

# Community engagement in UK Aid Connect consortia:

## Definitions and challenges



## About the Learning from Consortia programme

The Learning from Consortia programme brings together 13 consortia formed by diverse organisations to facilitate collective learning and support consortia to deliver their outcomes. The programme aims to learn from their experiences and insights to draw out good practice in consortium working, as well as helping organisations and donors understand how they can best support consortia.

## About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We unite and support a diverse network of over 450 civil society organisations and allies to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We also deliver a range of services to help organisations be more effective and improve the quality and impact of their work.

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## Jointly published by:

Bond, Society Building, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL. UK Registered Charity No. 1068839. Company Registration No. 3395681 (England and Wales)

The Partnering Initiative, 21B Park End Street, Oxford, OX1 1HU. UK Registered Charity No. 1154259. Company Registration No. 8528402 (England and Wales)

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## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Andrea Berardi with contribution from Carla Benham.

We would also like to acknowledge the 13 UK Aid Connect consortia who are involved in this programme: Approaches in Complex and Challenging Environments for Sustainable Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ACCESS); Advancing SRHR through the Promotion of Innovation and Resilience (ASPIRE)\*; Aswat Horra (Free Voices); Civil Society Collective; Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID); The Development Alternative; Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID); Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN); Inclusion Works; Innovation to Inclusion (i2i); The Partnership to End Child Exploitation (PACE)\*\*; Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation (PROTECT); Smart Peace.

\*The ASPIRE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Building resiliency and gender equality of the most marginalised communities through multi-sector approaches to delivering quality sexual and reproductive health and rights'

\*\*The PACE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Effective approaches to ending the worst forms of child labour in fragile contexts (EAPAC)'

The Learning from Consortia programme is led by Bond, The Partnering Initiative, and an academic advisory board, and is funded by UK aid. Due to the FCDO's cuts, the programme will be closing early in July 2021. [Read our statement here.](#)

Find out more about the programme by visiting: [www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia](http://www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-from-consortia)

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# Executive summary

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What does 'community engagement' mean in practice, and how have UK Aid Connect (UKAC) consortia navigated this complex process through these turbulent times?

Community engagement is not a simple term to define. There are many variations depending on who is involved, from the consortium, its organisations, the donor and the communities themselves. There are a number of existing typologies of community engagement that can help a consortium navigate which method is most appropriate. UKAC consortia have embraced a variety of approaches to ensure they stay engaged with the communities they are working with.

UKAC consortia have faced significant challenges, from the Covid-19 pandemic to funding cuts, political and military coups to natural disasters. These have had a big impact on UKAC consortia's work with communities and have led them to adapt their approaches significantly to sustain their commitments.

This report shares six key principles that UKAC consortia have utilised for co-creating effective interventions with communities. These principles can be used throughout a consortium's lifespan, though it is important the approach to community engagement is discussed and planned for during the co-creation stage. It is also critical that all stakeholders, organisations and communities are able to contribute and participate in the planning.

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# Defining community engagement

UKAC was launched in 2017 in recognition that poverty reduction is a complex and interconnected challenge. At its centre is a belief that consortium working can bring creativity and innovation through pooling ideas, sharing risk, combining skills and resources, extending reach and implementing efficiency savings, while generating a more effective and proactive response. A key component of UKAC has been the requirement to integrate strong community engagement processes within programme design, delivery and evaluation:



To ensure no one is left behind, strong engagement beyond traditional [high-income country] development actors is critical. This includes engagement of [low-income country] actors in consortia, but importantly it also needs to include meaningful and consistent engagement with beneficiary communities.<sup>1</sup>



There are two main challenges: first, defining the term 'beneficiary communities'; and second, to understand what is meant by 'meaningful and consistent engagement'. Traditionally, a 'community' was defined by the people located within the place they lived. However, membership of this geographical unit is a shortcut for representing more profound aspects of 'community'. The assumption is that if you lived in the same place, then you would have something in common with those individuals local to you. This is usually associated with individuals sharing common perspectives and experiences, engaging in joint action and/or having strong social ties around family, friendship and identity. With increasing mobility and digital methods of social interaction, membership of a community is no longer confined to distinct geographical boundaries. This loose definition of what constitutes a particular community (its characteristics and membership) also means identifying and naming a community is often in the eye of the beholder and emerges for specific agendas. In international development, engaging with 'communities' rather than 'individuals' provides a sense of significance and scale, and enables the identification of distinctive characteristics that help target interventions. For example, UKAC consortia often define communities in terms of levels of marginalisation, such as LGBTQI+

communities or communities where women are unable to access safe and affordable abortions.

