The IFRC Asia Pacific Roadmap for Community Engagement and Accountability: Accelerating a regional approach

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**CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA)**

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# Executive summary

*"CEA should not be seen merely as a series of actions or training but as an embodiment of the Red Cross principles, emphasizing people-to-people connections, genuine community engagement and integration into local cultural practices."*

Programme coordinator, IFRC

Community engagement and accountability (CEA) is a way of working that recognizes and values community members as equal partners. It makes sure their opinions are heard and used to design and guide our work.

*The Asia Pacific Roadmap for Community Engagement and Accountability* (*The Roadmap*) is a plan for improving community engagement and accountability across the Asia Pacific region. It is based on input from 38 people during interviews, two focus group discussions, a forcefield analysis and a literature review of previous research and case studies.

*The Roadmap* identifies eight current enablers of effective community engagement and accountability (CEA):

* We have an established and strong volunteer network.
* We recognize opportunities to build on existing relationships with partners and communities.
* The *Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability* demand action.
* We have access to good practices globally and from the Asia Pacific region.
* There is a high level of community trust in National Societies among people familiar with them.
* CEA in emergency responses provides valuable lessons for improved CEA mainstreaming in development programmes.
* We have dedicated and eager National Society CEA focal points across the region.
* There is emerging support for community engagement and accountability in the Asia Pacific region.

It identifies three barriers to implementing CEA practices efficiently:

* A perceived lack of evidence is preventing senior leadership buy-in.
* There are few explicit mentions of community engagement and accountability in most strategies, policies and structures.
* A short-term outlook for planning and resource allocation for community engagement and accountability.

To build on the enablers and reduce the barriers, Members should work towards three objectives:

* Establish a culture of accountability.
* Increase organizational support and resourcing for community engagement and accountability.
* Share evidence and strengthen Member capacity to promote and implement community engagement and accountability.

*The Roadmap* sets six interim goals and specific actions required to achieve them, assigning responsibility and a suggested priority for each action.

The actions, and therefore achievement of the interim goals and the objectives, rely heavily on strong leadership from the IFRC regional CEA unit and support from senior leadership.

*The* *Roadmap* will strengthen communities’ position at the core of National Societies' initiatives. Actively involving them in decision-making processes will allow their perspectives and preferences to direct development and recovery efforts. *The Roadmap* encourages an anticipatory approach to crisis response, proactively engaging with communities and ensuring they shape their future.

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# Community engagement and accountability is central to the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

*“**Community engagement and accountability (CEA) is a way of working that recognizes and values community members as equal partners. It makes sure their opinions are heard and used to design and guide our work”*

The IFRC *website*[[1]](#footnote-1)

In 2018, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) published *Strategy 2030 A Platform for Change*, [[2]](#footnote-2) which sets out three strategic goals and five global challenges for the current decade. The strategyalso describes seven organizational transformations that we must make to meet the goals and respond to the challenges. The community engagement and accountability approach is integral to *Strategy 2030*. It underpins all three strategic goals, is relevant to at least one of the global challenges, and is central to five of the transformations.

To support the strategy, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement adopted the *Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability* in 2019.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Implementing these goals and commitments at regional level will require a structured approach. *The Asia Pacific Roadmap for Community Engagement and Accountability* (*The Roadmap*) will assist leadership, staff and volunteers of the National Societies, Partner National Societies, IFRC and ICRC to develop, integrate and implement robust practices throughout the region.

Input to *The Roadmap* was generated from several sources:

* previous work by IFRC and CDA on community engagement and accountability in Africa[[4]](#footnote-4)
* interviews with 38 staff members
* desk review of previous case studies and research
* comparison between CEA in Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) and annual plan and budget documents
* focus group discussions
* a forcefield analysis workshop.

Annex 1 contains more detail on the methodology and Annex 2 lists the contributors to the interviews and focus group discussions.

*The Roadmap* analyses the current status of community engagement and accountability in the region and suggests ways to embed the approach more deeply and more effectively in regional operations. The intended audience for *The Roadmap* is senior leadership, CEA focal points and thematic leads. Other interested staff and volunteers are also likely to find the content informative.

# Eight factors enable community engagement and accountability

Our research confirmed eight main factors that contribute to successful community engagement and accountability:

* We have an established and strong volunteer network.
* We recognize opportunities to build on existing relationships with partners and communities.
* The *Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability* demand action.
* We have access to good practices globally and from the Asia Pacific region.
* There is an encouraging level of community trust in National Societies, as shown in the results of the Community Trust Index.
* CEA in emergency responses provides valuable lessons for improved CEA mainstreaming in development programmes
* We have dedicated and eager CEA focal points across the region.
* There is emerging support for community engagement and accountability in the Asia Pacific region.

Each of these enablers is described in more detail in the following subsections.

## We have an established and strong volunteer network

*“We are around because of our volunteers"*

Secretary general, National Society

Participants in our research consistently noted that volunteers are integral to our operational framework. Volunteers promote our presence and relevance in communities across the region. They serve not only as programme implementers but also as trusted sources that strengthen the bond between the National Societies and the community.

The spirit of community engagement and accountability is embedded in the National Societies’ strong network of volunteers. Our volunteers are members of the local community and are sometimes even recipients of the programmes they help to implement. This dual role gives them an intimate understanding of the community's needs and a deep personal investment in the success of each initiative.

Box : From managing misconceptions to building trust in COVID-19 vaccination[[5]](#footnote-5)

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| During the COVID-19 vaccination drives in Banke, Nepal, rumours spread that vaccines were being trialled in low-income countries and that the vaccine caused side effects, including infertility. Consequently, many members of rural communities refused vaccinations.  Nepal Red Cross volunteers went door-to-door to engage with the community and disseminate accurate information on the vaccine. The volunteers also willingly received vaccinations.  As community members realized there were no significant side effects, they spread the word and many brought their own family and friends to get vaccinated. One community member commented, *“When I didn’t get any severe symptoms after vaccination, my trust in the vaccination increased. … I am grateful to the Red Cross volunteers for busting our misconceptions.”* |

## We recognize opportunities to build on existing relationships with partners and communities

*“The health department will have better data than us that we can use for our programmes”*

Secretary general 2, National Society

Many National Societies build ongoing relationships with local actors and communities, through joint programming or through knowledge-sharing networks such as the risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) network. For example, the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia or PMI) co-led the national RCCE network during the COVID-19 pandemic and was officially recognized by the Ministry of Health. The network now comprises over 30 members from NGOs and government agencies. Relationships formed within such networks provide opportunities to collaborate with community organizations, gain funding, ensure a coherent approach and therefore enhance their CEA activities.

