Towards Meaningful Participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and Older People in Humanitarian Action

Lessons from Measuring Effectiveness of Meaningful Participation Innovation Challenge

May 2024

elrha

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express appreciation to everyone who contributed to the development of this learning paper, including the two grantees of the 'meaningful participation innovation challenge' – ASB Office for Indonesia and the Philippines, and Tearfund Ethiopia – and their local partners – OPDs, OPAs, and humanitarian actors – who generously shared their knowledge and experience.

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About Elrha

We are Elrha. A global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world. Through our globally recognised programmes, we have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response.

About the Humanitarian Innovation Fund programme (HIF)

The HIF is a globally-recognised programme leading on the development and testing of innovation in the humanitarian system. Established in 2011, it was the first of its kind: an independent, grant-making programme open to the entire humanitarian community. It now leads the way in funding, supporting, and managing innovation at every stage of the innovation process. The HIF's portfolio of funded projects has informed a more detailed understanding of what successful innovation looks like, and what it can achieve for the humanitarian community. This work is leading the global conversation on innovation in humanitarian response.

BACKGROUND

Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) aims to harness the power of humanitarian innovation to create more effective, responsive, and inclusive response mechanisms for people disproportionately affected by crises.

Despite global human rights instruments, frameworks, standards, and guidelines promoting disability inclusion in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and humanitarian action and aiming to embed participation into practice (United Nations, 2015; IASC, 2019; Agenda for Humanity, 2016), practical implementation remains slow (UNDRR, 2023a[1]; UNDRR 2023b[2]).

Evidence repeatedly indicates that people with disabilities and older people are disproportionately affected by disasters, conflicts, and humanitarian crises, yet they remain excluded from the design and implementation of humanitarian initiatives due to a range of attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers that hinder their meaningful participation (see for example: Lough, Barbelet, & Njeri, 2022; Gvetadze & Pertiwi, 2022).

Recent research has explored the complex challenges that heighten the vulnerability of people with disabilities and older people in disaster scenarios, with notable contributions from scholars such as Alexander (2015), King (2019), and Bailey et al. (2022). There is an increasing focus on the resilience and proactive involvement of people with disabilities in efforts to reduce and manage disaster risks, as highlighted by studies from Ton et al. (2020) and Pertiwi, Llewellyn, & Villeneuve (2019). This focus is supported by interdisciplinary collaborations that integrate diverse sectors and community-wide participation, as evidenced by works from Villeneuve (2021), and Flanagan (2023).

There is also a growing body of evidence showcasing the active and significant engagement of people with disabilities and older people. Scholars like Stough & Kang (2015) and Grech (2022) argue that Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) play a crucial role in driving change within disaster risk reduction and humanitarian action. Nevertheless, there is a gap in understanding the specific contexts that make these efforts and initiatives effective, particularly the mechanisms that enable meaningful participation of people with disabilities and older people. Furthermore, there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of these mechanisms as highlighted by the Gap Analysis (Robinson, Marella, & Logam, 2020).

To us, meaningful participation means that:

"People with disabilities and older people are able to participate fully and effectively in decision-making and in the processes for designing, developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating humanitarian programmes, policies and interventions, as relevant. It should result in participation being an individual choice not limited by barriers including cultural, identity, attitudinal, physical, communication or legal/policy barriers."

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1 UNDRR. (2023). The Report of the Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.
2 UNDRR. (2023). Global Survey Report on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters

BACKGROUND

In July 2020, Elrha launched an innovation challenge seeking "innovative mechanisms to increase the meaningful participation of people with disabilities and older people in humanitarian action, and innovative ways of assessing the effectiveness of these mechanisms."[3]

The challenge funded two projects, one in Indonesia and one in Ethiopia, to develop and pilot mechanisms to improve the meaningful participation of people with disabilities and older people in humanitarian action and to assess the effectiveness of those mechanisms.

The strategic focus on meaningful participation represents an innovative approach to addressing gaps in both practice and evidence within the humanitarian sector. Elrha seeks to champion and advance the prioritization of meaningful participation in humanitarian practices and policies by actively addressing these gaps.