## Existing definitions and typologies

Over recent years, there has been an increase in terms trying to distinguish the nuanced understandings of community engagement strategy. These are just a few examples:

### ► DFID's (now FCDO's) 'beneficiary feedback':

'A beneficiary feedback mechanism (BFM) is a tool designed to gather and respond to the views of recipients of aid, often called beneficiaries. By responding to the views of aid recipients, organisations can improve or evaluate their projects and be held accountable for project implementation. Some other ways of describing them may be helpful: a tool designed to gather and respond to the views of beneficiaries; a way of increasing the participation and ownership of beneficiaries; an opportunity for organisations to improve or evaluate their projects and be held accountable for project implementation; a way to ensure activities are being delivered which address and meet beneficiary needs; a way of capturing issues, gathering ideas and listening to beneficiaries so that project work can be adapted if needed; a chance for real time adaptation of projects – this requires projects to be designed in a way that allows for flexibility and adaptation; a means to improve empowerment, accountability, and transparency.'<sup>2</sup>

### ► UNICEF's 'Communication for Development':

'Communication for Development (C4D) goes beyond providing information. C4D involves understanding people, their beliefs and values, the social and cultural norms that shape their lives. It involves engaging communities and listening to adults and children as they identify problems, propose solutions and act upon them. Communication for development is seen as a two-way process for sharing ideas and knowledge using a range of communication tools and approaches that empower individuals and communities to take actions to improve their lives.'<sup>3</sup>

► **UNOCHA's 'Community Engagement':**

'Community Engagement is a two-way dialogue between crisis-affected communities, humanitarian organizations and, where possible, within and between communities. It should enable affected people to meet their different needs, address their vulnerabilities and build on their pre-existing capacities.'<sup>4</sup>

► **The World Bank's 'community-driven development':**

'Community-driven development (CDD) programs operate on the principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and enhanced local capacity. Experience has shown that when given clear and transparent rules, access to information, and appropriate technical and financial support, poor communities can effectively organize to identify community priorities and address local problems by working in partnership with local governments and other institutions to build small-scale infrastructure and deliver basic services.'<sup>5</sup>

These examples are characterised by establishing a two-way exchange of information (to and from communities) in order to co-design and adapt, with communities, more effective interventions that build trust with communities and meet their needs, along with enabling agency and ensuring accountability. However, a recent shift towards promoting the term 'community engagement' over other terms such as 'beneficiary feedback' emphasises a more active role for communities in decision making. In explaining this shift, the Red Cross/Red Crescent (2019) states:

“ [Community Engagement and Accountability] is the new name for beneficiary communication or “Ben Coms”. This change acknowledges that communities and people affected by natural and man-made disasters are not passive “beneficiaries” or “recipients” of humanitarian assistance, but active agents in their own development, preparedness, relief and recovery. (p13)<sup>6</sup>

Tandon, Singh, Clover and Hall (2016) summarise this shift succinctly:

“ Engagement is the process of building relationships with people and putting those relationships to work to accomplish shared goals, i.e. involving those who are at the heart of the change we wish to see. (p28)<sup>7</sup>

There has therefore been a move to apply the following basic steps when communicating with communities.<sup>8</sup>



**1. Initial communication to communities:**

Where organisations proactively share information with communities about who they are and what they are doing in the community, including project objectives, timelines, who/how people will benefit, expected behaviour and conduct of project staff and volunteers, and contact details if anyone has any questions or concerns. This transparency means organisations are more accountable, trust is built, and community members know how they can benefit, participate and contribute to the project. This communication needs to be provided in a way that is accessible and understood by everyone in the community, requiring a variety of communication channels and repetition. Organisations need to monitor and check information is actually reaching people and being understood.



**2. Communication from communities:**

Where community members share information with the implementing organisation through consultation, formal and informal feedback channels, with the objective that organisations then take action, make changes and adapt in response to this engagement and feedback.



**3. Closing the loop back to communities:**

Where organisations communicate back to communities what action they have taken in response to the engagement, or if they can't take action/make changes, the reasons why. Again, organisations need to use accessible communication channels and the communication needs to take place in a timely fashion to demonstrate responsiveness to the initial feedback.