In the Solomon Islands, the National Society has worked with a local organization led by people with disabilities. The organization ran a workshop on inclusive engagement, emphasizing the many opportunities for providing more accessible communication formats for people with disabilities.

Box : Harnessing existing partnerships to boost community engagement and accountability

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| The government of Nepal conducts regular social audits to monitor the effectiveness of services relating to health, education, social welfare, environment and local governance. They survey perspectives on transparency, accountability and public participation in government services.  In 2024 the government worked with the Canadian Red Cross Society and the Nepal Red Cross Society to develop questions about Red Cross services and include them in the survey. Such surveys can be limited in reach and scope; however, this example shows how existing relationships and structures can be harnessed to boost understanding of community perceptions. |

## The *Movement-wide Commitments and Minimum Actions for Community Engagement and Accountability* demand action

*The Movement-wide Commitments and Minimum Actions for Community Engagement and Accountability* establish community engagement and accountability as a non-negotiable aspect of the Movement’s strategies, policies and operational procedures. It was unanimously adopted by the Council of Delegates in 2019 as a binding requirement. The imperative for all National Societies to implement the Commitments makes it a powerful enabler of community engagement and accountability in the Asia Pacific region.

Box : Members must meet seven CEA commitments[[6]](#footnote-6)

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| 1. Integrate community engagement and accountability in strategies, policies and procedures 2. Conduct context analysis to address diverse needs 3. Facilitate participation of local people and communities 4. Systematically listen to and act on feedback 5. Ensure transparency in communications 6. Strengthen knowledge and competencies in community engagement 7. Coordinate approaches to community engagement and accountability |

## We have access to good practices globally and from the Asia Pacific region

"We are making sure that the communities’ people are in the driving seat [...] we are gradually bringing the communities to the front."

Health Programme Manager, IFRC/Canadian Red Cross

IFRC is a global and regional leader in CEA.[[7]](#footnote-7) and we are therefore in a strong position to elevate CEA practices through peer-to-peer engagement and mentorship.

Institutionalization of community engagement and accountability depends on evidence-based applications of engagement and accountability principles that show that tailored CEA activities lead to more inclusive and responsive programmes. Leveraging these practices requires diligent documentation so all National Societies can access and adapt these successful models. This approach not only promotes a unified standard of community engagement and accountability across the network but also encourages continuous innovation and improvement in CEA methods.

Our research confirmed that leadership and staff of IFRC Asia Pacific and Partner and Host National Societies in the region acknowledge the significance of community engagement and accountability. They were eager to learn about practical ways to further integrate it into their activities. CEA focal points at all levels have tried to increase interest in and understanding of community engagement and accountability.

Such positive attitudes pave the way for more effective and meaningful interactions with communities, ensuring that programmes are not just informed by the community but are driven by them.

During our research, we observed Red Cross leaders in Nepal actively engaging with volunteers, local government representatives and sectoral groups to improve and expand the sustainability of their programmes. Community members said that they appreciate the information they receive through the volunteers and that leaders listened to feedback.

Box : CEA Hub virtual repository of best practices hosted by the British Red Cross

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| The [Community Engagement Hub](https://communityengagementhub.org) is an online resource created by the British Red Cross and funded by the UK Government. It offers guidance, case studies, training material, toolkits and other resources. Country teams and the IFRC regional CEA unit have contributed resources that are relevant to the local context, many of which have been translated to local languages. At the 2024 regional CEA network workshop, participants highlighted the potential for the Hub to be the one-stop-shop for community engagement and accountability. Its success will rely on the identification, documentation and dissemination of good practices that are being implemented across the Movement. Many such practices are currently undocumented, which limits the potential for knowledge sharing and impact. |

Box : CEA Communities of Practice

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| In 2024, IFRC launch the Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) [Community of Practice](https://communities.ifrc.org/group/6680423bb76564410acaf86d). The aim of this collaborative space is to act as a global community of Red Cross and Red Crescent practitioners working on or with an interest in CEA and accountability to affected populations (AAP). This is a space to connect with other practitioners, facilitate collaboration and peer-to-peer support, and share experiences and best practices. While hosted on an IFRC platform, this community is for all Movement staff and volunteers. It is operated as a complementary resource to the CEA Hub which remains the place to publish published guidance, tools, case studies and other external facing documents. |

## There is an encouraging level of community trust in National Societies, as shown in the results of the Community Trust Index

*“Community engagement and accountability is our gateway to acceptance of the community”*

Technical lead, National Society

A high level of trust between National Societies and the communities they serve is critical for constructive community engagement and accountability. National Societies must value community contributions to decision making, while communities must feel that their opinions and concerns are heard and responded to by the National Societies. It prompts increased participation and a sense of ownership.

Box : The Community Trust Index highlights the importance of community engagement and accountability

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| The IFRC initiated the Community Trust Index in 2022 with support from USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance. The Index is a survey-based assessment tool to measure and cultivate trust between National Societies and the communities they serve. National Societies self-evaluate their performance according to 15 community trust parameters: capability, responsiveness, awareness, accessibility, openness, relevance, effectiveness, kindness, fairness, transparency, engagement, humanism, inclusiveness, neutrality and integrity.  In the Asia Pacific region, National Societies in Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu have implemented the Community Trust Index. In 2024,[[8]](#footnote-8) they scored well in almost all parameters, particularly their capability to support people. However, the results showed that communities sometimes feel unable to share feedback with the National Societies. Addressing this could increase National Societies’ overall ratings on the Community Trust Index and encourage donations and volunteering. It is also likely to increase community use of National Society services.  The 2024 results also revealed that National Societies and their mandates were less known by communities than anticipated. This underlines the importance of regular community engagement at all levels. |

## CEA in emergency responses provides valuable lessons for improved CEA mainstreaming in development programmes

*"We work a lot better in crisis situations... but we should also strengthen our development [approach]"*

Senior manager 1, Partner National Society

Lessons from emergency responses can and should be applied to longer-term development initiatives. Integrating community insight into development programmes is likely to foster deeper trust and engagement with the communities served.

