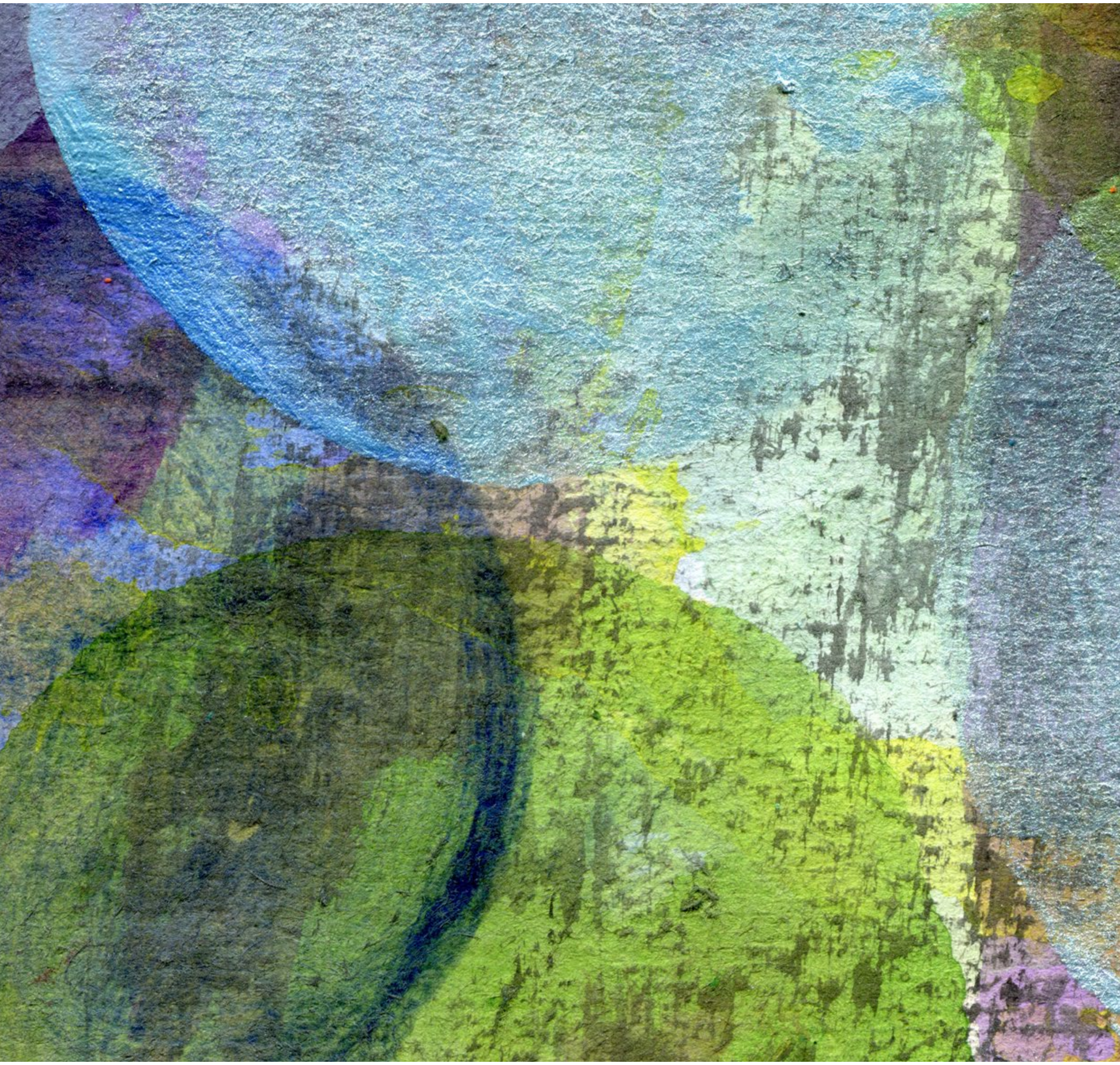
MAKING THE RESULTS OF HUMANITARIAN EVALUATION ACCESSIBLE TO COMMUNITIES:
Why it frequently fails and what to do about it



CoLAB

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Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024

Humanitarian Horizons is a three-year research initiative that adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence and creating conversations for change. It is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The research program for 2021–24 builds on the achievements of the Humanitarian Horizons pilot phase (2017–18), the previous iteration of the program (2018–21) and Humanitarian Advisory Group's experience in supporting the sector for almost 10 years. The research is structured into three interlocking streams: 1) Power, People and Local Leadership, 2) Greening the System, and 3) Real-Time Analysis and Influence. It is underpinned by a fourth stream that considers governance, accountability, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

About the partners

Collaborate Consulting Pty Ltd (CoLAB) is a Fiji-based development consultancy company that has delivered projects with diverse partners in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Europe. CoLAB's vision is to achieve localised responses to development that are inclusive and sustainable, enabled through genuine collaboration amongst all partners.

GLOW Consultants, based in Pakistan, is a leading national entity providing practice solutions and field implementation support to donors, their implementing partners and research institutions. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation assignments.

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.

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This paper presents the findings of research into the current practices used by humanitarians and monitoring and evaluation practitioners to make the results of M&E processes accessible to affected communities.

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Despite the strong recognition of the humanitarian imperative and ethical responsibility to ensure that communities access, and benefit from, M&E knowledge, making evaluation findings accessible to communities is hard. Our research uncovered a number of barriers that exist which have made this practice less common including resourcing constraints, lack of prioritisation and logistical barriers.

Why it is important to make the results of evaluation accessible to communities

Whilst there is limited evidence of practice, making evaluation results accessible to communities yield a number of benefits:

- It is ultimately for the benefit of organisations seeking to improve their interventions
- This process is also supporting communities to identify ways to use evaluation findings to advocate for their needs and rights
- It encourages communities to be involved more in similar activities in the future
- It helps in building a sense of confidence and ownership from communities in humanitarian programming and challenges the assumption that evaluators possess the ultimate understanding of the issues and solutions to humanitarian problems.

How we overcome the challenge

Proactively sharing evaluation findings must be a collective responsibility. It is imperative to understand that everyone has a role to play in ensuring that communities have the confidence to collaborate with humanitarian agencies, consultants, and research organisations, knowing they are treated as co-creators of knowledge and will be informed of the outcomes of their contributions.

The sector's articulated intentions on making evaluation findings accessible

Participation revolution

People affected by crisis are included in decision-making that affects them so that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient.

Accountability to affected populations

An active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist.

Upholding standards and guidelines in evaluations

Guidelines and standards that highlight the ethical and practical imperative of involving communities in the evaluation process and making sure they have access to evaluation findings.

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- Adapting M&E content to community context and needs
- Creating space for community engagement

Six steps to ensuring community access to evaluation findings

- **STEP 1** Involving communities in the planning and design of the evaluation
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- **STEP 3** Working with communities early to identify the best way to share findings and create accessibility
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An example from Pakistan – why sharing evaluation findings with communities matters:

In the case of a mid-term evaluation in Pakistan, a lessons learned workshop provided the opportunity for the community to revisit the priorities they set. One province initially prioritised advocating for blasphemy laws, but the evaluation findings highlighted it could pose substantial risk to them and the project. After lengthy discussions, the community and the evaluators reconsidered the decision, opting to remove that priority.