This learning paper highlights key outcomes emerging from the 'meaningful participation innovation challenge' and shares important learning for the humanitarian system.

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[3] The choice of meaningful participation as the theme for Elrha's challenge emerged from an evaluation of gaps identified through the Gap Analysis.

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INTRODUCING THE INNOVATION CHALLENGE PROJECTS

Indonesia: Localising Inclusive Humanitarian Response through 'Partners for Inclusion' (PIONEER)

Partners: Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Office for Indonesia and the Philippines (ASB), Advocacy for Disability Inclusion (AUDISI), Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI), and Resilience Development Initiative (RDI), alongside grassroots Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), Older People's Associations (OPAs), and local humanitarian organisations.

The PIONEER initiative emerged from a critical examination of the barriers to disability inclusion in humanitarian response, particularly within WASH programmes in Indonesia. The humanitarian system often overlooks the unique insights and contributions of OPDs and OPAs. The PIONEER mechanism was developed to bridge this gap, changing how humanitarian action addresses the requirements of people with disabilities and older people, fostering collaboration between OPDs, OPAs, and humanitarian organisations and investing in different forms of meaningful participation. It aimed to shift perceptions by challenging the traditional view of people with disabilities and older people as passive aid recipients, instead recognising them as vital contributors in times of crisis.

INNOVATIVE APPROACH

PIONEER draws from the principles of the "localisation of aid," capitalizing on the following:

- **Equitable partnerships:** strengthening and shifting power in partnerships between OPDs, OPAs and local humanitarian organisations.

- **Capacity enhancement:** strengthening stakeholder capacities for managing inclusive and accountable initiatives.

- **Participation revolution:** promoting a participation revolution where OPDs, OPAs, and humanitarian organisations jointly steer programme design and financial governance.

Find out more:
the PIONEER project page

Ethiopia: 'Nothing About Us Without Us' through Participatory Audits

Partners: Tearfund and the Ethiopian Guenet Church Development and Welfare Organisation (EGCDWO).

The 'Nothing About Us Without Us' – Participatory Audits initiative in Ethiopia represents a landmark shift towards more inclusive humanitarian efforts for people with disabilities and older people. Launched against the backdrop of conflict and widespread displacement in southern Ethiopia, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change impacts, the project directly addresses the unique circumstances of these groups who have been historically excluded in humanitarian action.

This project was emergent in its approach to involve people with disabilities and older people in the audit of humanitarian activities. This collaborative effort included input from local associations, highlighting the project's commitment to participatory and inclusive practices.

INNOVATIVE APPROACH

This innovation meant to engage older people, people with disabilities and their representative associations in:

- Co-designing an inclusive auditing tool of humanitarian organisations.

- Conducting audit of humanitarian organisations as to whether they are inclusive of older people and people with disabilities in their humanitarian initiatives.

- Taking a lead role in developing a locally contextualized older age and disability-inclusive humanitarian response strategy.

Capacity building of Older People's Associations (OPAs) and Associations of Persons with Disabilities (APDs), as well as networking between OPAs, APDs, and humanitarian actors, were used as the main instruments to achieve innovation.

The project introduced a comprehensive strategy to empower people with disabilities and older people through:

- Capacity development: enhancing the capacities of OPAs and Associations of People with Disabilities (APDs).

- Audit tool development: creating a tool for these groups to lead evaluations of humanitarian efforts, ensuring actions are reflective of the identified gaps and requirements.

- Collaboration enhancement: building networks among OPAs, APDs, and humanitarian organisations to share and promote inclusive practices.

Find out more: 'Nothing about us without us' – Participatory Audits project page.

WHAT DID MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN THE TWO PROJECTS?

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CONTENTS >

The landscape of humanitarian action is shifting to pay attention to inclusion and meaningful participation of historically excluded groups. The learnings from this innovation challenge promote more advancements in disability inclusion, highlighting the need for continued commitment to refining and advancing inclusive practices within the humanitarian sector that prioritise the meaningful participation of people with disabilities and older people.