The Asia Pacific region has extensive experience of applying a community engagement and accountability approach in emergency responses, including:

* identifying, accessing and targeting vulnerable groups
* implementing joint initiatives with diverse stakeholders like government, community service organizations and communities themselves
* establishing real-time integration of community feedback for corrective programming

While such actions can be initiated at the time of an emergency, they will be more effective if they build on efforts to build community trust and engagement as part of development programmes.

Box : Innovative strategies for community engagement and accountability with displaced populations in Bangladesh[[9]](#footnote-9)

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| Some 800,000 displaced Myanmar nationals were living in Cox’s Bazaar and Bashan Char Island, Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. The IFRC and Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) could not use established methods of disseminating information and engaging with the community, such as group gatherings, due to health risks. Limited access to and low usage rates of social media made that an ineffective solution. In response, BDRCS volunteers adopted community-specific communication strategies including:   * distributing printed information, education and communication material, like posters * broadcasting messages through mosque loudspeakers * attaching announcements to tuktuks * conducting door-to-door visits * using community leaders to spread awareness and encourage preventive measures.   Community engagement and accountability played a crucial role in collecting feedback from the community through information hubs and in-person visits using tools like the Kobo Toolbox revealed significant challenges, such as the inability to maintain social distancing due to space constraints and difficulties in regular handwashing due to limited water and hygiene resources. Addressing these challenges required BDRCS, the IFRC and relevant Partner National Societies to adapt their strategies in response.  The CEA team and the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) team developed a billboard at an information hub. It provided key contact points and volunteer information, enhancing accountability to the displaced community. The team's efforts to further train volunteers underscored the shift towards viewing operations in the camps as a means to boost dignity and rights. It underscored the importance of co-designing with the communities by ensuring that their feedback was integral to the operational strategy. |

## We have dedicated and eager CEA focal points across the region

*“The event gave me ideas on how to solve my own issues with community engagement and accountability. It is clearer for me now.”*

CEA focal point

Existing CEA focal points, whether from the IFRC, National Societies or Partner National Societies, are an asset for integrating community engagement and accountability across the region. Experienced focal points will increasingly share their experiences with colleagues in events such as the CEA learning workshop organized by IFRC in Malaysia in January 2024. That will build enthusiasm and practical knowledge in the region.

The CEA focal points and the IFRC regional CEA team are transforming community engagement and accountability from a concept into a tangible practice. Together, they:

* advocate for the importance of community engagement and accountability and integrate it into operations
* raise awareness among stakeholders
* ensure community voices are heard and acted on.

Leveraging their expertise and insight is crucial for effective community engagement and accountability.

## There is emerging support for community engagement and accountability in the Asia Pacific region

*"People are talking about community engagement and accountability now …”*

*“That’s good because nobody spoke about it before”*

Staff member, National Society

There is growing acknowledgement and understanding of the need to integrate CEA into operations and programmes. Increased discussion about and attempts to address it will further increase awareness.

Community engagement and accountability is becoming more evident in operational and annual plans. Building on this initial momentum can potentially shift community engagement and accountability from a theoretical concept to an integral part of operations.

CEA practices and priorities in both Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) operations and in Unified (previously Operational) Planning have seen significant development since 2019. In 2019, operational plans included little mention of community engagement and accountability. However, in 2024, community engagement and accountability had a much higher profile, evident in dedicated sections and budgets within both DREF and Unified Planning documents.

Our research identified many barriers to effective community engagement and accountability. The causes and effects of those barriers are inter-related and often reinforce each other (see Annex 1).

The three primary barriers are:

* Senior leadership commitment to community engagement and accountability needs to be clearer.
* Community engagement and accountability is widely viewed as an add-on.
* A short-term outlook for planning and resource allocation prevents long-term integration of community engagement and accountability.

Each of these enablers is described in more detail in the following subsections.

## Senior leadership commitment to community engagement and accountability needs to be clearer

“The main challenge in prioritizing community engagement and accountability is often due to limited knowledge about it. [Some leaders have] little knowledge of community engagement and accountability, so it is not prioritized.”

Assistant manager, National Society

Enhancing and demonstrating leadership understanding and commitment of community engagement and accountability is the first step to achieving significant change throughout the Asia Pacific region. Leaders are a product of power structures, but they also hold the greatest potential to reform them.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The lack of demonstrable leadership buy-in at different levels prevents community engagement and accountability being integrated across the region. Without leadership support, dedicated CEA efforts often are not included in budgets or are the first to be cut.

Community engagement and accountability is included in strategies, policies and procedures and CEA efforts consequently compete with other priorities. Any efforts that are included in programmes are typically isolated from other activities, resulting in insufficient collaboration and implementation between programmes. This lack of visible CEA initiatives makes it difficult to demonstrate their value and reinforces the idea that evidence is lacking.

One senior IFRC leader, commenting on community engagement and accountability, noted, *“I don't really see a compelling, revolutionary change emerging."* However, the type of revolutionary change that initiatives such as the participation revolution under the Grand Bargain were promising need systematic change. This highlights the urgency of maintaining momentum on community engagement and accountability and to ensure its impact is not limited to the project cycle. A decisive “just do it!” attitude, as keenly expressed by several CEA focal points, is helpful but must be built on leadership commitment and action. This involves suggestions towards corrective programming, real-time data collection for risk monitoring, qualitative data for operational decision making, and strong feedback mechanisms.

Activities such as leadership summits offer opportunities to showcase successes, garner wider organizational support and accelerate the integration of community engagement and accountability into programming. Active engagement of senior leaders in accountability-related opportunities demonstrates their priorities and responsiveness towards enabling strong institutional practices. Leadership participation and presence sends a direct message to staff on the importance of community engagement and accountability. Thus, simple measures like adding community engagement and accountability as a standing agenda item in senior management meetings means it will be regularly seen and reviewed.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In our research we noted several factors that seem to indicate a lack of clear leadership commitment to community engagement and accountability:

* an absence of CEA profile in strategies, policies and procedures
* a perceived lack of shared evidence of the value of CEA
* bureaucratic structures that hinder quick approval of CEA activities

### An absence of CEA profile in strategy, policies and procedures

*“Community engagement and accountability guidelines have been developed but are not fully rolled out or understood across all local chapters”*

CEA focal point, National Society

At the end of 2023, only three out of the 38 National Societies in the Asia Pacific region had expressly committed to community engagement and accountability in their mission statements, although another three were in the process of doing so.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Fostering change from within an institution requires leadership and responsibility at all levels.[[13]](#footnote-13) Conversely, a lack of obvious leadership buy-in can stifle and undermine innovative solutions. It is therefore important for leaders to challenge any existing power structures and procedures that do not encourage community engagement and accountability. They must encourage staff to listen and respond to emerging issues among communities.

Additionally, while guidelines for community engagement and accountability have been available locally and Movement-wide since 2017, they are not yet fully integrated. Project teams have little motivation to use the guidance or build in additional CEA activities. There is also some evidence of a lack of willingness to integrate them further. A study conducted in Nepal by the British Red Cross noted that, *“Many people have been working at Red Cross for 30 years. There is an idea that because we are the Red Cross we are already talking to the community and getting their feedback… they don’t want to use the community engagement and accountability resources.”*[[14]](#footnote-14)

### A perceived lack of shared evidence of the value of CEA

*“[There is a lack of] quantitative data and proper counterfactual designs,*[[15]](#footnote-15) *beyond descriptive or perception-based assessments”*

Thematic lead, IFRC

The extensive evidence for CEA within IFRC, available through case studies on the Community Engagement Hub,[[16]](#footnote-16) lacks profile in the Asia Pacific region. Because leaders are unaware of such evidence, they hesitate to fully commit to implementing it. Our research shows that some leaders understand the conceptual value of engaging with communities. However, they feel that they lack evidence to support it.

A senior leader commented that there is a lack of evidence that community engagement and accountability has the *“enhanced visibility we need in the community to be able to effectively deliver aid.”*

### Bureaucratic structures that hinder quick approval of CEA activities

We must be responsive to community input to show we’re listening and reacting to what people tell us; slow approvals can undermine community trust.

Many organizational processes were established some time ago, without being modified to account for relatively new concepts, including community engagement and accountability. In many instances they – presumably unintentionally – work against any attempts to listen to and respond to community perspectives.

## Community engagement and accountability is widely viewed as an add-on

*“Institutionalizing community engagement and accountability can be difficult without a formal policy,”*

Staff member, National Society

Data collected in 2023[[17]](#footnote-17) show that of 38 National Societies in the Asia Pacific region:

* 35 have not yet formalized a CEA policy, although seven were in the process of finalizing one
* 33 have no CEA strategy, although another 18 were working on one with the support of the regional CEA team.

When completed, more than half of the National Societies will be able to formalize their community engagement and accountability through a strategy and 25% will have a policy to guide them. This shows the significant progress made by National Societies in establishing the mandate for community engagement and accountability.

During our research, CEA focal points noted that while it is important to have a written mandate, it is only one of the necessary first steps to strengthen institutionalization. Unless community engagement and accountability is explicitly included in National Societies’ strategies, policies and procedures, leadership commitment remains questionable. It can lead to inconsistent implementation of CEA initiatives. The lack of specific policies, procedures and structures makes it difficult for Members to demonstrate a strong claim for funding for CEA activities. This can in turn generate:

* a project-based approach to community engagement and accountability
* limited recognition of the value of CEA officers and focal points
* internal structures and thinking that do not value the contribution of community engagement and accountability

### A project-based approach to community engagement and accountability

*“Community engagement and accountability has become project-based rather than integrated as a continuous and consistent practice across the organization”*

Manager, IFRC

Many National Societies in the Asia Pacific region apply community engagement and accountability as a project add-on rather than as a cross-cutting issue to be integrated in all programmes and activities.

As a result, community engagement and accountability is often siloed, without being highlighted internally or coordinated across programmes. When community engagement and accountability is absent from strategies, budgets and job descriptions, staff are unlikely to understand whether and how to implement it. It may be viewed as the responsibility of the designated CEA officer or focal point, rather than a shared responsibly across all roles.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The absence of strategies, policies and procedures leads to inconsistent, sporadic or ineffective approaches to community engagement. This means that National Societies do not benefit from the trust that targeted and sustained CEA efforts can build.

### Limited recognition of the value of CEA officers and focal points

During our force field analysis, CEA focal points shared that community engagement and accountability is often perceived as unimportant since there is no policy. They feel that this leads to resistance and lacklustre integration into programmes.

“*We did the minimum standards assessment [for community engagement and accountability]. People said they were doing what was in the standards but there is no motivation from the team to take action after the assessment*,” shared a National Societies CEA focal point.

Activities to promote community engagement and accountability are inconsistent and often project-based. Addressing community engagement and accountability in that way leads to a high turnover of CEA focal points and trained volunteers, which limits institutional learning.

In 2015, one IFRC adviser, based in South Asia, worked on CEA. With the growth of humanitarian responses in Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, a need for CEA focal points emerged within these National Societies.

In 2019, seven countries in the Asia Pacific region had CEA focal points and officers. By 2024 the number had grown to 30 countries, plus four regional roles that could support countries not prioritized by a specific grant or Partner National Society.[[19]](#footnote-19) Several National Societies share the focal point responsibility between two to three individuals. Additionally, some Partner National Societies have CEA focal points and several National Societies, such as Pakistan and Indonesia, have CEA focal points at branch level as well.

However, three of the CEA staff roles for IFRC at regional and Country Cluster Delegation level are ending in late 2024.