'Although it was a tough call, considering the complex environment in Pakistan, it was the right decision at that moment. This process underscored the importance of community ownership... community engagement is essential to address their specific issues and challenges effectively.'

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a key pillar of any humanitarian and development programming. Donors, humanitarian agencies, and governments invest heavily in M&E to generate valuable insights and propose recommended changes to programmes and practices. Yet the people who are least likely to hear about the results of M&E processes are those whose participation is arguably most important: crisis-affected communities.

The responsibility of evaluators and operational organisations to share M&E findings with crisis-affected communities is well acknowledged on paper. However, research and commentary over the past 20 years continues to show that these paper commitments are not at play in practice, and evaluation findings often remain disconnected from the very people they are meant to support.[1] A recent ODI report researching participation of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, found once again the repeated pattern of humanitarian actors requesting information without adequate subsequent follow up or engagement with communities.[2] The impact of this is eroded partnerships, thwarted future engagement by communities,[3] and reduced potential for evaluations to bring about positive change – or any change at all.[4]

> 'Providing information to humanitarians without receiving any obvious follow-up was a deeply frustrating experience, [for people living in Cox's Bazar] reflecting a wider pattern of fragmented and ad-hoc requests for information and data that punctuate their daily lives.'[5]

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper presents the findings of research into the current practices used by humanitarians and M&E practitioners to make the results of M&E processes accessible to affected communities. It finds that despite the strong recognition of the humanitarian imperative and ethical responsibility to ensure that communities access, and benefit from, M&E knowledge, making evaluation findings accessible to communities is hard. Our research uncovered a number of barriers that exist which have made this practice less common including resourcing constraints, lack of prioritisation and logistical barriers.

This report suggests six steps to make evaluation findings accessible to communities throughout the evaluation cycle. It draws on existing practices and outlines enablers and barriers to doing so. It also provides a number of promising practice examples that commissioning agencies and M&E practitioners can draw learnings and inspiration from. By offering a process to ensure community access to evaluation findings, we hope this piece can support more positive experiences not only for M&E practitioners but also, importantly, for affected communities in shaping the use and outcomes of evaluation.

1 See for example: P Sandison, ALNAP's Utilisation of Evaluation Study, 2006; A Hallam, Harnessing the Power of Evaluation in Humanitarian Action, 2011.

2 O Lough, A Spencer, D Coyle, MA Jainul, H Barua, Participation and Inclusion in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: 'We Never Speak First' (London: ODI), 2021.

3 V Barbelet and C Wake, Inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action: The state of play, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI), 2020.

4 P Sandison, ALNAP's Utilisation of Evaluation Study, 2006; A Hallam and F Bonino, Using evaluation for a change: Insights from humanitarian practitioners, 2013.

5 O. Lough, A. Spencer, D. Coyle, M. A. Jainul, H. Barua, Participation and Inclusion (London: ODI), 2021, p. 46.

Box 1: About this research

This report is part of a series of interlinked investigations of the politics of humanitarian knowledge and what changes can help bring about more inclusive and equitable approaches to research, analysis and decision-making. The series is the product of a collaboration of research groups and individuals based in Asia and the Pacific, under the Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024 research program. Working within the Power, People and Local Leadership stream of that program, we examine inequalities embedded in the humanitarian system, the conditions that perpetuate them, and avenues for change. In this series, we turn the lens onto knowledge production, using a range of methods that offer varying ways of conceptualising challenges and opportunities.

Needles in a Haystack: An Analysis of Global South Roles in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

This discussion paper examines what is visible on the public record of humanitarian knowledge production, based on specific publications and how they cite their sources of information. It uses analysis of these publications' content to reflect on trends in knowledge production in the humanitarian sector and what needs to change.

Stories for Change: Elevating Global South Experiences in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

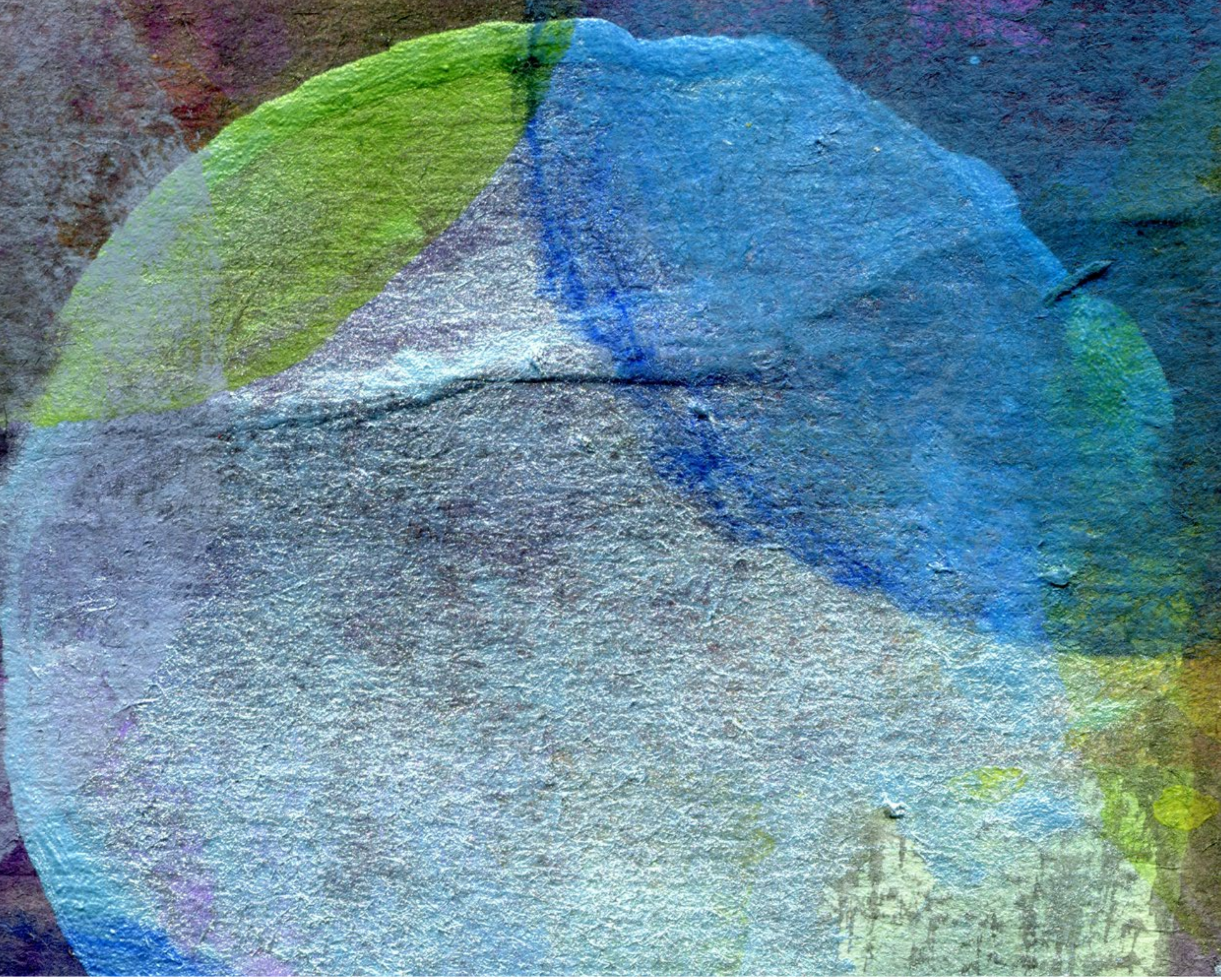
We sought to create a space for Global South knowledge brokers to share their experiences of working in the sector, their analysis of its biases, and their ideas for future action. We held three workshops and nine one-to-one sessions on aspects of the knowledge production cycle. The findings are shared in a narrative form that explains the sector's failure to recognise and hear a full range of voices.