The ASB and Tearfund projects offer important insights into this trend, particularly concerning why and how to engage with people with disabilities and older people. Both projects underscore the importance of reframing an outdated perception of people with disabilities and older people as passive recipients of aid to recognise them as pivotal contributors to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian action. This shift requires a rethinking of 'participation' and how to make it 'meaningful'. By positioning people with disabilities and older people in leadership and decision-making roles, both projects demonstrate a commitment to leveraging the unique insights and knowledge these groups bring. This is crucial to ensure humanitarian interventions are guided by lived experience of those disproportionately affected.

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WHAT DID MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN THE TWO PROJECTS?

CONTENTS ›

WHAT DID 'MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION' LOOK LIKE IN THE ASB INITIATIVE?

Partnership and leadership roles

Capacity development and empowerment

Inclusive implementation and community mobilisation

Capturing and disseminating effectiveness and learnings

Policy influencing and development

Project examples:

The success of the PIONEER project in shifting community attitudes relied on promoting the active participation of people with disabilities and older people in all project components. This inclusive approach extended to disaster response training, where these individuals not only took part but also assumed leadership and facilitator roles.

AUDISI, a national OPD, played a vital role in all project stages, from beginning to evaluating effectiveness. Acting as a mentor to partner organisations, AUDISI facilitated learning about disability and strengthened the organisational capacity of local OPDs.

Both OPDs and OPAs, as partners and members of PIONEER initiative, had control over project resources, including finances. This empowerment was reinforced by actions such as providing funds for them to manage within projects, enabling active involvement in planning, implementation, and evaluation. This approach empowered OPDs and OPAs to make final project decisions.

The PIONEER project developed a comprehensive capacity enhancement plan for its members, covering disability and older age inclusion, disaster preparedness, localisation of aid, project cycle management, and data in humanitarian response. This multi-faceted training equipped members to engage in all project phases actively and effectively, enhancing leadership capacities crucial for project management and decision-making. With a capacity-sharing approach, people with disabilities and older people were both participants and resource persons in capacity-building activities.

WHAT DID MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN THE TWO PROJECTS?

CONTENTS >

WHAT DID 'MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION' LOOK LIKE IN THE TEARFUND INITIATIVE?

Co-designing auditing and assessment tools

Training and capacity development

Advocacy and change

Partnerships and networking for inclusive humanitarian response

Project examples:

Participants from the Associations of Persons with Disabilities (APDs) and Older People's Associations (OPAs) played a vital role in the project, conducting audits and providing recommendations for more inclusive humanitarian programming. Their participation was central to the project's methodology and ethos. The project adopted a "nothing about us without us" approach, emphasising the indispensable role these individuals play in auditing and advocacy efforts. This approach not only granted them agency but also underscored the project's core value of ownership and self-representation.

The project's methodology was characterised by its nuanced and adaptive approach to capacity building and engagement. Initial plans to adapt existing auditing tools were reconsidered in favour of more accessible strategies, such as using drama to demystify the concept of auditing for participants. This innovative strategy not only facilitated understanding but also empowered participants to take ownership of the audit process. The self-help groups established during the capacity building phase were instrumental in building resilience and fostering a sense of agency among participants.

The innovation challenge initiatives facilitated this shift by showcasing different forms of 'meaningful participation' of people with disabilities and older people. The roles played by people with disabilities and older people are multifaceted and pivotal to achieving inclusive humanitarian action. Their participation is not just symbolic; it directly impacts the design, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian programmes, ensuring these are accessible and responsive to the requirements of all community members.

WHAT IS AN ADDED VALUE OF MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

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CONTENTS ›

The added value of meaningful participation in humanitarian action is evident through various themes highlighted by projects under this innovation challenge, showcasing its transformative potential across the humanitarian system:

Empowerment through leadership and decision-making: Meaningful participation goes beyond inclusion; it empowers historically excluded groups such as people with disabilities and older people by involving them in leadership and decision-making roles. This includes their active engagement in project management, financial decision-making, and ensuring the sustainability of crisis responses.

Amplifying agency and capacities: Meaningful participation recognises people with disabilities and older people as essential contributors to inclusive humanitarian action. By equipping them with necessary skills and knowledge through training and capacity development, they become empowered to identify, assess, and address barriers to inclusion within the humanitarian system.