While the overall increase in CEA focal points is promising, the tenure and experience of these individuals varies. For example, only nine National Societies employ CEA focal points who have held the post for three to four years.[[20]](#footnote-20)

CEA roles are crucial for engaging with communities, understanding their needs and ensuring their voices are heard in emergency responses and programmes. Without a budget for these efforts, National Societies may struggle to maintain consistent and meaningful engagement with communities. That is likely to lead to reduced understanding of the needs, vulnerabilities, capacities and strengths of the communities and to low levels of trust and credibility. Investing in CEA safeguards the impact of National Societies’ work and the trust communities place in them, as we have seen in the Africa region (see Figure 2).

Figure : In Africa, CEA investment has had several positive impacts

A graph of blue and green bars

Description automatically generated

### Internal structures and thinking that do not value the contribution of community engagement and accountability

*"Our institutional thinking process [is] inward thinking. We only train our own people, we do programmes within ourselves”*

Manager, Partner National Society

Participants in our research reported some resistance to sharing decision making with communities. They noted an associated reluctance to adapt outdated, bureaucratic internal structures and procedures based on feedback. A Senior IFRC representative shared that *"I think because [community engagement and accountability] is a shift in power, not everybody really wants it...."* This seems to reflect a lack of internal alignment around the value of CEA and therefore how it should be prioritized and implemented.

There are few, if any, internal structures that encourage or require staff to:

* provide feedback and discussion on CEA
* listen to and reflect on community perspectives
* change their behaviour and listen differently.[[21]](#footnote-21)

An IFRC thematic lead expressed that “*We are not necessarily listening to people to deliver their assistance*." The failure to engage effectively with communities hampers programme co-redesign and adaptation. It can result in services that fail to meet the real needs of the community. *“I'm not seeing a lot of evidence yet that... what is delivered within a community over time adapts to need based on feedback,"* reflects an IFRC senior leader.

A National Society CEA staff member believes that community engagement and accountability could help National Societies be more accountable for how funds are used and show impact to communities. “By engaging communities, our programmes and projects could be more relevant to actual needs,” they observed. A new CEA focal point emphasized that, “We have to be much more driven by local perspectives and demands.” They added that volunteers can aid in community engagement and accountability.

Commitment seven in the Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability requires that “Movement components commit to coordinating their approaches to community engagement and accountability when working in the same context, including with relevant external partners, in order to increase coherence and consistency, avoid duplication and improve effectiveness and efficiency.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The most recent Community Trust Index[[23]](#footnote-23) confirms the need to improve transparency, particularly in terms of acknowledging and addressing any mistakes in providing support. It also highlights the need to enhance feedback mechanisms and develop initiatives to increase direct interaction with community members, ensuring their needs and concerns are actively addressed.

Yet our research revealed some reluctance to be transparent, with an associated loss of opportunities to:

* share resources
* achieve wider reach
* increase visibility
* access vulnerable groups.

## A short-term outlook for planning and resource allocation prevents long-term integration of community engagement and accountability

A short-term perspective on budgeting and resource allocation hampers the ability of National Societies to consistently and effectively engage with communities. In one National Society, 85% of the entire budget for community engagement and accountability is sourced from donors, while the remaining 15% come from various sources.[[24]](#footnote-24) In this scenario, existing CEA staff and hotline volunteers are financed by Partner National Societies’ support, with no confirmed assurances for funding beyond 2024. Long-term funding is crucial to improve the implementation and effectiveness of community engagement and accountability across the organization and move away from the current project-based approach. Funding for community engagement and accountability is typically tied to programmes or operations, often depending on external partners. This generates uncertainty in long-term support, which in turn leads to:

* reliance on donor-driven CEA initiatives
* a view that CEA “competes” with other cross-cutting issues in budgets
* a lack of collaboration between teams involved in CEA activities.

### Reliance on donor-driven CEA initiatives

*“If [community engagement and accountability] is not a donor requirement […], I think it's still a bit difficult to see things happen”*

Staff member, Partner National Society

Donor-driven community engagement and accountability initiatives often reflect donor interests, without actively seeking to understand actual community needs.[[25]](#footnote-25) This can lead to tokenistic engagement of communities to meet a certain donor requirement rather than incorporating the genuine perspectives of the community. This limits the scope and effectiveness of CEA activities and hinders the ability to build sustainable, community-focused strategies.

When donor support ends, so does the ability to continue the work. This happens because the support was not intended to be part of the organization's usual way of doing things. *“The financial investment is only given to the project where the donor is supporting. So it doesn't reach the whole National Society. When the donor leaves, often that capacity goes too, because it's not really a system strengthening, it's project oriented,”* a Partner National Society staff member shared.

An IFRC manager reflected that *“community engagement and accountability need not be expensive. There are ways to support shared community engagement and accountability services, such as fee-based pricing and sharing a percentage from programmes.”*

To overcome the current reliance on donor funding we must explore opportunities to improve project sustainability. For example, we could:

* develop innovative funding models
* co-design programmes with donors
* establish strategic partnerships
* co-finance shared CEA support services.

### A view that CEA competes with other cross-cutting issues in budgets

When faced with many competing priorities, programme managers are often unable to include dedicated CEA resources. In instances where such resources are included, budgetary constraints mean they tend to be used in an add-on capacity, rather than integrated throughout the programme. This in turn limits opportunities for collaboration and implementation between programmes.

During our research, several representatives of IFRC Regional, Partner National Societies and National Societies acknowledged that community engagement and accountability is sometimes reduced when budgets are limited. They explained that this was due to limited resources. They further claimed that the lack of visible evidence of the impact of community engagement and accountability makes it difficult to generate additional funding for such activities.

Given that clear evidence of the value of community engagement and accountability does exist, claims to the contrary suggest that the evidence is either not visible or not trusted. Either explanation is problematic or warrants further investigation.

### A lack of collaboration between teams involved in CEA activities

*“Community engagement and accountability [is] sometimes being seen as a separate programme rather than a core approach to be integrated across all work”*

Senior health officer, IFRC

The siloed approach to CEA, where each programme addresses it according to the specific context, with limited resources and without access to others’ experience, is not conducive to knowledge building.

Not surprisingly, the inconsistent prioritization and implementation limits the effectiveness of community engagement and accountability in the region. That pattern seems to reinforce leadership’s ongoing reluctance to embrace CEA.

# Overcoming the barriers will require collective and collaborative shifts

This collective and collaborative shift requires the active participation of all Movement components to ensure the effective implementation of the approach and continuous coordination at all levels.

Our research generated numerous suggestions for overcoming the barriers to more effective community engagement and accountability in the Asia Pacific region. We’ve grouped them under three broad objectives:

Objective 1: Encourage an internal culture of community engagement and accountability.

Objective 2: Increase organizational support and resources for community engagement and accountability.

Objective 3: Share evidence and strengthen Member capacity to implement community engagement and accountability.

These objectives, and the interim goals for achieving them, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (see Figure 3). They require collective and collaborative shifts across the region.

Figure : Objectives and interim goals for integrating community engagement and accountability

Objective 1

Objective 2

Objective 3

**Establish a culture of accountability**

Create institutional space to reflect

Establish formal CEA roles and responsibilities

**Increase organisational support and resourcing**

Invest in people with CEA expertise

Fund CEA integration, not just for specific programs

**Share evidence and strengthen Member capacity**

Enhance visibility of CEA impacts

Increase CEA capacity

Strengthen coordination with external CEA partners

This section describes interim goals and a series of actions for achieving each objective. Together, the objectives, interim goals and actions create a strategic approach that will:

* embed community engagement and accountability in organizational structures at multiple levels and cultivate proactive behaviours
* establish practices that are relevant at the regional level and effective and sustainable at the country level
* involve people at every level – including senior leadership, technical teams and CEA focal points – to ensure that communities are at the heart of all our activities.

The objectives, interim goals, actions and responsibilities described below are not prescriptive. Rather they are a guide for moving the region to a more institutionalized approach to community engagement and accountability.

## Objective 1: Establish a culture of accountability

Putting the interests of people and communities at the centre of decision making ensures that humanitarian action leads to the best outcomes and results for them.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the Asia Pacific region, there is a need for leaders to foster, cultivate and model accountability to actively support community engagement and institutionalize it as a regular practice.

In countries where leaders actively encourage community involvement and take pride in internal and external transparency, there is a strong push to make accountability a formal part of the system. When leaders set up ways to check their own performance, it helps them be more accountable to the communities they serve, their partners and organizations. This happens not only through policies and actions that show commitment to community engagement and accountability, but also when leaders themselves take part in activities involving the community, and in making space in decision-making events to discuss impact and evidence of community engagement and accountability.

Making these changes within an organization requires leaders at all levels to take responsibility. They should lead by example, listen to the community, get involved in activities related to accountability, and provide support for accountability efforts.

Promoting a culture of accountability internally and externally will contribute to reducing all three recognized barriers (see Section 3) to community engagement and accountability:

To establish a culture of accountability, we should work towards two interim goals:

* Create institutional space for leadership to reflect on the practical value of strong community engagement and accountability.
* Integrate community engagement and accountability into operations.

### Interim goal 1.1: Create institutional space for leadership to reflect on the practical value of strong community engagement and accountability

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Priority*** |
| Model accountability, for example:   * Establish an internal feedback mechanism * Provide opportunities for staff and volunteers to reflect on CEA progress regularly * Establish shared decision-making processes * Incorporate 360o reviews and community engagement and accountability-related performance indicators into leadership evaluations | Leadership  CEA focal points  Human resources department | High |
| Simplify the approval process for community engagement and accountability activities | Leadership | High |
| Nominate senior regional community engagement and accountability advocates, (SGs, Presidents, and senior leaders) who can raise community engagement and accountability in high-level meetings and amongst their peers. Link this group to the global ambassador network | Leadership  CEA focal points | High |
| Review progress against the *Movement-wide Minimum Commitments on Community Engagement and Accountability* at senior leadership meetings. Will require a compliance plan. Consider making this a key performance indicator | Leadership | High |
| Prioritize active participation in workshops, discussions and peer-to-peer learning sessions that focus on community engagement and accountability | Leadership | Medium |

### Interim goal 1.2: Integrate community engagement and accountability into operations

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Priority*** |
| Create community engagement and accountability plans for each country. Assign roles and responsibilities among IFRC, NS, PNS and other relevant partners | Leadership  CEA focal points | High |
| Include community engagement and accountability in other thematic policies and strategies to ensure community engagement and accountability is mainstreamed | Country/  regional managers  National Societies  Department and programme leads  IFRC thematic leads | High |
| Designate community engagement and accountability focal points within each sector or unit to:   * support the integration of community engagement and accountability activities in their sector * monitor progress * provide technical information to help answer community feedback | Country level | High |
| Initiate regular (at least quarterly) campaigns to emphasize that community engagement and accountability is a core cultural value | Country/ regional  Comms  CEA focal points | High |
| Advocate for CEA policies, strategies, and action plans using the CEA guide and toolkit | CEA teams | Medium |
| Ensure that CEA policies, once established, are widely communicated, understood and adhered to | Leadership  CEA focal points | High |
| Advocate for community engagement and accountability to be a regular agenda item at senior leadership meetings, providing an opportunity to discuss specific targets and share community input | CEA focal points  National Societies focal points | Medium |
| Encourage participatory monitoring and evaluation processes to jointly assess the effectiveness and impact of programmes. Pilot revised CEA core indicators to track the effectiveness and impact of community engagement and accountability initiatives across operations and programmes | PMER  CEA teams | Medium / Low |

## Objective 2: Increase organizational support and resourcing for community engagement and accountability

Within the Asia Pacific region there are very few full-time roles dedicated to community engagement and accountability.

Providing stable and institutionalized human and financial resources to support community engagement and accountability can significantly influence and transform operational approaches, making it a core strategy rather than a sporadically implemented activity.

Increasing organizational support and resourcing is likely to reduce all three barriers to community engagement and accountability (see Section 3).