This captures the shift from single to double and, eventually, to triple loop learning in the engagement process.<sup>9</sup>

1. **Single loop learning** optimises existing action based on feedback ('doing the thing right').
2. **Double loop learning** identifies and builds understanding around the causes of why an intervention may not be working through dialogue with communities, and then developing a different, more appropriate approach ('doing the right thing').
3. **Triple loop learning** explores values and reasons why organisations do what they do, and radically transforms systems, processes and impacts ('transformation').

When confronted with the complex challenges of consortium working within the UKAC programme, there is a strong case for moving beyond 'beneficiary feedback'

to community participation that is not just about ‘consultation’ or ‘informing’. This means being aware of the different typologies of community participation in an initiative (Diagram 1 below).

These are not hard-and-fast distinctions, and there is a need to consider the many variations on these that are possible in practice. For example, there is the danger of overwhelming communities with requests for input without appropriate compensation for their time and energy. Community members and local stakeholders are quick to see when the engagement process is not genuine.<sup>10</sup> So, without appropriate resourcing and long-term commitment to address community needs, sometimes the most appropriate approach is to limit the level of engagement.

Table 1 (overleaf) provides an overview of the types of groups engaged and approaches to engagement that have been adopted by a range of UKAC consortia. Although some consortia directly engage with communities in highly participatory and ‘co-creative’ approaches, the focus of others is directed at types of stakeholders beyond communities, such as civil society organisations (CSOs).

There have been calls for a significant shift away from top-down decision making led by experts (usually foreign to the country of intervention) towards strengthening partners in lower-income countries and communities’ capacity for adaptive management through the enhancement of local skills. This can help partners take the lead in finding long-term sustainable solutions to their own development challenges.

**Diagram 1: Typologies of community participation in development initiatives**



Source: adapted from Pretty, 1994<sup>11</sup> and Arnstein, 1969<sup>12</sup>

**Table 1: Overview of who is engaged and the approaches to engagement adopted by UKAC consortia**

Consortia	Who is engaged	Approaches to engagement
<b>Approaches in Complex and Challenging Environments for Sustainable Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ACCESS)</b>	'Marginalised and under-served populations living within complex and challenging environments that have unmet sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) needs'	Community-led programming, preparedness, and advocacy, using proven participatory and leadership approaches to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ work with communities to define, characterise and prioritise their concerns to inform how activities are selected and implemented</li> <li>▶ co-design and pilot interventions in dynamic settings with groups who have been marginalised</li> <li>▶ incorporate active feedback loops in consortium work</li> </ul>
<b>Advancing SRHR through the Promotion of Innovation and Resilience (ASPIRE)</b>	Community influencers, such as community health workers, with the power to shape social systems and social norms that limit access to SRHR	A programme designed through consultative and participatory process conducted with stakeholders representing and supporting programme beneficiaries using human-centred design  Quantitative and qualitative beneficiary feedback informs programme evaluation, learning and adaptation
<b>Civil Society Collective</b>	CSOs and CSO communities of practice	Supporting a network of specialist communities to be effective mechanisms for collective action and collaboration by developing group peer-learning strategies linked to events, training, and information outputs
<b>Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID)</b>	Faith leaders, local education managers, teachers, religious minorities	Grass-roots stakeholder collaboration, involving religious minority groups (often with a gender focus), educational managers and teachers in order to understand context, develop a 'needs assessment' and influence policies and programmes
<b>The Development Alternative</b>	Youth CSOs and youth volunteers	Youth-led, tech-enabled community engagement approach where volunteers engage young people and community members to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ identify problems and solutions in existing livelihoods programming</li> <li>▶ identify solutions to unmet needs and priorities</li> <li>▶ demonstrate the effectiveness of youth-led, community-driven approaches</li> </ul>
<b>Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID)</b>	Populations who have been marginalised, including LGBTQI+ populations and people with disabilities	Community-led prioritisation and action planning through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ sense-making workshops</li> <li>▶ identifying unmet needs and data gaps that affect populations who have been marginalised</li> <li>▶ a Community Reporter Networker, enabling real-time community-led data</li> <li>▶ COMPASS – a real-time community complaints and feedback tracker that is shaping programme design</li> <li>▶ An inclusion approach grounded by a Gender, Inclusion, Power and Politics context analysis framework</li> </ul>