Equitable Research Partnerships Between Global North and Global South Research Collaborators: Making it Happen

This guidance note seeks to support more equitable research partnerships and knowledge production processes and systems. It focuses on partnerships between Global North and South research actors, and is informed by our collective experience and aspirations as partners. This paper does not address all power imbalances within research partnerships; however, it outlines approaches and actions intended to guide organisations and individuals in their pursuit of more equitable research processes and partnerships

Making the Results of Humanitarian Evaluation Accessible to Communities: Why it Frequently Fails and What to do About it

The purpose of this research is to contribute to an improved follow-through on the humanitarian sector's stated commitment to sharing evaluation findings with affected communities in a meaningful and participatory manner. It sought to review the challenges and opportunities in sharing evaluation findings with affected communities through consultations with M&E practitioners across Asia and the Pacific and consultations with crisis-affected communities in Pakistan and the Philippines. For us at Humanitarian Advisory Group, this paper also presents an opportunity to inform our own practices and can be used to have conversations with commissioning agencies on how to plan for making the results of our evaluation studies accessible to crisis-affected communities.



OUTLINE OF THIS PAPER

Following an overview of the study's methodology, this report is divided into three main sections.

- Section I outlines the sectoral commitments, principles and intentions in relation to ensuring community access of evaluation findings.
- Section II offers an analysis of current practices including a contextualised understanding of barriers and enablers – not treating the commitment to sharing findings as if it happens in a generic space, but identifying what shapes follow-through.
- Section III presents a six step pathway to make evaluation findings accessible to communities throughout the evaluation cycle.

METHODOLOGY

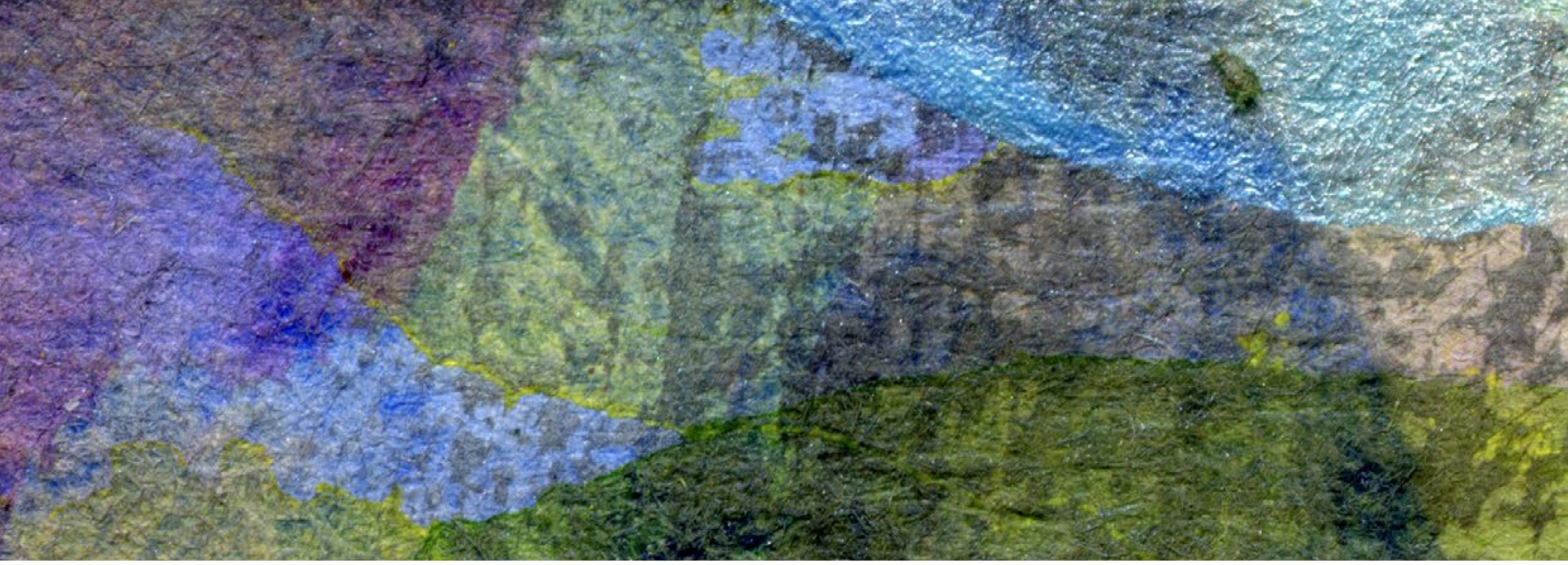
This study sought to understand the challenges and opportunities of sharing evaluation findings with communities affected by crisis and receiving support from humanitarian agencies. In particular, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Why should the findings of humanitarian evaluations be shared with affected communities?
2. What are the enablers and barriers to sharing of evaluation findings with crisis-affected communities?
3. What can evaluators and those supporting them do to more frequently and meaningfully share the findings of evaluations with affected communities?

METHODS

The study took a qualitative approach, through a combination of desk review, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with M&E practitioners across Asia and the Pacific, and consultations with crisis-affected communities in Pakistan (see Figure 1 for methodology overview).

Figure 1. Methodology overview



The study began with a desk review to examine existing literature, reports and relevant documents that capture the insights and experiences of different agencies in their M&E processes, specifically on following through after results of evaluations. The desk review aimed to provide a historical context and offer a foundation for understanding the current landscape. It also supported the development of tools for interviews and discussions with M&E practitioners and crisis-affected communities.

In order to capture diverse viewpoints and gather firsthand experiences, a series of interviews and group discussions with M&E practitioners across Asia and the Pacific were conducted. In Melbourne and Southeast Asia, we brought together M&E practitioners to have an open discussion on the opportunities and barriers which provided a space for reflections and learnings to be shared by the participants. The selection of M&E practitioner interviewees was deliberate, ensuring representation of practitioners that are working as independent consultants, part of a M&E team within a humanitarian organisation; those with experience as a consultant for humanitarian agencies as well as government.

Our consultations with community representatives in Pakistan focused on understanding their previous experiences being involved in evaluation processes (if they were) and their recommendations to commissioning agencies if they are involved again in evaluations in the future. Insights from the consultations process informed the development of the recommendations of this report.

Debriefings between HAG, GLOW Consultants and CoLAB were held to discuss emerging findings. The data obtained from interviews and desk reviews were organised and analysed through Dedoose software. This helped us to identify themes and patterns emerging from different data set.