To increase organizational support and resourcing for community engagement and accountability, National Societies should work towards two interim goals:

* Invest in people with CEA expertise.
* Ensure enough funding for community engagement and accountability to consistently become part of standard practices, not just limited to specific programmes.

### Interim goal 2.1: Invest in people with CEA expertise

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Prioritization*** |
| Appoint CEA focal points within National Societies HQ and branches, whose role it is to:  Mainstream community engagement and accountability within the National Society  Ensure long-term technical support at the regional level for organizational change | Country/ regional leadership | High |
| Support and encourage CEA focal points (and appropriate regional staff) to identify CEA opportunities and funding options | Partnerships and Resource Mobilization Department  CEA teams and focal points  Senior leadership | High |

### Interim goal 2.2: Ensure enough funding for community engagement and accountability to consistently become part of standard practices, not just limited to specific programmes and operations

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Prioritization*** |
| Commit to all programme and operational budgets including a consistent minimum percentage for community engagement and accountability before senior management signs off | Leadership / senior management | High |
| Include funding to institutionalize community engagement and accountability in annual budgets at all levels | Country/regional leadership | High |
| Incorporate evidence of community engagement and accountability impact into resource mobilization initiatives to raise interest and funding for community engagement and accountability | CEA teams and focal points  PRD | high |
| Identify opportunities for large-scale resource mobilization to support work on institutionalizing community engagement and accountability.  For example, create a database of donors that have funded community engagement and accountability, dedicated core funding for community consultations as part of any programme/proposal development process, etc. | CEA teams and focal points  PRD  Sectors  Programmatic leads | High |
| Include community engagement and accountability in annual work plans, budgets, and performance targets | Sectors  CEA teams and focal points | High |

## Objective 3: Share evidence and strengthen mutual CEA capacity[[27]](#footnote-27)

To institutionalize community engagement and accountability as a way of working, all staff at different levels need to follow these principles every day. Building on an organizational culture that views every success and failure as a learning opportunity is essential. This includes documenting and sharing lessons learned, celebrating successes and openly discussing challenges as a way to identify future improvements. Promoting cross-departmental projects and teams focused on community engagement and accountability objectives leads to a more cohesive approach to applying community engagement and accountability across various areas of work.

Sharing evidence and strengthening CEA capacity is likely to reduce all three recognized barriers to community engagement and accountability (see Section 3).

To share evidence and strengthen CEA capacity, Members should work towards three interim goals:

* Enhance visibility of community engagement and accountability impact.
* Increase capacity in National Societies to institutionalize community engagement and accountability.
* Strengthen coordination with external community engagement and accountability partners.

### Interim goal 3.1: Enhance visibility of community engagement and accountability impact

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Priority*** |
| Encourage programme and operational teams to regularly discuss community feedback and how to act on it, so staff start to value it[[28]](#footnote-28) | Leadership  CEA focal points | High |
| Invite senior leaders within National Societies and at the regional level to visit projects with strong community engagement and accountability integration/activities to see community engagement and accountability in action and win them as advocates | Thematic and technical leads  CEA teams and focal points | High |
| Support in-person peer learning visits or learning exchanges to build and learn from local experts on community engagement and accountability best practices | CEA teams and focal points | High |
| Expand community engagement and accountability impact research from Indonesia to other countries | CEA teams and focal points | Medium |
| Continue to leverage the Community Engagement Hub to share region-specific community engagement and accountability tools, case stories and best practices, with support from the communications team for countries to produce blogs, webinars and workshops on their activities for the Hub | CEA teams and focal points  Comms | Medium |

### Interim goal 3.2: Increase capacity in National Societies to institutionalize community engagement and accountability

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Priority*** |
| Include community engagement and accountability e-learning modules in mandatory staff onboarding e-learning | Country/ regional | High |
| Shift from training to a mentoring approach and peer exchange for National Societies to institutionalize community engagement and accountability best practices, policies and strategies | CEA teams and focal points | Medium |
| Follow up regularly with participants from previous community engagement and accountability training to document achievements and provide additional support for any knowledge and capacity gaps | CEA teams and focal points | Medium |
| Clarify roles and responsibilities related to community engagement and accountability in job descriptions and annual objectives to share responsibility for community engagement and accountability | Human Resources Department | Medium |
| Establish national working groups or committees comprising staff from various National Societies departments, IFRC, Partner National Societies, and ICRC to collaboratively develop an integrated approach to community engagement and accountability that emphasizes its importance as a fundamental methodology rather than a separate project | Leadership  Community  CEA focal points  Partner National Societies | Medium |

### Interim goal 3.3: Strengthen coordination with external community engagement and accountability partners

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Actions*** | ***Who*** | ***Priority*** |
| Reach out to partner organizations to fill gaps in supporting marginalized communities and producing accessible content (for people with disabilities) | Protection Gender and Inclusion teams  CEA teams and focal points | High / Medium |
| Advocate for CEA focal points to actively participate in external coordination mechanisms, such as working groups for:   * accountability to affected populations * risk communication and community engagement * communication with communities * community engagement and accountability | Leadership  CEA teams and focal points | Medium |
| Develop memoranda of understanding with community engagement and accountability partners at regional level if not available at global level (for example, Clear Global, Internews, BBC Media Action) | CEA focal points  PRD | Low |

# Annex 1: Methodology

*The Asia Pacific Roadmap* was developed by the Asia Pacific region of the IFRC and the regional CEA team, with the support of CDA Collaborative Learning (CDA).

The primary evidence for analysis was gathered between October 2023 and February 2024 and came from a prioritized set of contributors identified by IFRC. They included technical and programmatic leads, volunteers and senior leadership across the region. The analysis and actions detailed in *The Roadmap* reflect the expertise of those contributors and their insight about current challenges and emerging opportunities for the Asia Pacific region.

CDA interviewed 38 key informants (listed in Annex 2) and conducted two focus group discussions involving a further 20 people. Additionally, 22 CEA officers and focal points participated in a force field analysis workshop.[[29]](#footnote-29) The workshop authenticated and contextualized the Africa Roadmap and the institutional systems within the Movement and considered its applicability to the Asia Pacific region. It also helped validate the most important enablers of and barriers to community engagement and accountability. The verbal input from the contributors was supplemented with document review and observation of related activities.