Consortia	Who is engaged	Approaches to engagement
<b>Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN)</b>	Faith leaders and faith communities	Promoting progressive and research-informed change in social and cultural norms through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ online and face-to-face training</li> <li>▶ school competitions</li> <li>▶ photographic competitions</li> </ul>
<b>Inclusion Works</b>	People with disabilities, disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and employers	Undertaking participatory research and case studies to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ build evidence and insight into the experiences of people with disabilities to understand better the barriers they face in entering formal employment</li> <li>▶ support DPOs and people with disabilities in taking a leading role in analysing change and promoting effective solutions</li> </ul>
<b>Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation (PROTECT)</b>	CSOs, human rights defenders (HRDs) and independent media organisations	Extensive capacity-building programme delivered to CSOs, HRDs and independent media organisations in public data access and use, legal rights, protection against attack, sustainable business plans, information and awareness-raising campaigns
<b>Smart Peace</b>	Conflict-affected communities and conflict actors, including local community peace groups	Strengthening local community conflict resolution practices and enhancing coordination between different levels of government and between government, militias and communities on reconciliation and reintegration

Historically, working with in-country partners and communities in development projects has focused much more on delivering an immediate 'development outcome' (such as the number of women educated, number of food parcels delivered, number of individuals that have been taken above the poverty line). This has been conducted through prescriptive 'command-and-control' interventions, rather than supporting local people to work through challenges themselves. Reasons for this include the short timeframe that many of these projects run in, which restricts innovative learning approaches and the development of skills that take time to grow, as well as the agendas of funding bodies.

Changing this requires a shift in the international development mindset, moving away from dependency on past solutions and trained behaviours and instead freeing participants to respond uniquely to unique situations.<sup>13</sup> Armitage, Marschke and Plummer (2008) propose that sharing learning and knowledge for adaptive (co-)management should 'create enabling

conditions for learning which... involve a concern with issues of power, culture, institutions, worldviews and values' (p96).<sup>14</sup> Also, as Eade (2007) points out, real capacity is not built unless it contributes to enabling participants themselves to change their own realities.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly recognised by UKAC:



Genuine collaborative consortia are not so easy to bring into existence or control. For all proposed partnerships, the roles of each partner and their contribution to delivery of the programme must be clearly defined. It must also be made clear how the consortia will learn and improve its own operation. There must be clear mechanisms in place to enable beneficiaries to participate in the design, management, implementation and review of the work.<sup>16</sup>



UKAC consortia are transforming the approach to community engagement. Many have reported how 'community engagement' is not simply a separate, two-way communication component for gaining 'beneficiary feedback' on project implementation, as originally promoted by the donor. Instead, whole programmes are co-designed and co-implemented with communities:<sup>17</sup>

“

*[We aim for community participation] throughout – at different levels – from the research, to the way communities will be involved in designing services, improving services, and delivering some of the services...*

”

“

*It's actually been really exciting to see and work with our consortium partners around how we do really take community feedback and integrate it into this whole programme cycle, and how we work effectively with our communities. We take a very evidence-led lens towards identifying the most marginalised and working with them in an intersectional way. So, we work with a lot of specialist organisations who have a lot of experience working with the communities we're working with. And that has kind of led our programming approach. And then now that we're into... [our] implementation, we're very much working to develop our ongoing community feedback mechanisms.*

”

These sentiments capture the wider societal shift in organisational management. UKAC consortia are implementing collaborative, contextual, community-driven approaches to programme design and delivery. Historically, just like any other organisation based in high-income countries, development organisations modelled their management in ways that controlled and curtailed creativity, innovation and collaboration. Instead, highly innovative consortia are distributing creativity through a bottom-up, participatory process. Communities are leading in innovation and creation, so programmes can readily adapt to their contexts and needs:

“

*If we had to define the approach to the consortium, it is a dialogical approach, and is about working with those on the ground, doing participatory programming to learn from them and then develop evidence that can also feed back into what they're doing. And do that in a kind of iterative way, in a dialogical way and reflective way throughout the consortium.*

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In other words, consortia have embraced a dialogical approach with communities and local stakeholders to help them address complex challenges and be able to work through them in a constructive and generative manner:

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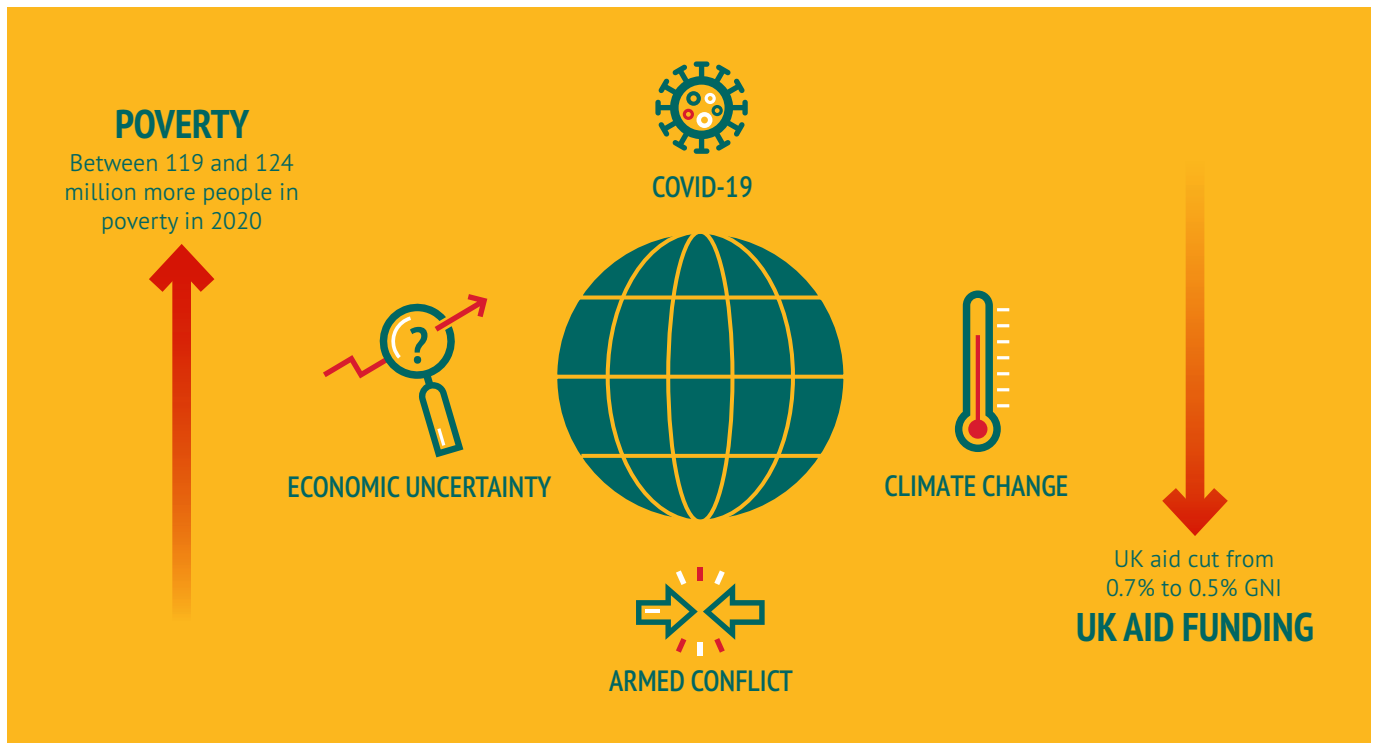
*Most of the proposal was really led by [our in-country partners]. The teams we have there were the ones considering how to make that happen in the absence of in-person activities. And of course, without those implementing partners directly in the partnership and driving that process, you don't know what will work and what won't. So we were offering up several ideas, that obviously wouldn't work.*

*So, without them, we would have probably trialled and erred a lot. For example, one of the options was could we have the surveys in paper and leave them at doctors or various places in the community that you were still allowed to go to, and then have them submitted? But in practice that wasn't going to work for several reasons and due to very specific restrictions. And then it was learning more about the cultural norms around Covid-19, about what we've learned from the Ebola crisis from different partners that were involved... So I think that it is certainly at base, it stopped us implementing activities that wouldn't have worked.*

”

Consortia are eschewing simplistic slogans and command-and-control logics in favour of complex, patient dialogue. They are implementing a highly participatory process of community engagement, many placing the community members who have been most marginalised at the forefront of decision making, so their needs and aspirations can be met.

