

MODULE 1 THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY AND BENEFICIARY ENGAGEMENT

This module will focus on the purposes and benefits of engaging with communities and beneficiaries during project assessment, design, and implementation, as well as the risks involved if not.

Purposes of Engagement

There are six main purposes of community and beneficiary engagement:

1. Empowerment of assisted populations

First purpose is to empower the populations we are trying to support. Assisting these communities and beneficiaries is not just a question of providing them with dignity, we want them to be partners in their own success.

2. Improve Project Design

Typically, the historical trajectory of humanitarian practice shows that the more frequently you engage with communities and beneficiaries, the better your project design will be. This is because coordination and communication encourage mutual respect and take into account the special needs of marginalized populations such as women, children, the elderly or the disabled.

3. Better Donor Support

By getting to know communities and beneficiaries, you will get better support because you can demonstrate that the aid you are giving them is determined by their requests and needs, not the needs you assume they have.

4. Promote Social Social

Mutual communication ensures that you can avoid your presence being disruptive or negatively impacting the lives of host communities and beneficiaries.

5. Improve Social Security

The penultimate purpose of community and beneficiary engagement is that it can improve local social security. Through engagement, you can become more aware of the movements and potential threats from other settlements or population groups not benefiting from your intervention. Also, when visiting communities and beneficiaries

designed to receive assistance, they more likely want to provide protection for you and the aid services you are offering them.

6. Improve Ownership and Sustainability of Aid Delivery

It's difficult and in many ways unethical to impose aid delivery, no matter how altruistic your motives, from the outside without the full support or consent of the community you're trying to help.

Benefits of Beneficiary and Community Engagement

There are several potential benefits of engaging well with communities and beneficiaries:

1. Improved mutual security respect, and acceptance

On the one hand, as previously mentioned, the community is often an important part of the security for your team. Whether you're monitoring or running an operation, having engagement with the community will improve the localised acceptance of your operation and ease of implementation.

2. Enhanced interaction with communities

Talking to communities and beneficiaries will also give you a greater understanding of what is and what is not culturally appropriate. Often when we provide humanitarian goods, supplies or services to communities, we use standard specifications from things like the *emergency items catalogue*. It is more useful, however, to truly *understand and appreciate what goods and services are culturally appropriate*, for example the type of food people eat, the tools and utensils they use, and so on. This will improve project design and approval.

Similarly, you will have a *better needs assessment* if you engage with the community to understand their views on what their priorities are in regard to your project implementation. Furthermore, if there are implementation issues in regard to the topography of the location or the type of people you are helping, the community can help you navigate these in your project design and make your program much more efficient by helping you to mitigate any potential problems in advance.

Issues with Non-Engagement

There are several issues that can arise should you choose not to engage with communities and beneficiaries. These include the following:

Perhaps the most significant risk is that lack of consultation and communication fosters a *top-down assessment based upon your own assumptions and positionality*. In this case, you are likely to design and implement a project based on the erroneous notion that you know what is best for that community. This is not only paternalistic and neocolonialist, it also ignores the agency of the people you are trying to assist.

Furthermore, by not engaging with the communities you are also more likely to *reduce your project's effectiveness and risk not being inclusive or relevant* with regard to the project design. For instance, goods and activities implemented may not be what communities actually need. If you want to make sure that your project has a positive impact and is relevant to the needs of the community then you must engage with them.

Finally, there is unfortunately a tendency with absent community consultation that the *project design is consequently driven by the agenda of the donor or the agency* you work for. This can be problematic as it infringes upon the core humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence.