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40th WEDC International Conference, Loughborough, UK, 2017LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES**Community engagement – a paradigm shift to WASH
programming in emergencies***Eva Niederberger*

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Community Participation is the backbone of Oxfam's approach to public health and one of its core strengths when responding to diseases outbreaks. The Ebola crisis in West Africa however revealed that public health programming is often adopting instructive approaches rather than building on the local expertise of affected communities. Oxfam's public health promotion team therefore revised current approaches to community mobilisation in WASH which prompted a paradigm shift towards greater community engagement. This paper provides an overview of the learning, adopted approach, and how this has shaped Oxfam's overall public health promotion strategy.

Introduction

Engaging with communities is critical when responding to WASH focused emergencies. This means to create a space to listen to disaster affected people, ensure that distinct needs are understood and inform the design and provision of services and facilities. Recent program reviews including Oxfam's response to the Ebola crisis revealed however that public health promotion often over relies on instructive "messaging" rather than building on local expertise. It also highlighted that standard response analysis and planning often don't reflect socio-cultural realities, epidemiological disease trends and socio-economic variables. And whilst participatory approaches are used to mobilise affected communities only little is done to understand the impact and adapt the response. In 2015-2016 Oxfam therefore supported several learning initiatives which prompted a paradigm shift from "community mobilisation" to "community engagement". Key learning included that a well defined framework and flexible model to community engagement are critical enablers to support program teams in the design of context-specific approaches to community engagement - and ultimately contribute to improved program quality. This paper highlights the learning when shifting towards a greater level of community engagement. It further intends to provide an insight into how this has shaped Oxfam's community engagement framework to date.

Hardware versus software: challenges to make community engagement work

Strong community participation is central to Oxfam's approach to public health emergencies. However, in practice we often experience various challenges to have communities shape the way we design and deliver services to affected communities, these include: socio-cultural differences between "outsiders" and "insiders", funding constraints, limited access to affected communities, and limited capacity and time to listen to affected people when a rapid response is necessary – to name just a few. In WASH programming the focus on hardware aspects such as water supply or access to hygiene items often further compromise the extent to which communities are effectively involved in the process of decision making. The emphasis on the visible and tangible aspect of WASH programs (hardware) is often driven by the inadequate interpretation of sector standards – inside and outside of Oxfam, the lack of clear evidence of the impact of hygiene promotion on behavior change, as well as the *branding* of hygiene promotion as "messaging around the distribution of hygiene items". As a result the role of engaging with communities (software) is often undermined which has an immediate effect on program quality and effectiveness. Ebola was a crisis that clearly highlighted that more needs to be done to get a diverse group of crisis affected people engaged in the

design, implementation and monitoring of public health activities. During the outbreak in West Africa the initial response strategy prioritized biomedical interventions to create enough capacity to treat patients. But only little attention was paid to community's coping mechanisms, information needs and traditional health seeking behavior. This top-down approach linked with poor quality of services fuelled people's fear and mistrust and created a barrier to prevent and contain the spread of Ebola Virus Disease.

Critical factors in developing the methodology

The development of clear principles and parameters to community engagement in WASH unfolded as an organic process rather than using a rigorous methodological protocol. Learning from past responses as well as the collaboration with others – either with technical experts from other sectors within Oxfam or practitioners outside of Oxfam– were important enablers.

Enabling frameworks to explore community engagement further

Guiding principles and minimum standards are central to ensure community engagement and participation are high on the agenda of our work. The development of Core Humanitarian standards was hereby an important step towards a more people-centred approach as they compel aid agencies to improve the quality of their support. These standards set nine commitments to ensure accountability to crisis affected populations. They highlight the role of participation, communication and feedback: “Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them” (*commitment 4*). Active participation in a humanitarian response is also echoed within the Sphere Standards around hygiene promotion: “Community mobilization is especially appropriate during disasters as the emphasis must be on encouraging people to take action to protect their health.” The section further highlights that the approach should be systematic drawing on what people know and do as well as the resources they have. At an organizational level, Oxfam's WASH strategy provides an enabling platform to engage with communities in humanitarian action and beyond. It promotes the importance of contextual analysis and aims to develop “clearer core models” to community engagement based on specific principles. These would entail the role of increased and culturally appropriate accountability to affected populations, the collaboration with others to generate evidences around community mobilization as well developing robust monitoring system to measure the quality of what we are doing. It further recognizes the need to develop a clear framework to community engagement which reflects the diversity of affected communities and the contexts we are working in.

