: 10).
- **Affected populations should be consulted to find out their needs and preferences** for engagement, communication and feedback channels, in particular to find out the barriers to access for specific vulnerable and marginalised groups (Smith, 201: 14).
- **Guidance and tools on engaging with marginalised and vulnerable people highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for meaningful participation in practice.** For example, see the tool on safe spaces in the UN Women intersectionality resource guide and toolkit (Monjurul Kabir et al., 2022); the tool ‘Better Consultations’ developed for actors engaging with women in fragile and conflict-affected states (UK Gender Action for Peace and Security network et al. nd); and the IASC guidelines on the participation of people with disabilities in humanitarian response (IASC 2019).
- **Daigle (2022: 21, 22) recommends seeking out existing CSOs already ‘working on inclusion** to avoid duplication of efforts or working at cross-purposes’, noting that ‘In displacement settings, such local and national CSOs have a deep, embedded knowledge of their context and related gendered norms, and they are already working on the self-defined priorities of affected communities and marginalised groups within them’
- **CDAC (2022: 18) recommend ‘taking a pluralistic approach which uses different mechanisms and engagement tools (e.g. hotlines, face-to-face engagement, broadcast media, social media) for engaging different groups.** Smith (2019: 14) highlight the importance of complementing technological platforms with ‘opportunities for

meaningful engagement through face-to-face channels and personal interactions' (Smith, 2019: 14).

Local leadership and action: long-term partnerships

Barbelet et al. (2021: 40) find that local leadership and action can be strengthened through multi-year initiatives that focus on strengthening equitable partnerships and capacity development. Enabling factors include: 'co-design process, a long-term lifespan and appropriate funding; when capacity assessments and strengthening are contextually prioritised by local and national actors and integrated into partnership and programme agreements; and when they include accountability measures for international partners' (*ibid.*). They list key initiatives with evidence of impact: 'the Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships programme, Islamic Relief's Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (STRIDE), Oxfam's ELNHA project, the SHAPE Framework and Shifting the Power initiatives, the Syrian Humanitarian Action Project and the Bridge Builder Model through the work of NEAR and through donor-funded long-term institutional capacity support for governments' (*ibid.*).

Participatory, qualitative research

The literature calls for 'more granular, embedded, qualitative research that is inspired by sociological and anthropological methods and gives displaced people ownership over the findings ... humanitarian analyses and assessments would do well to start from displaced people's own reading of how their lives are changing over time' (Daigle, 2022, focusing on understanding gender norm change). Osofisan and Keen (2019: 78) note that 'not everything that counts can be counted' and recommend 'Rich qualitative analysis – including of storytelling and anecdotes – combined with quantitative analysis' for deeper insights.

For example, the Empowered Aid multi-year participatory action research works with refugee women & girls to better prevent sexual exploitation & abuse. This feminist research 'recognizes women and girls as contextual safeguarding experts and engages them as co-producers of knowledge, supported to safely take an active role in asking and answering questions about their own lives'.¹⁵ In another example, research undertaken in Yemen by ACAPS has aimed to understand 'how the lives of average Yemenis continued under the conditions of war', and allowed issues to emerge, rather than set questions on pre-identified or assumed coping strategies (ACAPS 2022: 2). Interestingly this approach brought out different findings, with less of a focus than expected on remittances and humanitarian assistance.

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