

# Participation and engagement: a discussion about power

## Key Messages:

- Participation and engagement of community members in a programme is a positive step in the practice of international development. But, how programmes engage their constituents can reinforce transactionality – where the building of trust is simply a means to an end.
- Power is not recognised as central to all relationship-building. As long as the distribution of power between programme constituents and implementers remains uneven, it will be difficult for programmes to have meaningful relationships with communities.
- Redressing power as part of engagement would entail being clear about what a programme can deliver, and making space for not just a response to the proposal but also the ability to reject a programme, and then collaboratively making changes towards a common goal.

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A community group meeting  
in Karrova Village, Uganda.  
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## Introduction

Development programmes tend to have constituent feedback mechanisms and community engagement built into their activities. This is good practice, especially when programmes are being implemented in complex contexts, such as those affected by conflict, fragility and violence.<sup>1</sup> The rationale that underpins constituent engagement in programmes tends to have two aspects: (1) programme effectiveness and responsiveness to context, and (2) dignity and accountability for affected populations.

There is therefore an assumed causal link between engagement and these two goals, with particular emphasis on programme effectiveness, and the building of trust and relationships a welcome, but additional, outcome of engagement activities. However, this conceptualisation promotes a transactional understanding of development, where **instead of putting relationships with constituents at the centre, they become a means to an end: building trust in order to promote more effective programming or deliver on accountability promises.** The result is that engagement is often one-sided. It is not a relationship but a transaction. One party (the development programme) engages the other (the programme constituents, or larger community), and then gets to choose the ways in which feedback is allowed, who participates, and what actions, if any, will ultimately be taken. The other party, in turn, grants the necessary level of access and participates as required in order to receive the goods and services on offer.

By viewing participation and engagement as a means to an end, programmes sidestep the issue of power. Discussions of power barely feature as part of the issue. Yet, shifting the framing of constituent engagement from transactional or process-orientated to one that is relational requires a conversation about power. At the moment, engagement is just one pillar among many in a programme, and **any problem encountered with constituent engagement or feedback mechanisms is looked at with a procedural lens. If an approach is not working, it can be redesigned.** For example, if community members feel a programme is not inclusive enough, then new categories of people may be added as target groups, and the engagement strategy is revised to contain more consultations. Yet, genuine participation of communities in programming requires organisations to resist the instinct to resolve instances of negative feedback, and, instead, look deeper at how power can be redistributed. This means reviewing the ways in which programmes conceptualise and practice engagement and community participation activities.

## How processes of engagement are designed and implemented

The ways in which development actors go about deciding who will participate in what aspects of a programme can create a false sense of security around inclusion. The current 'how'

of engagement is inclusion in its most basic and quantitative form, fit for logframe indicators and audits, but not necessarily reflective of how programmes should engage with people to bring about change. Inclusion and fairness are *experienced*. They are personal reactions to how a process or outcome feels – often as a response to how power is exerted. Programmes often fail to replicate these experiences, focusing instead on processes that equate feedback with complaints and are technical fixes to those complaints, as opposed to actions to strengthen accountability (Jean 2017).

The onus is on transparent communication of what has been decided, and on providing proof that members of pre-established categories have been consulted. Those groups that are considered to be more vulnerable or have more needs get more resources, or everyone gets the same. This information is then communicated frequently and loudly, and the level of engagement of community members in that process is mixed. Certain programmes will convene groups as part of consultations in the resource allocation process; at other times, community members will be appointed to decision-making committees. But, in trying to use objective methods to try and achieve something subjective – the experience of fairness and inclusivity – programmes are sidestepping the issue of power and the opportunity to redistribute it. The status quo remains that one side, the programme, decides what to give to another group of people, and, ultimately, has final say over their level of participation in the process.

Communities are not homogenous entities, which presents a practical challenge for programmes in their engagement activities. The most common approach to resolving this issue is through categorisation and targeting. Individuals from communities are labelled as belonging to a distinct group, such as female-headed households, ethnic minorities, or persons with disabilities. A programme judges whether and how to involve that category of people. However, people do not always identify with these categories as a marker of their identity. They do not necessarily reflect their *lived experience*, and being confined to an identity group, decided externally, can lead to disengagement and a sense of exclusion (Levine 2014). The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has found that this was particularly the case in contexts where people's most important identity was linked to their unique experience during conflict. For example, in northern Uganda, even long after the official end of the conflict, people's recalling of their experience of conflict continued to impact their behaviour and the ways in which they made sense of their lives and identities (Amanela *et al.* 2020).

In bringing in nuance and complexity about people's individual and group experience, attempts to address the issue of how to include people tend to mean further definitions, categories and labels. Although this may seem the simplest option for implementers, and fills the perceived requirement of having someone from each pre-defined group represented, SLRC has

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1 See evaluations and analyses from the [World Bank](#), [WHO](#), and [OECD](#) calling for increased community engagement in order to increase the quality of programming (IEG 2018; WHO 2020; OECD 2007).