The study followed ethical review standards: confidentiality (between individual interviewees and researchers, while participants in group discussions were briefed that insights shared in the group should be kept confidential), informed consent, data protection and voluntary participation of participants at all stages.

LIMITATIONS

While efforts were made to ensure diversity and representation in the selection of interview participants, it is critical to acknowledge that our sample is limited and varying experiences and insights may exist beyond the scope of this study (i.e. M&E practitioners in other regions outside of Asia and the Pacific may have different experiences).

Whilst consultations with communities were conducted, the research was also not designed to provide an overall analysis of the impact of making evaluation findings accessible to local communities. A lack of concrete evidence on outcomes, in the form of monitoring data or pre-existing research, remains a limitation of the research.

Box 2: Terminology

Accountability to affected populations is an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist.[6] In international humanitarian action this has a number of key goals, including responsible use of power, active participation of crisis-affected people in the decisions that impact their lives; inclusion of diverse perspectives and different groups; effective two-way communication and sharing of critical information; and the establishment of feedback mechanisms that work.

Crisis-affected communities: We use this term to refer to individuals, groups and communities that are directly or indirectly affected a by a humanitarian crisis.[7]

Community engagement: A foundational action for working with traditional, community, civil society, government, and opinion groups and leaders; and expanding collective or group roles in addressing the issues that affect their lives. Community engagement empowers social groups and social networks, builds upon local strengths and capacities, and improves local participation, ownership, adaptation and communication. Through community engagement principles and strategies, all stakeholders gain access to processes for assessing, analysing, planning, leading, implementing, monitoring and evaluating actions, programmes and policies that will promote survival, development, protection and participation.[8]

Monitoring and evaluation: Monitoring and evaluation have a number of overlaps as well as distinct processes. Monitoring is usually continuous – or at least periodic and frequent – and internal and is largely concerned with tracking activities and their immediate results as it is with systems and processes. Evaluation tends to be an episodic – and often external – assessment of performance and can look at the whole of the results chain from inputs to sustainability. ALNAP further defines evaluation as 'a systematic and objective examination of humanitarian action, intended to draw lessons to improve policy and practice and enhance accountability.'[9]

Sharing evaluation findings: Whilst this report will unpack what we learn about 'sharing findings,' we also use this shorthand to refer to making evaluation results accessible to communities or sharing of elements of an evaluation that are often distinguished, strictly speaking, from its formal findings (such as recommendations).

6 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/humanitarian-failing-crisis-un-aid-relief
7 https://higuide.elrha.org/humanitarian-parameters/crisis-affected-populations/
8 UNICEF 2011
9 ALNAP (2013), Evaluation of Humanitarian Action, Pilot guide, London, UK

SECTION I: ARTICULATED INTENTIONS

Monitoring and evaluation is about finding out what has worked, what hasn't and why. There is widespread recognition among stakeholders consulted that this is critical information to be shared with communities who are involved in any kind of humanitarian or development interventions. In the humanitarian sector specifically, the principles and standards that guide humanitarian action provide a compelling case for ensuring community access to evaluation findings.

PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION. Sharing evaluation findings with affected communities is strongly aligned with the sector's long-standing commitment towards a 'participation revolution', ensuring that people affected by crisis are included in decision-making that affects them so that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient.[10] Workstream 6 of the Grand Bargain, in particular, which has continued into its second iteration, stresses that participation goes beyond 'exchanging information and learning':

> 'It is about managing the performance of humanitarian programming, and seeking to ensure effective action is taken in response to inputs received. It implies clear and consistent communication to inform people affected by crises what has been learned from them and how follow-up action will address their concerns, where this is feasible.'[11]

Participation, then, requires not only the involvement of affected communities in data collection and analytical phases of evaluations but also in the final stages targeted at dissemination and uptake.

ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS. Ensuring community use of and access to evaluation findings can play an important role in contributing to the goals of accountability to affected populations (AAP).[12] The United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines accountability to affected populations as 'an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist.'[13] Guidelines for inter-agency humanitarian evaluations (IAHE) produced by the United Nations Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) instruct that 'Whenever possible, IAHEs will seek to provide feedback on the evaluation findings to affected people' and emphasise that 'communication and dissemination of the evaluation is an important component of the accountability role that evaluations play at all levels: from accountability of the system towards affected people, to accountability to the people whose taxes are used to conduct evaluations.'[14]

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10 The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need, Istanbul, 23 May 2016, 10.

11 Grand Bargain Participation Revolution work stream, Agreed, practical definition of the meaning of "participation" within the context of this workstream, 8 March 2017, 2.

12 Also see M Sattler and Humanitarian Advisory Group, Accountability to affected populations: Stuck in the weeds, June 2021.

13 See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/strengthening-accountability-affected-people

14 OCHA, Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations Process Guidelines, 2018, p. 36.

The Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS), which sets outs standards and a verification process for more than 113 humanitarian organisations globally,[15] emphasises the need for sharing information, listening carefully to affected communities and involving them in decision-making. Commitments 4 and 7 of CHS, in particular, stress the importance of organisations being transparent and accountable to the people they assist through information access, participation and feedback. Some of the Key Actions under Commitment 7, in particular, encourage that any information collected through monitoring and evaluation be analysed and shared in a brief accessible format to facilitate continuous learning and improvement.[16]

Commitment 4: Communities and people affected by crises know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.

Commitment 7: Communities and people affected by crisis can expect assistance that improves as organisations learn.

UPHOLDING STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES IN EVALUATIONS. Evaluation standards and guidelines emphasise the ethical and practical imperative of involving communities in the evaluation process and making sure they have access to evaluation findings. For example, participation of 'primary stakeholders' or the 'intended recipients of aid'[17] are among the eight cross-cutting themes outlined in ALNAP's guide to Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: 'Evaluators and evaluation offices are also accountable to primary stakeholders, in terms of both consultation and ensuring that evaluation results are used to benefit primary stakeholders to the maximum extent possible'.[18]

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) promotes credible and useful evaluation across UN agencies and their partners in various sectors. The UNEG evaluation guidelines discussed accessibility of evaluation findings within the norms of utility (Norm 2), transparency (Norm 7), and human rights and gender equality (Norm 8).[19] The IFRC has developed a Framework for Evaluation that provides guidance for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian action. Three of the eight standards which guide how evaluation is conducted within the Movement underscore the importance of ensuring that a diverse range of stakeholders, including affected communities, volunteers and other partners, have access to information about the evaluation process, results, and the subsequent actions taken based on those findings.[20]

Save the Children's Evaluation Handbook applies these considerations to working with children and young people. It reminds evaluators that 'It is important that you tell children and young people the outcome of their participation and how their contribution has been used.'[21] Its suggested methods include producing child-friendly versions of publications, planning specific child-focused events, distributing leaflets and posters, and presenting research in creative formats such as photography, video, dramatisation, or poetry.

These principles and guidelines underscore the ethical imperative of involving communities throughout the evaluation process and more so, ensuring that they have access to evaluation findings. However, as will be discussed below, evidence of the sector translating these paper commitments into practice remains limited.

15 This membership entails specific requirements, such as establishing a robust accountability mechanism for learning, sharing feedback with the community, and outlining the process for gathering community input.