Working with others

Following the peak of the Ebola crisis Oxfam's public health promotion team successfully obtained funding to support program learning around community engagement. One of the first initiatives of Oxfam's public health promotion team involved the facilitation of an interagency workshop on social mobilization in September 2015. This platform provided the opportunity for a group of practitioners and technical experts to reflect on some of the key issues experienced within the Ebola response across West Africa. Whilst it was challenging to agree on a commonly preferred terminology when we refer to meaningful ways to interact with affected communities, key outcomes entailed the definition of specific principles for community empowerment.

The discussion further highlighted the need to remember that a “community” is not static during the evolution of an emergency response. This is particularly important in view of a changing context, priorities and preferences affected communities have. It was therefore felt that we need to adopt a flexible approach and explore diverse models to community engagement. Considering that social mobilization is a discipline underpinned by a body of academic theory and evidence it was acknowledged that further research was required to understand how best we can engage with affected communities across different phases of an emergency response.

Learning from past responses

Another important step informing Oxfam's adopted new community engagement approach was to examine past responses for possible lessons learnt and recommendations. Resulting from the Ebola Response we compiled key lessons learnt and soon found that these can be applied to Oxfam's wider WASH programs – beyond disease outbreaks. In parallel the global public health promotion experts undertook a review of Oxfam's community engagement approach in Nepal following the earthquake response of 2015. It was

found that public health promotion teams have made extensive use of participatory approaches including social mapping, community meetings and action planning.

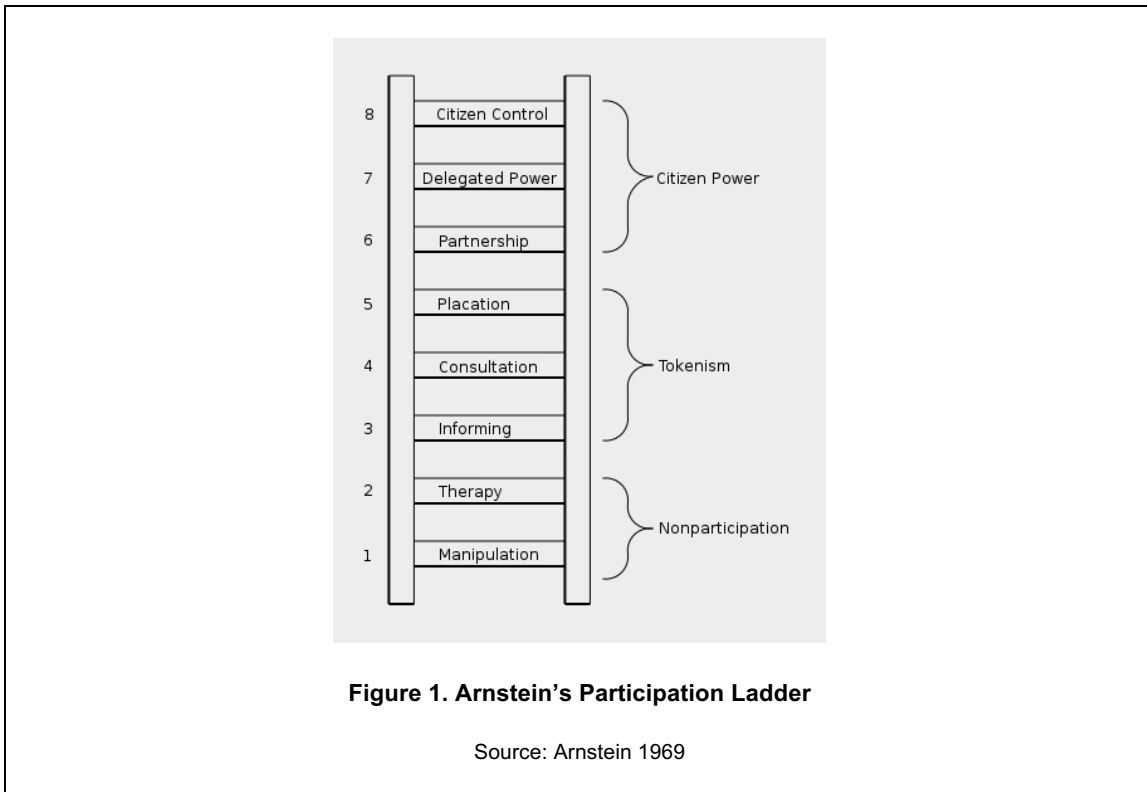
However the use of participatory approaches didn't necessarily result in meaningful participation as "it was more difficult for individuals and groups who were not closely associated with those ["formal community structures"] to be able to participate in decisions". As a result, the level of community participation within Oxfam's WASH response ranged most frequently between consultation and negotiation on decisions. The learning review revealed that community participation was most active and effective when it was planned, and coordinated, and contextual issues such as power dynamics were understood. In order to facilitate inclusive and meaningful participation the review suggests tailoring participatory approaches to different population segments. It also recommends the design and use of well defined framework which clearly outlines the expected outcomes of the intended participation work. This entails the critical aspect of measuring community participation in order to know whether the participatory model is culturally appropriate, effective and enables structurally underrepresented individuals or groups to play a decision-making role.