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shown that inclusion was often not experienced in this way by research participants (Cummings and Paudel 2019; Amanela *et al.* 2020). **In considering who to engage with at community level, programmes might find it useful to think about the capacities of groups and individuals for change** (McCullough and Toru 2019). Most development programmes aim for some sort of behavioural change, and so must ask themselves who has the power to impact this change or drive the problem at hand in one direction or another.

### **Who to include: the capacity-for-change approach**

An alternative way forward may be to ask programmes to be more strategic and politically savvy, instead of representative in a quantitative, clinical sense. This means moving past processes and procedures to look instead at where power is located, and adapt accordingly.

The capacity to contribute to change is power. However, currently, the power that development programmes hold (in deciding who to involve, target and engage with) is treated separately from the question of who in the community holds power over desired changes. What if programmes brought these together? This would allow programmes to work with how change happens and support these pathways. By understanding [capacity](#) as being about relationships (Denney *et al.* 2017; Calderon and Englebert 2019; Schomerus 2021), development problems are viewed through the wider lens of how community members relate to one another and what the pathways (or networks) of change are, regardless of an external actor such as a programme. This, in turn, can lead to more context-appropriate activities that involve the people whose relationships are central to a problem, and the solution to that problem.

This approach was attempted within [teenage pregnancy programmes in Sierra Leone](#), when a mapping of capacity and power led to programme actors turning their attention to men and boys and other key influencers. Previous attention to girls alone was to focus on the group with the least power of any actor in avoiding pregnancy. Combining this insight with principles of adaptive management allowed programmes to place more decision-making power with people closest to the problem: members of the community and programme constituents. By being more strategic about with whom to engage, programmes can better create enabling environments for working adaptively as well as moving closer to meaningful relationships with communities (Castillejo and Buell 2020).

The suggestion to move from identity-based categorisation to looking at capacity for change does not come without its problems. Going with the grain on current power dynamics may mean that a programme forgoes the opportunity to contribute to transformative change: set power hierarchies may be reinforced instead of challenged. **Optically, identity categories are a more audit-proof way of showing inclusivity and fairness. It is much more difficult to demonstrate that a programme is sticking to these values when working instead with capacity for change.** Yet, a pivot towards capacity does not mean forgetting about those individuals and groups

who do not hold power. Instead, it could represent a step in redistributing power from programmes to their constituents, and letting those closest to the issue at hand decide who to involve in its resolution.

Uneven power relationships cannot be remedied or designed away through a process or system, and so fairness continues to be elusive. In fact, the experience of fairness or unfairness is often related to the distribution of power and **it might be futile to try and engineer the experience of fairness in a system, a power distribution, that is already inherently unfair.** So how does a programme hand over some of that power? By building genuine relationships and making this the centre of all efforts on engagement and community participation. These relationships then become central to being adaptive to a particular problem, context, and people's needs and perceptions.

### **What issues are being addressed through constituent engagement?**

Development agendas and programme priorities do not always line up with what constituents think is important. But in order for programmes to be effective, they must have the capacity to understand community perceptions and expectations as well as needs. SLRC research on [state legitimacy](#) has shown the importance of identifying salience in issues, which can be applied in this case. When looking at state legitimacy, we found that services that (re-)produced contested distribution arrangements tended to be more salient (McCullough 2020). Therefore power – specifically who holds it and over what – needs to be at the forefront of a discussion of what issues programmes should address.

Due in part to a tension between what is important to communities and pre-established goals of development programmes, it can be difficult for development actors to consistently [act on information](#) from feedback and engagements to adapt their programme to what people find is most salient (Buell *et al.* 2020). There is a gap between understanding what is salient and the limits of a development programme, but it is not often articulated or recognised in community engagement efforts. Instead, listening is structured as a one-way system with very little space for response or the ability to reject an offer. In this sense, the level of participation in programmes can sometimes resemble an ultimatum, but where 'reject' is disengagement and disappointing programme results.

**Meaningful engagement entails being clear about what can be delivered by a programme, and making space for not just a response to the proposal but also the ability to reject it and then collaboratively make changes towards a common goal.**

In addition to moving the needle on power equity, this approach also more explicitly recognises the agency of communities and programme constituents. Ultimately, changes in a society, and in a community, are going to happen whether or not a programme is present – so a programme needs to find ways to provide its resources (money, goods, human capital) to accelerate change in the right direction on an issue of importance.

### Tying it all together

Feedback and engagement processes, common to programmes in extractive forms, are disempowering and cement a transactional understanding of development. Transactions involve an exchange. Yet, in most development programmes, that exchange does not shift power. **Instead, practice continues to be about one party engaging the other, offering time-limited agency, and inviting a community to participate in a process in which it is granted only a finite**

**role. The result is that agency, fairness and inclusion are not truly experienced, and the impact of the programme can become limited as expectations are not met, and root causes of issues remain unaddressed.** Moving our understanding of development from one of transactions to one of relationships – from identity-based to one based on capacity for change – means putting issues of power at the centre, with the aim of taking steps towards redistributing power.

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