16 CHS Alliance, CHS guidance notes and indicators, 2018, p. 27.

17 ALNAP, Evaluation of humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: An ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies, 2006, p. 19; At the time of writing this report, ALNAP is conducting a review and revision of the OECD-DAC criteria, see more here: https://www.alnap.org/blogs/together-let%E2%80%99s-shape-new-guidance-for-humanitarian-evaluation?fbclid=IwAR0eq910QqltMjQCePzTZzQWVYJ4Z3MjIzhfkcTVrvR6-uLF_JBxhMZ3fZk

18 ALNAP, Evaluation of humanitarian action, p. 79

19 United Nations Evaluation Group, Norms and standards for evaluation, 2016, p. 10-12

20 IFRC, Framework for Evaluation, p. 7-10.

21 K O'Neill, Evaluation Handbook, (Save the Children), 2012, p. 47.

SECTION II: EVIDENCE OF PRACTICE

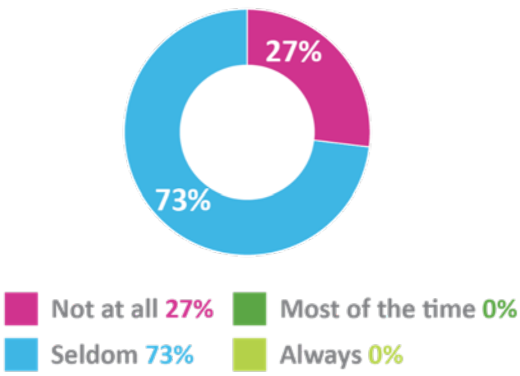
Research participants referred to principles and guidelines discussed in the previous section when articulating the importance of sharing evaluation findings with communities. Most believe that responsibility for sharing findings sits with commissioning agencies and M&E practitioners, and that communities have a right to access the knowledge and learning.[22] One M&E practitioner from the Pacific reflected that not doing so is akin to an 'act of violence and abuse' especially when requests for information are coming during a time when communities are trying to rebuild their lives after a crisis.[23] Others also emphasised how sharing evaluation results is ultimately for the benefit of organisations seeking to improve their interventions: *'Completing the loop will only lead to more responsive and contextually appropriate program design and implementation.'*[24]

However, whilst there is a wider recognition among our participants of the importance of sharing the outcomes of evaluations with participants, particularly crisis-affected communities, they too acknowledge that this remains an area that is well-acknowledged on paper, but lagging in practice. There was a strong consensus across research participants that the sharing of evaluation findings seldom happens or is not taking place consistently in the current landscape of humanitarian action (see Figure 2).

> 'To be candid, when considering this from an evaluation perspective, I struggle to recall a specific instance where we systematically engaged communities.'[25]

> 'When a disaster happens, multiple people will come and ask the same questions over and over again – but they don't know why and how it will be used. Some of them are worried that if they don't do it they won't get assistance. It is their right to know.'[26]

Figure 2: To what extent do you think humanitarian evaluation findings are being shared back to affected communities? (N = 38)



22 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
23 Interview 1
24 Interview 7
25 Interview 12
26 Interview 1

A number of existing research on monitoring and evaluation utilisation in the sector as well as the broader community engagement and inclusion literature have also highlighted that there is a lack of emphasis on communicating evaluation results with crisis-affected communities. In 2008, Stetson observed that the 'utilization-focused evaluation' (UFE) stresses communication with agencies, however, he argued that often this means at the expense of that with communities.

Alistair Hallam (2011) similarly argued that the systems in place and bias towards 'upward' accountability to donors are one of the factors getting in the way.[27] Hallam suggested that reorienting the evaluation process towards 'downward accountability'–to one that centres the concerns of crisis-affected communities–may require entirely new mechanisms, 'It may not be possible simply to use existing mechanisms to fulfil new and different functions.'[28]

Of course, this does not mean that there is no promising practice across the sector and this research also captured some good examples of strong engagement with communities at different points in the evaluation process that will be discussed in this section. However, even when promising practices are adopted they tend to be ad hoc and not reflective of a holistic approach to community engagement in the evaluation process.

BARRIERS TO PRACTICE

Across contexts this research documented several barriers to a holistic and consistent approach to making the results of evaluation findings accessible to communities.

LACK OF PRIORITISATION. The lack of prioritisation of community-engaged M&E practices emerged as a significant barrier.[29] This manifested in a lack of intentional integration in design and planning and a lack of provision for adequate resourcing. A number of practitioners cited that an evaluation required by a funder often becomes an end in itself – to be done because it is mandated, not because it will be useful.[30] Whilst mandated evaluations can support decision-making on whether and how a program can be continued, it can undercut utility by making compliance and funding requirements the main driver for the evaluation rather than genuine interest in being accountable to crisis-affected communities and sharing the learning with them.

> 'Existing practices are not conducive for this – especially when you fly in international consultants. It's really for donors. Set up is fly in and go out. System is set up that findings are for HQ people, not for communities. The primary users are never the community.'[31]

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE. The role, placement, and approaches of M&E within an organisation's operational culture also influence whether and how sharing of evaluation results with communities is done. Some M&E practitioners shared that they already struggle to seek funding for M&E and then use their M&E processes to create a learning culture within the organisation, so it is even more difficult to get the buy-in of leadership to make evaluation processes and results transparent and accountable.[32] Research by ALNAP on evaluation utilisation has echoed the same issues, explaining that this stems from perceptions that evaluation is meant to be 'criticism' and evaluators are 'critics,' resulting in resistance to change.[33]

27 A Hallam, Harnessing the power of evaluation in humanitarian action (ALNAP), 2011.
28 A Hallam, Harnessing the power, 2011, p. 15.
29 Interviews 2, 4, 6, 11
30 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 13
31 Interview 15
32 Interviews 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11
33 A Hallam and F Bonino, Using evaluation for a change: Leadership, culture, structure and resources, 2013, p. 27.

> ‘The reason for this [sharing evaluation findings with communities] not happening is due to its lack of prioritisation within organisations. When it becomes a priority, it will be integrated into project design, action planning, annual planning, or project planning processes.’[34]

> ‘Leadership doesn’t recognise it as important amidst competing demands…. all of us need to have strong arguments to convince the leadership, not only ethics but also financial impacts.’[35]

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS. The resourcing for making evaluation results accessible to communities presents a considerable hurdle. This challenge affects both local and international organisations, including those working on behalf of international NGOs. A number of practitioners emphasised that it can be a costly process, often dependent on various factors, including the nature of the evaluation, the size and characteristics of the community, and the methods of dissemination.[36] There are suggestions that commissioning agencies often underestimate or overlook the resources required for certain logistics during the evaluation (such as travel and meeting costs, which might impact on the extent of engagement with communities) and for the dissemination phase in general.[37] Budgeting for these activities, including translation services, cultural sensitivity training, and the development of context-specific materials, demands resources that organisations struggle to allocate especially in midst of under resourced M&E teams.