Policy-level involvement: By amplifying the voices of people with disabilities and older people in humanitarian policy discussions, meaningful participation positions them as more than just recipients of aid. They become key stakeholders in shaping policies that directly impact their lives. Collaboration between various stakeholders, including OPAs, APDs, local governments, and NGOs, in developing locally adapted response strategies underscores the significant policy impact of meaningful participation.

Strengthening networks and partnerships: Meaningful participation fosters collaboration among people with disabilities, older people, humanitarian organizations, and community stakeholders. This collaboration strengthens networks and partnerships, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the humanitarian system and its practices.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ENABLERS FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION?

Capacity building and empowerment: Providing specialised training and one-on-one technical assistance tailored to address the specific requirements of people with disabilities and older people not only equips them with essential skills and knowledge but also fosters empowerment, enabling active participation in decision-making processes and assuming leadership roles in projects. Investing in the capacity building of OPDs and OPAs enhances their organisational, leadership, and advocacy skills.

Inclusive policy development and advocacy: Strategic efforts in shaping inclusive policies create a legal mandate for accessibility, inclusion, and meaningful participation. This compels stakeholders to implement humanitarian programmes that are fully accessible and equitable, promoting meaningful participation of all individuals in humanitarian efforts.

Enhancing accessibility and inclusion: Investments and strategies to ensure that humanitarian services and environments are fully accessible to people with disabilities and older individuals promote inclusivity and guarantee equitable access to humanitarian assistance.

Accessible communication and engagement: Adopting strategies that provide information in accessible formats ensures equal access to crucial information for all individuals. Whether it is braille, sign language interpretation, large print, audio recordings, or digital platforms with assistive technologies, these approaches promote inclusive communication and engagement among diverse populations, which is an essential prerequisite for ensuring meaningful participation.

Combating stigma and societal attitudes: Awareness raising, and educational campaigns aimed at the broader community challenge and change negative perceptions about people with disabilities and older people. By highlighting their abilities, rights, and contributions, these initiatives promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

Collaborative partnerships and resource mobilisation: Establishing collaborative partnerships enhances the inclusivity and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. By fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among stakeholders, these partnerships ensure that humanitarian initiatives are responsive, impactful, and sustainable.

SPOTLIGHT: REFLECTIONS ON MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Throughout the innovation challenge, key focus was on documenting processes to measure effectiveness, ensuring ongoing learning, adjustments, and sharing of lessons with the broader humanitarian community.

The emphasis on measuring the effectiveness of meaningful participation in humanitarian projects stemmed from the need to provide quantifiable evidence. Collaboration with Outsight International aimed to assist grantees in developing effective strategies for measuring the impact of meaningful participation. This initiative sought to equip grantees with the tools needed to formulate clear hypotheses that could be empirically tested, facilitating a structured approach to evaluating the effectiveness of their participation strategies underpinned by the deductive (causal-effect) logic and post-positivist view[4].

Through non-financial support such as workshops and collaborations with organisations like Outsight International, project partners engaged in in-depth discussions about what effectiveness entails in process-oriented initiatives. These discussions explored identifying indicators of change and success in projects focused on meaningful participation.

A critical reflection on this process revealed that the effort to quantify the impact of meaningful participation was ultimately valuable for project partners. However, grantees revealed challenges related to the adoption of quantifiable measurement for the disability-inclusion concept, often seen as complex and difficult to measure, which is not entirely appropriate. Grantees reported some crucial qualitative findings that could not be captured in the evaluation process. This process shed light on the complexities of measuring process-based outcomes and sparked ongoing conversations about the effectiveness of different measurement approaches. The experience underscored the need for further exploration and dialogue on how to best capture and demonstrate the value of meaningful participation in a manner that produces convincing evidence for the broader humanitarian sector. This reflects an ongoing commitment to improving the understanding and implementation of meaningful participation, despite the challenges in quantifying its impact.

Reflecting on the process, grantees also noted that the capacity to measure the effectiveness of the intervention in a robust manner was not inherent to the grantees as humanitarian actors. Despite efforts to provide such technical capacity in-house, both organisations faced challenges with staff turnovers. Another reflection pertains to timing. Assistance from Outsight International was provided concurrently with project activities rather than during the inception phase. This occasionally caused confusion for project teams, who had already initiated their measurement plans and were uncertain whether to adjust their approaches based on new insights.