Measuring the "software" aspect of public health programs

Following the learning review in Nepal 2016 Oxfam's global Public Health Promotion and MEAL team (Monitoring, Evaluation Accountability and Learning) developed a tool to measure community participation. This involved critically examining Oxfam's previous definition of community participation in public health programming (Oxfam 2006). The definition was still found to be relevant, although the team aims that Oxfam's new approach to community participation further reveals the issue of insiders (*communities*) and outsiders (*agency*). The revised definition of community participation further seeks to build on distinct needs people have and to explore how best capacity, knowledge, resources and motivation of both (insider and outsider) can be combined. The emphasis is hereby on a collaborative process in which the organization learns from the affected community. This is an important principle given the fact that aid is often delivered under enormous pressure and as a result aid organizations often adopt a rather instrumental approach to achieve program objectives¹.

In Nepal, the team made some contextual adoption to Arnstein's participation ladder (Arnstein 1969) and it was found as useful starting point to develop criteria for measuring community participation. In Nepal the team used a simpler framing of the initial participation ladder, using *decoration* as second rung of the ladder. Similar to Arnstein's hierarchy of participation *decoration* equally indicates a level of non-participation referring to a stage in which "the group may be indirectly involved in decision but they are not fully aware of their rights, their possible involvement, or how decisions might affect them" (Oxfam 2016).

In order to narrow down possible indicators to measure community participation various steps of the participation ladder were discussed against the different phases of an emergency response. These phases range generally from the initial days after a disaster up to six months before exiting or transitioning into recovery programming. The ladder was further used as proxy tool to explore the level of community participation with country teams in the Middle East. Whilst it was straightforward for the teams to relate their work to the different steps of the participation ladder, it was more challenging to translate some of the concepts into program reality. For example it was difficult for the teams to differentiate between partnership and delegated power which represents in Arnstein's approach higher degrees of *citizen power*. It was also problematic for the teams to think about examples of *decoration* whilst it was easier to associate some of the program experience to a certain form of *manipulation*. However, practitioner's experience in WASH emergencies suggests that most of the participation work is initiated at the information stage - which goes beyond the level of non-participation. Similar to the findings of the Nepal learning review, consultation was found as critical step when facilitating participation within Oxfam's WASH programs. However closing the feedback loop and providing, especially the most, vulnerable people with the opportunity to play an active role in the planning stage and lead on community action is often more difficult to implement. This is particularly the case in contexts in which participation challenges formally established power holders and structures.



This might also be one of the shortcomings when applying Arnstein’s approach to participation in a humanitarian setting as it has a rather political connotation based on the conceptualisation that “participation is a categorical term for power” (Arnstein, p.216) Whilst it is true that participation implies the re-distribution of power at different levels and community engagement “may wittingly or unwittingly involve outside aid providers in local power dynamics, controversies and divisions” Oxfam’s understanding of participation is based on an apolitical approach providing aid on the basis of needs alone (Obrecht et. al, p.17).

Furthermore, Arnstein’s understanding of community participation does reflect a linear relation between non-participation and citizen control – with citizen control held up as goal of participation. Community participation within Oxfam’s approach to community participation puts the emphasis rather on the process than on the outcome. The aim is also to adopt a realistic view about the extent to which participation can work across different phases of a response. For example in some of the response settings, especially in the initial onset of a crisis, it is vital to ensure that culturally relevant information is shared – not only with formal stakeholders but as well with socially underrepresented groups.