> ‘Very often M&E activity comprises a small portion of the budget of the entire programme operation. They don’t budget appropriately, [it is] not just printing or sending [findings] to communities, [we] need to translate it and make it more digestible, transfer it into different format such as posters and videos. [This] needs to be considered when budgeting.’[38]

Especially for evaluations that happen close to the end of humanitarian response operation, allocating budgets to these activities can also be difficult as contracts close and project teams are faced with tight timeframes and administrative requirements to meet in order to wrap up their projects.[39] For end-line evaluations that have not designed communication and sharing findings in the project’s inception, retroactively implementing these processes is proved difficult especially when the required skills and resources are not adequately accounted. Some consultants based in Global North institutions acknowledged the impact of the lack of resourcing to share evaluation results for researchers and enumerators in the Global South, who have used their social capital to do interviews in communities.[40]

> ‘Some of the works that we’ve been doing speaking with local consultants, what came out is – Global North consultant, local consultant either as numerator, most of the time they end up using their social capital but they’re not resourced to go back to community, they’re being asked, why you don’t come back. Sitting here in Australia [you] don’t deal with challenges faced by locals.’[41]

34 Interview 11
35 Group discussion 2 participant
36 Group discussion 2, Interviews 6, 7, 10, 12
37 Interviews 9, 12
38 Group discussion 2
39 Group discussion 1 & 2; Interview 8
40 Group discussion 2
41 Group discussion 2

LOGISTICAL BARRIERS. Closely linked to resourcing are the logistical challenges. In particular, disseminating information to diverse and geographically dispersed communities can be logistically demanding and resource intensive (as highlighted above). Security concerns, lack of transportation infrastructure, or other logistical barriers were cited as factors that can impede the efficient dissemination of evaluation results. In some cases, this limits community members to travel to another town to participate in the data sharing presentation.[42] While conducting an evaluation in the Kohistan district in Pakistan, one of the poorest and most isolated districts in the country, one consultant reflected that simply assembling community members to discuss their needs during data collection was already a difficult task in light of the security concerns as well as travel costs.

> 'It's not a simple matter, it presents complex operational challenges. Personally, I don't view this issue in isolation. Rather, it ties into a broader concern shared by many organizations – the sharing of information.'[43]

SKILLS GAP. M&E practitioners' often-limited skills in communication, community engagement, and cultural sensitivity was also cited as a barrier. Some have noted that sharing evaluation finding to communities requires M&E practitioners to know how to package the information effectively that makes it relevant and meaningful for communities. A number of practitioners shared that developing these skills or working closely with other teams (e.g. communication team) that have the capacity to repackage evaluation findings to make it accessible has to be built in and resourced in the evaluation process. However, the current practice shows that resourcing for this is still not as intentionally embedded.[44] Investment in tailored training and wider research capacity to enable different kinds of dissemination methods is an important area where resources may be required; training sessions also create opportunities for local researchers to provide feedback on plans and tools.[45]

> 'While the evaluation itself may be conducted by a skilled practitioner, conveying its messages and findings in a manner comprehensible to the community requires careful message design.'[46]

PROMISING PRACTICES

Promising practices were highlighted both in the literature and in project examples provided by research participants. Whilst the research did not uncover a holistic or consistent approach to sharing evaluation findings with communities, it did reveal some of the practices that enable and support community engagement. Across these project examples and interviewee reflections the following areas of promising practice were identified.

ENGAGING CRISIS-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES EARLY AND OFTEN. In some examples captured, communities contributed to setting indicators, objectives, and network structures before an intervention commenced which helped to strengthen community use of the results. FAO best practice guidelines require that affected people are involved from the start in thematic or country evaluations.[47] Community representatives are invited to join consultative groups with other stakeholders and can comment on all

42 Interviews 5, 10 & 11; Marple-Cantrell, 'Sharing Evaluation Findings with Community Stakeholders,' 4.
43 Interview 5
44 Group discussion 1 & 2; Interviews 10, 11
45 K Marple-Cantrell, 'Sharing evaluation findings with community stakeholders,' 2018, p. 5-6.
46 Interview 11
47 A Hallam, Harnessing the power, 2011, p.16

draft products in relation to the evaluation.[48] IFRC also engage the community in the planning stages for evaluations.[49]

In the mid-term evaluation of a women's rights project in Pakistan, this practice was embraced through a feminist methodology.[50] Community members directly involved in the project contributed to setting objectives and indicators during the project design creating a space for the community to align the work with their preferences and needs. This engagement made it much easier for the evaluation team to work with the community to understand what was working and what was not during the mid-term evaluation (further discussed below in the 'Creating space for community engagement' subsection).

PLANNING AND ALLOCATING ADEQUATE BUDGET. Allocation of adequate budget and resources was identified as key to supporting community engagement in evaluation processes.[51] In the evaluation of another project focused on gender advocacy in Pakistan, adequate budget was able to support gatherings, transportation costs, and provision of meals for community members. The project evaluation team also recognised that logistical challenges can arise when genuinely involving communities and ensuring that the budget was flexible enough to accommodate solutions was important.

> 'A well-thought-out budget is essential to overcome these challenges effectively.'[52]

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY WELL. Many interviewees underscored the importance of really understanding the community well in order to successfully pitch evaluation processes and findings.[53] There are many ways to achieve this, but for some organisations mapping processes can be useful; this can include basic stakeholder mapping but also power and influence mapping.[54] This involves identifying community members who can support the dissemination of findings. Understanding the community well often also involves really understanding the cultural and linguistic context so that findings can be tailored appropriately.

> 'In the areas where we operate within Pakistan, literacy levels tend to be lower, especially in the regions where NGOs and other actors are active. As a general rule, literacy rates are relatively low in these areas. Given this context, we must carefully compile and present the information to be shared with the community. It's essential to gauge the community's capacity to absorb and comprehend this information effectively.'[55]

ADAPTING M&E CONTENT TO COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND NEEDS. Interviewees provided a range of examples of adapted M&E content from language translation to simplifying key messages to changing the medium of communication, for example, through video.[56] In an evaluation in Sindh province, Pakistan, consultants presented the evaluation findings visually, using graphs and charts to help communities understand and engage with the information they provided. Interviewees also provided examples of findings being adapted for different demographics; many child-focused organisations have excelled at developing child-friendly versions of evaluation reports. This often involves including visually appealing content and plain language, which in many cases can be useful for an audience beyond children.

48 Afifi, R. et al., 'Implementing Community-Based Participatory Research with Communities Affected by Humanitarian Crises: The Potential to Recalibrate Equity and Power in Vulnerable Contexts,' American Journal of Community Psychology (2020), p. 388.
49 IFRC, 2021, Framework for evaluation.
50 See reference about feminist evaluation here: Better Evaluation, Feminist Evaluation, 2021
51 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
52 Interview 7
53 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
54 Interview 12
55 Interview 5
56 Interviews 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 14

> 'Not only translating the content into the local language but also ensuring that it is articulated in a manner that resonates with the community's understanding and context, while not losing the originality of the message in the translation process.'[57]

In the evaluation of a program focused on supporting community resilience in the Pacific, the organisation implementing the program was surprised with the donor request to share the information back to communities. *'That [the donor request] was our lightbulb for us to say yes we need to share findings back and what are our participatory steps to take to do this.'*[58] The resources, albeit limited, allowed them to repackage the findings by simplifying it and translating to local language. The organisation used it as an opportunity to reflect how they can further improve: *'Reflecting back we could have invested in a deeper process with the communities, our method was rather presentation and response. But we could have made it a more meaningful conversation getting communities to think about what the findings mean for them and how it can help them and turn that it into something tangible.'*[59]