The learning suggests that for future endeavours, integrating such support during the project's outset – during the inception phase – might be more effective. This approach would enable project teams to seamlessly incorporate measurement strategies and hypothesis testing into their overall project design and execution plan from the beginning, thereby avoiding complications of adjusting methodologies midway through the project lifecycle.

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4 See Carpiano & Darley (2016). https://doi.org/10.1136%2Fjech.2004.031534

HOW DID ASB MEASURE 'MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION'?

Measuring the effectiveness of the PIONEER model was central to the approach.

To test the effectiveness, five key hypotheses were identified and tested using interviews, focus groups, observational records, pre-post and post-test questionnaires and desk research:

- **Humanitarian PIONEER partner organisations' perceptions of OPAs and OPDs as contributors, have changed from passive to active, in local humanitarian responses.** Humanitarian organisations indicated that from the PIONEER implementation, they can see first-hand how OPDs and OPAs can design, implement, and monitor local humanitarian response activities.

- **OPAs and OPDs have experienced their roles changing from passive to active contributors in local humanitarian responses.** Throughout the project, there was a shift from passive to active. The endline measurement shows that both OPDs and OPAs have directly engaged in planning, implementing, and monitoring a local humanitarian programme together with humanitarian organisations through the project.

- **OPAs and OPDs are facilitated in the planning of local humanitarian responses.** There was a significant increase in the active participation of OPDs and OPAs in humanitarian response. For example, in Magelang, active participation shifted from 1 in 5 humanitarian organisations collaborating with OPDs/OPAs at baseline, to 4 in 5 at the endline. For OPD members at baseline 4 of 14 participants had worked with a humanitarian organisation, at the endline it was 12 out of 13.

- **OPAs and OPDs are facilitated in the implementation of local humanitarian responses.** At the baseline, OPDs and OPAs reported that their participation in the implementation stage of local humanitarian response was low. Using a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest level of participation, OPDs reported an average of 2.6, OPAs an average of 1. Post intervention, this changed significantly, with OPDs reporting an average of 4.4 and OPAs an average of 4.

- **OPAs and OPDs are facilitated in the monitoring of local humanitarian responses.** There were considerable differences in the participation level of OPDs and OPAs in the monitoring phase before and after PIONEER, from passive to active. Local humanitarian organisations in both districts had never engaged OPDs and OPAs in monitoring humanitarian response prior to the project. By the end, 67% of local humanitarian organisations considered OPDs and OPAs to be active in the monitoring stage (on a scale of 4 out of 5). From the perspective of the OPDs and OPAs, before the project, 77.7% OPDs and 67% OPAs considered themselves to be passive in the monitoring. This changed significantly after the project, where 55.5% of the OPAs and 67% OPDs reported that they were facilitated to be actively involved in the monitoring of local humanitarian programmes.

HOW DID TEARFUND MEASURE 'MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION'?

Measuring the effectiveness of the disability audit and wider capacity building was central to the approach.

To test the effectiveness, five key hypotheses were identified and tested through surveys, interviews, reflection sessions and tools such as organisational capacity assessment benchmarks, observational checklists, audit effectiveness indicators metrics, and advocacy process assessment tool.

- Training of OPA and APD leaders increases their organisational capacity to enhance inclusive humanitarian action.

- OPA and APD leaders actively engage in co-designing auditing tools.

- OPA and APDs can effectively audit humanitarian services in Shashemene town.

- OPA and APDs take a lead role in developing an inclusive humanitarian response strategy.

- OPA and APDs' advocacy efforts at the local government of Shashemene results in greater meaningful participation of older people and people with disabilities.

The project brought the three fragmented associations of older people in Shashemene town together to form a new federation of associations of older people, focusing more to ensure the rights of older people. It strengthened the leadership of the town's federation of organisations of persons with disabilities, which was previously characterised by an internal split, to now act in solidarity and advocate for their members' rights.