# Challenges



## Covid-19 and innovation in community engagement

### Significant challenges

UKAC consortia have faced severe in-country disruptions as a result of Covid-19. The World Bank has estimated that global extreme poverty has risen by between 119 and 124 million people in 2020 – the first time a rise has occurred in more than 20 years. In 2021, the World Bank estimates that a further 143 to 163 million people will be added to the extreme poverty category.<sup>18</sup> This addition compounds the escalating forces of conflict and climate change, which were already slowing poverty reduction progress. Some governments in countries that consortia are working in have exacerbated the situation by stating that Covid-19 was not present in their country or diverting limited emergency resources to promote herbal cures. Other events that have had significant impacts on programme implementation include cyclones and conflict in Mozambique; militia violence in the Central African Republic, emerging from disputed presidential and parliamentary elections; and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Already communities who have been marginalised faced increased economic hardships, while the urgent support they required was restricted or suspended as a result of severe limitations to mobility and face-to-face engagement. Consortia partners and stakeholders needed to address practical immediate needs and so their focus may have been diluted.

Prompted by the Covid-19 restrictions in face-to-face meetings, one of the most marked transformations in community engagement within many UKAC consortia was the championing of information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, the pivot to online working

brought challenges: access to and ownership of devices, lack of familiarity with the technology, intermittent electricity, poor network connection, safeguarding issues around social media and potential for groups who have been marginalised to be exposed to exploitation, and the

ability to use technology of people with a disability, such as those who are partially sighted or have intellectual impairments.

These were some of the issues encountered by the UKAC consortia:

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*We had to pivot under Covid-19, to trying to use online training for some of our soft skills, employability training... not just young people, but our job seekers, and faced very, very similar challenges to lack of familiarity with the technology at all – intermittent electricity, poor network connections. All of the assumptions that we classically made, just had to go out the window really, and required a kind of rethink on how we delivered that using online.*

“

*As soon as you move everything online, you open up a whole new can of worms in lots of ways, and you open up a whole new problem that you've not trained volunteers properly on how to be using social media. So suddenly, for them it's incredibly overwhelming to be learning and understanding all of the ways social media can be used in a harmful way.*

”

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Yet, adaptations were put in place that transformed a challenge into new opportunities:

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*...one of the things we did is we trained all of our young people to use social media. Many young people... [have] never used a smartphone. So this was quite an undertaking to train people how to use technology and social media on technology, which was a new one for us, and was a bit more difficult. And what we did with social media is volunteers led health awareness workshops, via Facebook. We had some go relatively viral, which was exciting, including making your own soap and how to hand wash properly. We had volunteers interviewed on radio, sharing what they've done in the past, what impact they've made... We had a couple of volunteers excited to go on TV... and similarly, share and advocate messages as young people.*

”

The major push to ICT-mediated interaction therefore opened up new opportunities for community engagement. Accessible and low-cost ICT tools offer huge potential for involving community members in real-time monitoring, adaptation and learning (UNDP, 2013). However, although one major lesson learned by

UKAC consortia is that the momentous shift to online interaction is here to stay, it is also clear the pandemic has exacerbated the impact of the digital divide. For example, ICT engagement mechanisms such as SMS tend to have greater gender disparities in participation compared with face-to-face engagement. Adequate support needs to be in place so communities who have been marginalised are not further left behind:

“

*If we're thinking about, it's not just Covid-19, this is the future in terms of far, far greater reliance on online approaches, far, far less travel. These things are going to be norms with us. And one of the things we could be focusing on, asking the FCDO to focus on, is precisely that thing, which is the Covid-19 pivot doesn't involve us just only pivoting to Covid-19 as a substantive area. But actually, what about technology infrastructure? Can we really ramp up aid in terms of technology infrastructure for young people... What about our training on online usage?... These are probably the big resources that we could do with. Just because the future will be different. We are not going to go back to 'normal' after Covid-19.”*

”



## Impact of uncertainty and change on community engagement

### Significant challenges

Even before Covid-19, significant disruption within the UK had brought high levels of uncertainty and change to UKAC. The impact of Brexit picked up pace as UK government departments were required to refocus resources to managing the break-up from the European Union. Funding decisions were delayed, with an impact on the consortia's co-creation phases; six to nine months were often stretched out to over two years. Just as some consortia began to transition into their implementation phase, Covid-19 struck. Most international travel was banned along with a move to working from home/online (for those that could). This had a significant effect on implementation. However, a priority for consortia was and continues to be their duty of care towards staff, volunteers and communities. Then, in June 2020, the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was announced, further disrupting decision-making. Six months later, the UK government made another announcement to cut the UK aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI) – an estimated cut in funding of approximately £5 billion. To date, no reassurances have been made of ongoing funding support to see out the UKAC programme as originally planned, although the UK government has announced it would return to a UK aid budget of 0.7% of GNI 'when the fiscal situation allows'.<sup>19</sup>

In discussions and interviews with UKAC consortia, it has been highlighted that the quality of community engagement is highly dependent on a stable long-term funding environment. Consortia have made concerted efforts to consult partners and stakeholders and implement the best community engagement possible in the challenging circumstances. They are doing this by involving community members from a very early stage, using innovative techniques and technologies.