The force field analysis workshop was conducted during a CEA regional network meeting in Malaysia from January 23 to 26, 2024.

Several key informants were interviewed at the community engagement and accountability regional network meeting, which was attended by 16 National Societies, seven IFRC staff and six Partner National Society CEA focal points.

As well as face-to-face meetings, staff that influence programming in the Asia Pacific region were interviewed over Zoom. This included staff from IFRC Asia Pacific, ICRC, Partner National Societies and National Societies.

Additionally, existing case studies from other countries were summarized to share evidence around community engagement and accountability's impact on programming.

***Limitations and challenges***

Due to budgetary and administrative constraints, the research for *The Roadmap* had to be conducted between October 2023 and February 2024. Additionally, part of the research was conducted over the December holidays and therefore the team experienced delays in scheduling interviews and focus group discussions.

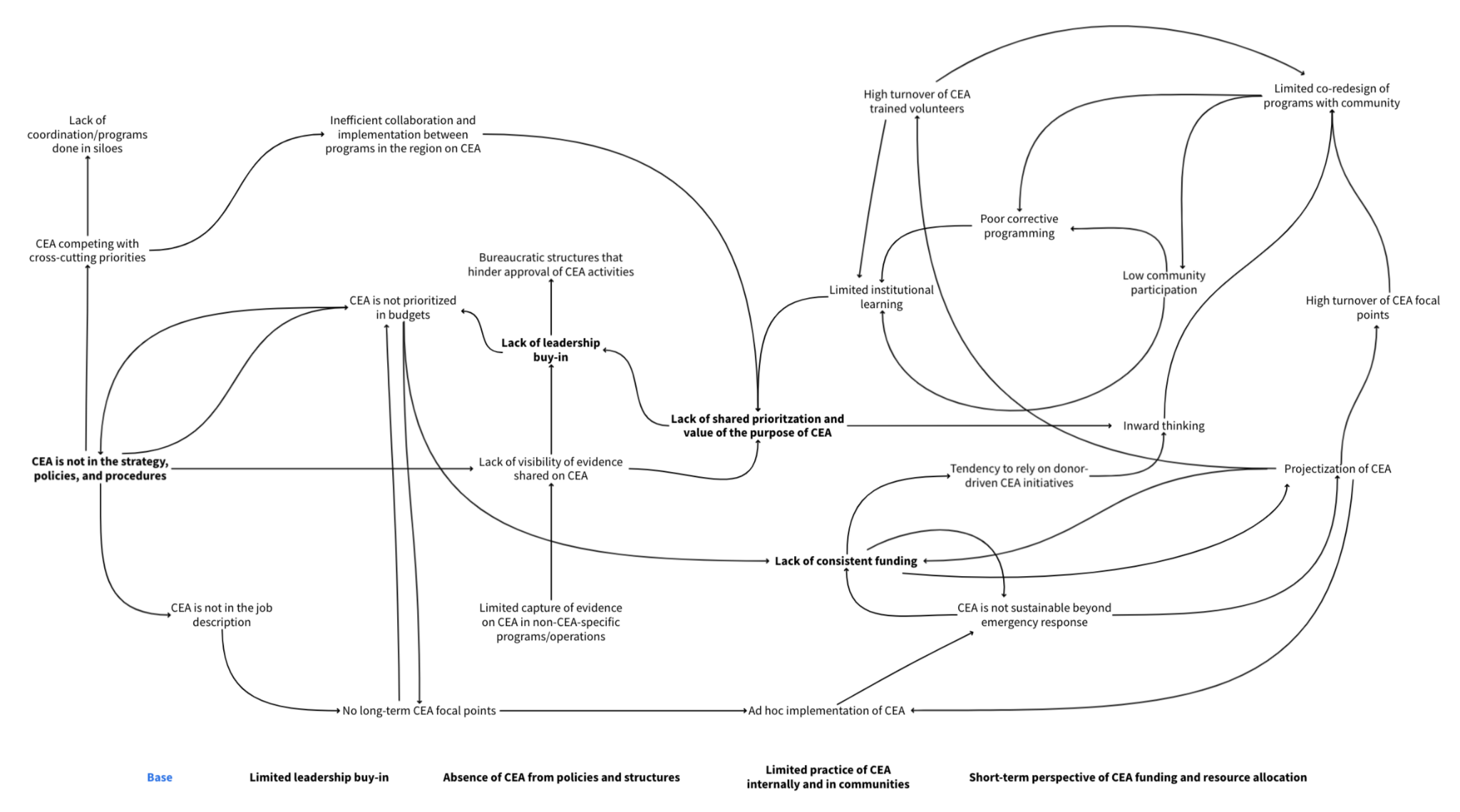
***Systems mapping to interpret the data***

CDA used a systems mapping approach to analyze the quantitative data they collected.

A systems map is a visual representation of the interconnected elements, relationships and reinforcing loops within a complex system, such as that used to implement community engagement and accountability within IFRC in the Asia Pacific region. The systems map that CDA developed for this research (Figure A1) provides a holistic view of the system associated with community engagement and accountability in the region, including key factors influencing its behaviour and outcomes.

Arrows indicate relationships between different elements, with reinforcing loops amplifying certain behaviours and balancing loops stabilizing or counteracting changes. Feedback loops illustrate how changes in one part of the system can influence others, leading to either amplification or regulation of those changes. Key barriers are highlighted in the map by indicating areas where intervention is needed to drive positive change.

Figure A: Systems map developed by CDA



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27. Mutual capacity strengthening is defined as a process of strengthening skills, knowledge, and network contacts in which all actors participate as equal partners (Stopping As Success. 2024. [Mutual Capacity Strengthening Guidelines for Local Ownership](https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/resources/mutual-capacity-strengthening-guidelines-for-transitions-to-local-ownership/)). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. During this time, it’s important to ensure that staff don’t feel punished or penalized, for sharing community concerns or complaints, but rather are informed and assured that all feedback is useful information that helps the programme or operation to improve. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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