OPD and OPA leaders actively engaged in the co-design of an auditing tool, however, the methodology to facilitate their active engagement had to be adapted considerably from the original plan.

The plan was to adapt an auditing tool from a development context. However, an entirely new tool relevant to the humanitarian context had to be developed. Based on the findings from the audits, the OPAs and OPDs have developed an inclusive humanitarian response strategy for the town, the first of its kind.

In total 13 governmental, non-governmental and community-based organisations were assessed using the audit tool.

The demand for a measurement approach that is simultaneously robust, innovative, and inclusive reflects an ambitious goal, particularly for a consortium without a specialisation in the kind of innovation defined by EIrha. This ambition highlights a critical gap in the field: the need for expertise and methodologies that can navigate the intricacies of measuring social innovations, which are inherently abstract and challenging to quantify.

Social innovations like meaningful participation require nuanced understanding and measurement approaches that can capture the qualitative impacts of these initiatives. The process facilitated by Outsight International, and the subsequent reflections, suggest that even within the donor community, there is an ongoing search for methodologies that can accurately measure the effectiveness of such innovations.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS

Overall, the two projects facilitated the shift of people with disabilities and older people from passive recipients of aid to active participants in humanitarian action. In the Tearfund initiative, OPAs and APDs engaged in audits, while in ASB project they assumed more advanced roles as partners contributing to enhancing humanitarian action across various capacities and activities.

The PIONEER initiative has demonstrated the positive impact of partnership and collaboration among OPDs, OPAs, and humanitarian organisations. It has fostered better understanding and advocacy for disability inclusion locally, enhancing the knowledge and capacity of village officials and the Local Disaster Management Agency in disability-inclusive humanitarian response. Identifying gaps and enhancing accessibility in programming have been additional outcomes. Collaboration among PIONEER members has influenced the development of district-level regulations on disability inclusion, encouraging the active participation of people with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response.

The Tearfund initiative led to improvements in accessibility and disability inclusion within government and humanitarian organisations. It fostered greater advocacy and unity among different groups, highlighting the importance of adaptable methodologies and inclusive co-creation. These efforts showed that participatory action requires a willingness to share power and embrace diverse perspectives.

KEY LESSONS FROM THE PIONEER INITIATIVE

- The PIONEER initiative has demonstrated that fostering equal partnerships with OPDs and OPAs ensures that people with disabilities and older people can actively participate in humanitarian action. Establishing equal partnerships shifts power dynamics, giving OPDs and OPAs access to resources and decision-making, leading to increased participation from project design onwards.

- Strengthening the capacities of OPDs and OPAs in humanitarian action improves inclusion outcomes as they become more aware and can contribute effectively. Similarly, capacitating humanitarian actors on disability and older age inclusion helps them identify gaps in their response. Learning directly from people with disabilities and older people is especially impactful, leading to greater motivation and improvement, resulting in more inclusive humanitarian action.

- Understanding the organisational capacities of each organisation is equally important as strengthening capacities in humanitarian action and disability and older age inclusion. Strong organisational capacity enables effective collaboration, whereas unresolved internal issues hinder it. Therefore, conducting technical and organisational capacity assessments at the outset and undertaking nuanced capacity building approaches is crucial.

KEY LESSONS FROM THE 'NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US' – PARTICIPATORY AUDITS INITIATIVE

- The project underscored the significance of enhancing the meaningful participation of older people and people with disabilities through innovative methods. This entailed involving them in participatory audits and providing comprehensive capacity-building support, including ongoing mentorship, instead of just offering training. Such an approach empowered older people and people with disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes and fostered genuine inclusion.

- The project's achievements highlighted that older people and people with disabilities can meaningfully participate in humanitarian action, regardless of their prior expertise, education, or socio-economic backgrounds. Many representatives from Older People's Associations (OPAs) and Associations of People with Disabilities (APDs) involved in the audits lacked professional audit skills and hailed from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

- Redefining meaningful participation requires going beyond mere participation to comprehensive capacity building and partnership. It is imperative to prioritize the comprehensive development of OPA and APD capacities, as mere participation without capacity building may not result in meaningful participation.