Yet, funding uncertainty and indecision is disrupting momentum where communities are suddenly left with silence after a protracted period of intense engagement:

“

*We did research and then we had planning meetings with all the [CSOs]. And then, based on those outcomes, we did more in-depth research, and then did another round of consultation with the stakeholders. So they were involved in that stage. And then there was a big gap of about maybe a year and a half, and the work plan had to be changed... So it's going to have to be a new conversation to say, 'Well, this is what we said we're originally going to do in January 2019. But due to various things out of our control, this is what we're doing now.'...we did invest a lot of time and energy and got all this information and engagement from them, and then literally disappeared, because we didn't know what was happening. And now we're going back with something that wasn't what they signed up for. Right? Which is going to be a very difficult conversation that we're going to have to have with these community leaders and CSO groups.*

”

Consortia made commitments to local stakeholders and communities based on the funding agreed within the original proposals. Yet, UKAC repeatedly put in requests to consortia to cut budgets without clarity on what should be prioritised:

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*We've had our budget slashed two years in a row. We fully expect next year's budget to be slashed, as well, you know. So we're like, 'What are we... what do we even want us to deliver at this point?'...we can't achieve some of our higher ambitions, you know, or we do less engagement and do achieve something really innovative but extractive. What is the actual priority for this programme going forward?*

”



Alongside the budget cuts, there was some inflexibility from the side of the donor to adapt programmes to accommodate the cuts:

“

*There was a lot of pressure on us to retain our entire consortium. I think we would have actually been able to deliver something which will be able to last throughout the entire programme cycle more cohesively if we had a lot more flexibility from FCDO to actually reduce our consortium. They really pushed back at us at every moment when we said like, 'Could we get rid of x? Could we kind of harmonise this area of work?' and they're like, 'No, not really.' I think if they had just been like, 'Five partner consortiums, we think that could kind of realistically work long term. Let's just go with that,' then it would have been easier than trying to negotiate with eight/nine partners. We thought it's poor value for money because we spent too long just discussing things, you know, not even delivering.*

”

Significant levels of frustration have emerged as the ethos of collaborative engagement that consortia are implementing with local stakeholders and communities (which the funder readily encouraged) is not reciprocated in the relationship between the funder and the consortia:

“

*So we can't plan, you know. Are we in [x] countries? Or are we in [y]? It's like a totally different programme. But really, I can easily sit here and complain. But my point is, I think that donors fundamentally don't... it perpetuates all the problems that we know. And what we see is there isn't an equal partnership between donors and organisations. Because it's not at all, it's fundamentally not a good working relationship... you waste time, you feel bad, because you've not done anything yet. And I think it comes from simply a lack of an equal relationship, where you're collaborating to create something, and rather a stilted relationship where one party holds the power, and often doesn't really communicate effectively, and so on and so forth. So I think, in the same way that we're trying to, in many ways revolutionise the sector and how we understand engaging with community members, people who we work with, communities, places where we work with, we also need to revolutionise the people who fund those.*

”

The lack of proactive engagement from FCDO had a significant impact on community engagement. Some consortium received speedy agreements to their proposed Covid-19 'pivots', while others had to wait a long time, which had an impact on implementation:

“

*First and foremost, [x] months into the programme, Covid-19 hit, which is quite a blow in lots of ways. There were no in-person activities at all. So... no community engagement, nothing on the ground. I will say that the reason for that is we proposed an alternative, a Covid-19 pivot response and received no response from FCDO on that. So we would have liked to run alternative activities and had planned for that, but unfortunately, ended up on a sort of waiting game where we just weren't able to do anything, because we didn't have the go ahead.*

”

The hardest part for many consortia members is letting down the very community members they are trying to help:

“

*We have been asked to work with particularly vulnerable communities. It's not like we've just been asked to work with any community. Like, the most marginalised... we cannot just break their trust like everybody else does.*

”

“

*There is a disconnect between us being asked to engage with communities but then we haven't given the communities any certainties. Those two things can't exist at the same time. I think we do need to feed that back... Because we've spent a long time building these relationships, and then... we can then get accused of being extractive. You know, you've come in, got all this stuff, you've promised the world. And now you're telling me you can't do all of this?*

”

UKAC consortia organisations have highlighted a disconnect between FCDO's espoused wish for development interventions through highly participatory processes of community engagement and their actions, which are disrupting community relations and the effectiveness of consortia interventions. UKAC consortia require certainty and stability in their funding so they can maintain their long-term commitments to engaged communities and stakeholders.