CREATING SPACE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. We found a number of examples where sharing the results of evaluation findings happened through validation or lessons learned workshops. Consultants and M&E practitioners including this in the evaluation process shared that it provided opportunities to nuance their findings as they could discuss the comments and reflections of study participants. This process is also supporting communities to identify ways to use evaluation findings to advocate for their needs and rights.[60]

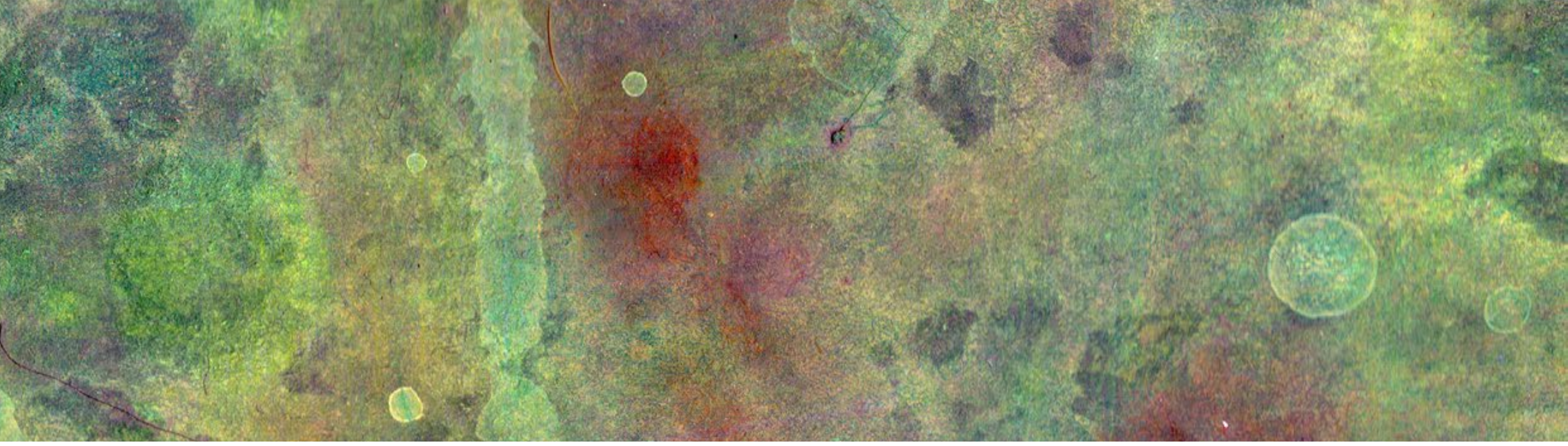
> 'Communities are given the opportunity to further respond to the findings and [this] helps to build trust when they see organisations come back and they see this is an organisation willing to talk and [be] open to feedback.'[61]

In the evaluation of the gender advocacy program in Pakistan, the consultants shared that because they had a budget allocated for the validation workshop (as discussed above), they were able to convene community participants to share their evaluation findings in an accessible way through graphical formats and activities and for communities to review and validate them. Through the workshops, communities were able to share their thoughts further – for example, their hesitations on some project activities: *'We engaged with this group, listened to their experiences, and incorporated their perspectives into our evaluation study.'* The consultants also shared that this provided opportunity for community members to be more involved as they started to enquire when and how they could participate in similar activities in the future.

In the case of another mid-term evaluation in Pakistan, the lessons learned workshop provided the opportunity for the community to revisit the priorities they set. One province initially prioritised advocating for blasphemy laws, but the evaluation findings highlighted that it could pose substantial risk to them and the project. After lengthy discussions, the communities reconsidered the decision in internal meetings, opting to remove that priority.

> 'Although it was a tough call, considering the complex environment in Pakistan, it was the right decision at that moment. This process underscored the importance of community ownership... community engagement is essential to address their specific issues and challenges effectively.'[62]

57 Interview 9
58 Interview 4
59 Interview 4
60 Interviews 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14
61 Interview 4
62 Interview 8



SECTION III: SIX STEPS TO ENSURING COMMUNITY ACCESS TO EVALUATION FINDINGS

Despite the promising practices discussed above paving a way for successful engagement with communities in evaluation processes, this research found that rarely were all the promising practices being employed in a holistic or systematic process. With all the barriers that are getting in the way of community engagement, it is important that practitioners follow a simple process that considers all the necessary steps of engagement – from the beginning to the middle and through to the end of an evaluation.

This research proposes six steps to ensuring that communities can access evaluation findings based on existing guidelines and the promising practices identified above.

Figure 3. Six steps to ensuring community access to evaluation findings

STEP 1: INVOLVING COMMUNITIES IN THE PLANNING AND DESIGN OF THE EVALUATION

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step focuses on ensuring community representatives are involved in the initial design phase of the evaluation and seeking their input on evaluation objectives, methodologies and key evaluation questions.

We found that key to making the evaluation process and outputs meaningful is to involve communities right from the start. This means that making evaluation findings accessible is not just a post-evaluation task; rather, it needs to be a priority before an evaluation commences. Specifying this as a requirement in the evaluation contract or TOR, supported with corresponding resources, is important. Several M&E practitioners and consultants reflected that the more inclusive and transparent the evaluation process is from the beginning, the more likely findings will be shared and received by communities.[63]

> 'Socialise the evaluation before you actually do it but people need time to process the information so communities are aware and can create an enabling environment and space for the evaluation.'[64]

Involving communities in the evaluation planning process opens up different opportunities. For evaluators, it helps to understand their audience (communities) and manage their expectations.[65] For communities, it allows them to understand not only why the evaluation is being conducted, but also enables them to provide input into the methodology and jointly articulate the criteria and intended outcomes of the evaluation.[66] Some M&E consultants shared that it builds a sense of confidence and ownership in the project and challenges the assumption that evaluators possess the ultimate understanding of the issues and opportunities that arose from the project.[67] Especially for evaluations adapting global standards and criteria (e.g. OECD DAC criteria for evaluations), it is critical to be able to articulate what they mean and what these are for, and consult communities whether there are additional criteria not included in the evaluation.

> 'Can we effectively communicate these criteria to individuals, including those with limited education or even highly educated individuals? Furthermore, can we explain to them the benefits of understanding and engaging with these criteria?'[68]

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE: Avenues to ensuring communities understand the purpose of the evaluation could include community discussions, Q&A sessions, requests for input into design of exercises or activities. Communities can also be involved in mechanisms such as consultative groups or advisory boards, with diverse representation (acknowledging power dynamics) to ensure different voices may be heard. Advisory groups have been described as a way to formalise partnerships between researchers and communities and as providing 'a mechanism for communities to assume a leadership role in research activities.'[69] They can help to promote inclusion and equity through a community-based participation approach, from the earliest stage of project design and ethics through to data collection, analysis, dissemination, and debriefing.

63 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14
64 Interview 3
65 Group discussion 1 & 2; Interviews 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14
66 Interviews 8, 9
67 Group discussion 1 & 2; Interviews 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14
68 Interview 12
69 RA Afifi et al, 'Implementing community-based participatory research with communities affected by humanitarian crises: The potential to recalibrate equity and power in vulnerable contexts,' American Journal of Community Psychology, 2020, p. 388.