- Measuring the effectiveness of meaningful participation emerged as a primary objective for Elrha and a crucial impact indicator for the project. Nonetheless, for the grantees, understanding the necessity of quantifying meaningful participation posed a challenge. They acquired numerous insights during the journey while striving to maintain balance across all project components.

Successes from both projects encompassed changes at diverse levels, including personal and organisational shifts for OPDs, OPAs, and humanitarian actors. However, despite greater awareness and practice changes, these practices are not yet institutionalized. In instances where some practices have continued beyond the projects' duration, it has been mainly due to personal initiatives, particularly among humanitarian actors. Therefore, sustainability poses a significant challenge due to the absence of allocated funding to sustain meaningful participation, despite enhanced networking with humanitarian actors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of Elrha's 'meaningful participation innovation challenge' present the humanitarian sector with several critical lessons. These initiatives reveal a path forward for the sector, emphasising the need for a deliberate, continuous commitment to refining disability inclusive practices that not only engage these groups in participatory roles but also empower them to lead and evaluate humanitarian responses.

Empowering participation as a catalyst for inclusive humanitarian action

Humanitarian actors can learn the transformative power of reframing people with disabilities and older people from passive recipients to active contributors in humanitarian action. By involving these groups in leadership roles, such as auditing and assessing humanitarian services, the sector can leverage their unique insights to identify and tackle accessibility barriers, enhancing the inclusiveness of service provision and effectiveness. Amplifying their agency and contributions underscores the necessity of moving beyond inclusion towards active and meaningful participation, ensuring interventions are guided by the lived experiences of those who face the greatest challenges. This approach not only promotes dignity and empowerment but also ensures that humanitarian interventions are better informed, more effective, and truly inclusive, reflecting the needs and strengths of all members of the community.

Redefining 'meaningful participation'

A re-evaluation of what constitutes 'meaningful participation' in the humanitarian sector more widely is imperative. Meaningful participation involves more than just engagement; it requires placing people with disabilities and older people in decision-making roles, thus acknowledging their pivotal role in shaping humanitarian actions. Capacity development and empowerment-centric activities are key enablers in this regard, equipping people with disabilities and their representative organisations with the skills and knowledge for effective involvement and positioning them as leaders in humanitarian spaces.

Challenging and changing community perceptions

Both initiatives demonstrate success in shifting societal and individual perceptions regarding the capability of people with disabilities and older people to contribute meaningfully. Initial scepticism was overcome by showcasing the substantial contributions these groups made towards inclusive humanitarian actions, thereby challenging and changing long-standing stigmas and perceptions.

Partnerships as a foundation for disability inclusive strategies

The importance of partnership and network building as foundational elements for developing inclusive humanitarian response strategies is evident from this challenge. Effective collaborations with OPDs and OPAs ensure that humanitarian action is not only inclusive but also rooted in the realities and needs of people with disabilities and older people.

Navigating barriers to participation

Common barriers such as societal stigma, lack of integrated approaches, communication challenges, and resource constraints underscore the necessity for strategic interventions led by people with disabilities and older people. Addressing these barriers involves innovative communication strategies, capacity building, enhancing accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and adequate resource allocation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovative assessment and measurement challenges

The humanitarian sector is encouraged to embrace more creative, adaptable assessment strategies that are led by the diverse lived experience of the communities they serve. However, overcoming internal capacity limitations and the practical feasibility of conceptual evaluation frameworks remains a significant challenge for OPDs and OPAs, pointing towards a need for a paradigm shift in evaluation methodologies from traditional approaches to ones that are more inclusive, flexible and can capture the qualitative impacts of these initiatives.

In conclusion, these themes offer the humanitarian sector a comprehensive guidance for advancing disability inclusion through empowerment, meaningful participation, strategic partnerships, and innovative assessment methodologies. The insights from the 'meaningful participation innovation challenge' initiatives highlight the importance of continued commitment to refining inclusive practices, ensuring that humanitarian action is truly participatory and reflects the diverse requirements of all community members.

In conclusion, these themes offer the humanitarian sector a comprehensive guidance for advancing disability inclusion through empowerment, meaningful participation, strategic partnerships, and innovative assessment methodologies.

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