# Steps for moving forward

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UKAC consortia have been making the transition from 'command-and-control' strategies of working in communities to community-led processes. They 'walk their talk' by making decisions through regular dialogue, transparency and accountability. They have developed trusting and transparent relationships with communities who have been marginalised to generate collective learning. And they have implemented innovative solutions to overcome the many challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic and FCDO cuts have brought.

Many consortia have embraced the imperative to shift power and decision-making authority to local partners, stakeholders and communities. They have applied Ramalingam et al (2014)'s<sup>20</sup> six practices for promoting appropriate attitudes to collaborative working:

- 1.** Start and continue to work through transparent group interaction and iteration rather than command-and-control 'back office/black box' plans.
- 2.** Generate ownership of problem formulation and resulting actions through participation of local stakeholders, especially front-line staff and community end users.
- 3.** Seek new, alternative and diverse perspectives rather than enforcing existing 'best practices', which may have emerged from completely different intervention contexts.
- 4.** Develop coherent visual representations of the challenges being faced that enable holistic and collective explorations of potential intervention options.
- 5.** Work together to explore and identify multiple intervention points and experiment with these dynamically, learning collective lessons from small failures without blaming.
- 6.** Focus on flexibility and process rather than the predictability of solutions and outcomes.

These principles were formalised within the UKAC consortia ‘co-creation’ phase, which underpinned the first year or so of consortia activities.<sup>21</sup> In the development context, co-creation is about knowing and understanding communities’ interests and concerns, and exploring possibilities together. Crucially, there is often a naive perception that communities are homogenous and can be represented by a few voices. Instead, there needs to be a recognition of the unavoidable tensions between community perspectives, and maintaining, rather than erasing, difference, so interventions can be better targeted and sustained. There is a strong role to be played by an intermediary or facilitator who can take a constructive and proactive role in seeking out marginal and opposing perspectives, surfacing and communicating underrepresented community voices. By uncovering overlooked and hidden perspectives, new relationships and understandings can be communicated to consortium partners. Embracing a dialogical process has been emphasised by consortia as key to their successful co-creation phase, where local partners become the dialogical intermediaries between diverse community perspectives and the consortia in order to arrive at an appropriate intervention strategy.

The task now is to delve deeper into approaches and frameworks that can inspire more authentic, ethical and effective community engagement in ways that are adaptive within a chaotic, complex and conflictual context. This objective matches the existing strategies of many consortia:

“

*One of our tasks going forward is to really try and codify what this participative co-creative approach looks like, when it’s undertaken by a consortium of NGOs [in higher-income countries], plus academics, and community organisations [in lower-income countries].*

”

However, their success has been tempered by cuts and uncertainties in the funding environment. Effective community engagement requires the establishment of long-term dialogue to build trust and shared cohesive practices. Montuori (2011) calls for a contextual, collaborative, emergent, networked, participatory creativity to manage complexity, chaos and conflict.<sup>22</sup> Many of the UKAC consortia have achieved this ambition, but their ongoing success is fragile and depends on key recommendations being implemented. There is a paradox in the idea of strong community engagement

and sharing knowledge and learning in complex, chaotic and conflictual times, in that support for the engagement process needs to be stable and predictable.

Effective community engagement requires the establishment of long-term dialogue to build trust and shared cohesive practices. As Montuori (2011) states:

“

*The social creativity of complex dialogue can involve grass-roots efforts to explore the future together, to envision alternatives, because this also means learning to talk across differences in ways that see difference as the source of creativity rather than mutual destruction. A complex world does not merely require the ability to address complexity individually, to be able to think about it and think it through, but it also requires the ability to engage in dialogue in a way that reflects this complexity... (Montuori, 2011, p225)*

”





# Endnotes

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## Community engagement in UK Aid Connect consortia: Definitions and challenges

June 2021

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