STEP 2: INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY IN GATHERING DATA

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step is about engaging the community in the process of collecting data to ensure data collected is more comprehensive, accurate and reflective of the community's experiences and knowledge.

Involving the community in the data gathering process recognises that they are not just sources of information, but facilitators and conduits of information exchange. This part of the process is not only concerned with the participation of communities as key informants, but the roles they play in ensuring that a valid spectrum of views are consulted, especially accessing minority views, which can be a challenge in conflict situations where expressing opinions might not be difficult but also dangerous.[70]

Some of our participants shared that identifying the role of communities in the data collection process is intrinsically linked to the first step, and can support the later stages of the dissemination of findings.[71] As communities understand the purpose of the evaluation, they can help identify ways to support the data collection process and support in the dissemination process by identifying ways to adapt the information to an individual community's context and needs.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE: Most of the experience shared in this step pointed to the role of community members, particularly community leaders, as community facilitators. Whilst external evaluators or researchers play a role of enumerators and interviewers, community facilitators can help to identify key informants, provide translations where needed, and support the dissemination process at the later stage.

STEP 3: WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES TO IDENTIFY THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE EVALUATION FINDINGS ARE ACCESSIBLE AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step focuses on consulting communities to pinpoint any cultural sensitivities and determine the most effective method for making evaluation findings accessible.

Our research found that this step helps map contextual factors or accessibility barriers at play that need to be considered in adapting the language or format of outputs to make it accessible and engaging (as discussed in the next step below). Similarly, sharing evaluation findings in a culturally sensitive manner considers the unique cultural contexts and values of the community. M&E practitioners strongly suggest that cultural norms within a research site can also shape the sharing of evaluation findings.[72] In some cultures, open and direct communication is encouraged, while in others, there may be a preference for indirect or non-confrontational approaches. A number of participants stressed that evaluators need to be aware of and respect these cultural norms when sharing findings.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE: Mapping out the community with representatives and understanding potential barriers to communities accessing evaluation results, and having a collective discussion about how different groups are likely to relate to and engage with the findings.

70 RA Afifi et al., 'Implementing community-based participatory research,' 2020.
71 Interviews 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 14
72 Group discussions 1 & 2; Interviews 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 14

STEP 4: ADAPTING THE FORMAT AND LANGUAGE OF THE FINDINGS TO MAKE THEM MORE ACCESSIBLE

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step focuses on the process of adapting communication methods to suit the preferences and accessibility of diverse community members. This step of the process considers the manner in which the results *(what information is to be shared) are adapted, the audience (who) and their needs (why the information is relevant to them).*

Throughout this research and in numerous evaluation guidelines, a key learning proposed is to make sure that those receiving information comprehend the results and recommendations effectively. Guidance on adapting communication methods to suit the preferences and accessibility of diverse community members is not new, in fact many of these considerations are common across different communication strategies employed both within and outside of the humanitarian sector. It is also important to test whether the format, approach and language to which findings are shared are working for communities, and adapt if it isn't.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE: Translation into local languages / developing stories to share messages in various formats (audio, use of photos and video to share messages / pictorial representation / developing customised one-pagers for different groups in the community

STEP 5: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITIES TO DISCUSS THE FINDINGS AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON HOW THE INFORMATION RESONATES

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step includes conducting sessions during which communities can help in the analysis, discuss findings and provide feedback. It encourages an open dialogue and a two-way communication between evaluators and communities to ensure clarity in the findings and co-create recommendations with them.

This step entails overcoming logistics and resourcing constraints in order for communities to take part in these discussions. For example, evaluation teams need to be prepared to shoulder the associated travel and meeting costs for community members. Additionally, selecting an appropriate time that aligns with the community's availability and engagement levels is vital. It is also important for evaluation teams to consider and plan for power dynamics when there are diverse representation within communities.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE: Data validation workshops / informal communication networks / lessons learned discussions with different groups in community

STEP 6: INFORMING COMMUNITIES HOW THE FINDINGS HAVE BEEN USED

WHAT THIS STEP ENTAILS: This step is about letting affected communities know if and how evaluation findings have been utilised and/or resulted in any change. This can include providing updates on how the findings influenced decisions to reinforce the connection between the evaluation process and positive changes within their community.

Whilst there are some examples of including a 'management response' to evaluation results which supports accountability,[73] we did not find examples of how this information is communicated back to communities. In this step is important to acknowledge the potentially long, timeframe differences between sharing the evaluation findings and coming back to communities to share and discuss how the findings and their recommendations were used by commissioning agencies. Other implications that need to be considered is whether it is the evaluation team coming back or might it be operational staff. Our respondents raised important points to consider when executing this step:

> 'The issue of credibility arises when there is a disconnect between the community's input and the subsequent actions taken by program managers or decision-makers. It calls into question the legitimacy of the evaluation process.'[74]

> 'If community members are not kept informed about the results of previous evaluations or how their feedback has been used, they may become disengaged.'[75]

73 See examples from A Hallam, Harnessing the Power of Evaluation in Humanitarian Action, 2011.
74 Interview 10
75 Interview 9

CONCLUSION

This report examines the opportunities and barriers to ensuring that evaluation findings are accessible to crisis-affected communities. Our aim is to help humanitarian organisations, donors, and other commissioning agencies in improving the follow-through on the humanitarian sector's commitment to sharing evaluation findings with crisis-affected communities in a meaningful and participatory manner.

While there is broader recognition among humanitarian agencies, donors, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning practitioners regarding the importance of sharing evaluation outcomes with participants, particularly crisis-affected communities, this remains an area that is well-acknowledged on paper but significantly lags in practice. For a sector that prioritises principled work and learning, failing to fulfill this commitment or neglecting to invest in opportunities for crisis-affected communities to co-create, discuss, and utilise evaluation findings may hinder the sector's ability to truly meet their needs. We recognise that, as M&E practitioners shared in this research, charting a course to address this challenge is much harder.

We hope that this piece and the outlined steps support the sector in making evaluation findings accessible to communities more frequently, and that we begin to build a stronger evidence base of promising practices and ways to overcome barriers that may arise.

Furthermore, this research raises broader questions that we have been exploring under the Power, People, and Local Leadership research stream – namely, whose voices are being heard in humanitarian decision-making and why. By examining who contributes to processes such as evaluations and the limited opportunities for communities to do so, we must problematise the ultimate purpose of evaluation and learning, and the impact of not doing so for the sector but also on crisis-affected communities themselves.

As shared by a research participant, placing crisis-affected communities in a position where they are repeatedly questioned by different consultants and organisations but left unaware of the outcomes of the information they provided, particularly during a difficult time when they are trying to recover from a crisis, can be likened to an 'act of violence and abuse'. Proactively sharing evaluation findings (or research, for that matter) must be a collective responsibility. It is imperative to understand that everyone has a role to play in ensuring that communities have the confidence to collaborate with humanitarian agencies, consultants, and research organisations, knowing they are treated as co-creators of knowledge and will be informed of the outcomes of their contributions.