Defining parameters of community engagement

In early 2016, resulting from program learning and reflecting on existing models such as hygiene promotion in emergencies (*Source WASH cluster*), we developed a model of community engagement in WASH. Interestingly the parameters of the model were developed without having yet defined what community engagement in WASH exactly means. However it was clear for us that there are certain components which are essential to promote the control of affected communities over the impact of the response on them. Important to note is that community engagement is seen as integral part of public health promotion and hereby contributing to behavior change of affected communities. It is not a substitute for hygiene promotion which continues to be vital for Oxfam’s WASH work in emergencies.

Within the community engagement model, community participation does constitute the core of our interaction with communities. However, the focus on specific parameters within the model is principally informed by the context itself. For example in some disasters it will be particularly important to strengthen the aspect of communication and feedback, whilst in others a greater emphasis will be placed on training and capacity building to develop community capacity for decision making and action.

When presenting the model to public health practitioners during Oxfam’s global emergency forum in May 2016, the technical discussion highlighted the need to develop a well defined framework reflecting on the parameters of the community engagement model. This should further entail a clear definition and objective to illustrate what we try to achieve with community engagements as well as priority action over different phases of an emergency response.

Practice matters: tailoring community engagement to the context

In line with our core strategic objective to increase community engagement in WASH the aim over the past year was to introduce the model and guidelines across different programs and make it context-specific. This involved specific community engagement workshops with programme teams in Lebanon and Iraq. Given the fact that communities have distinct needs which evolve throughout a response, the discussion with field practitioners soon revealed the need to broaden the spectrum of community engagement beyond WASH. This was particularly relevant for the programme teams in Iraq as targeted cash assistance often provoked tensions and conflicts among the affected population. In order to ensure inclusive and accountable programming it was therefore crucial to identify a joint approach among food security, WASH and protection teams to communicate and interact with local communities. In both programme settings, the contextualisation of the model also stressed the importance of ongoing analysis. In Lebanon for example we found that existing “community profiles” provided a useful entry point to capitalise further on community’s capacity and preferences. This meant to develop a systematic approach to explore power dynamics at community level and to make effective use of anthropological, epidemiological and socio-economic information. Adopting the model to community engagement to different contexts also highlighted the relevance of exploring a flexible approach reflecting the diversity of the affected population. For example, in Lebanon we felt that our emphasis should be primarily placed on building the capacity of the affected population to strengthen community led actions. In Iraq, the programmatic focus required to focus primarily on designing culturally appropriate information, dialogue and accountability mechanisms.

Lessons learnt

- The paper might already reflect the variety of interpretations of what community engagement entails such as community participation, interaction and dialogue. These terms are not interchangeable as each of them refers to a different dimension when working in partnership with affected communities. A clear definition of community engagement is therefore vital to communicate to others what the expected outcome is. It will support public health practitioners to be more explicit about resources they require to achieve the outcome and have a positive impact on Oxfam’s WASH programs. Defining what community engagement means will also help to bring community engagement to scale in future public health responses.
- Bridging the gap between theory and practice continues to be challenging and will require ongoing technical support. The design and implementation of capacity building initiatives including training material will be critical to enable programme teams in tailoring our community engagement to the specific context.
- The past experience revealed how critical funding is when developing a new approach to Oxfam’s public health work. It helped to undertake learning reviews, facilitating inter-agency networking, supported capacity building of programme teams as well as the recruitment of an anthropologist – essential steps in shaping community engagement further. In order to consolidate our understanding of community engagement further resources in terms of funding and technical expertise are required.
- Using an organic approach rather than following a methodological protocol was appropriate as we were able to incorporate new findings and learning from ongoing capacity building initiatives, programme reviews and actual response work.
- In many programs community engagement will require a coherent cross-sector approach to maximise the impact on affected communities. It is therefore important that our work is closely coordinated with others.

Next steps

In the near future Oxfam will facilitate a community of practice involving public health promotion specialist, MEAL teams and engineers to identify opportunities to trial the newly developed tools and

framework. It will involve further planning to ensure that the design and delivery of community engagement is monitored in order to understand its effect on programme quality.

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Notes

¹ This approach implies that the outsider assigns specific roles to the affected population - strengthening community's capacity is not considered as objective in itself (ALNAP groupe participation handbook, WP38).

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