

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION



CONTACTS

For feedback, questions and suggestions, please contact us at cea.europe@ifrc.org

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Contact us:

Requests for commercial reproduction should be directed to the IFRC Secretariat:

Address: Chemin des Crêts 17, Petit-Saconnex, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Postal address: P.O. Box 303, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland

T +41 (0)22 730 42 22 | **F** +41 (0)22 730 42 00 | **E** secretariat@ifrc.org | **W** ifrc.org

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Introduction

Community participation has been central to the work of the Red Cross Red Crescent movement since its inception more than 150 years ago. That it is essential to include people and communities in preparing for and responding to the crises which affect them remains as true today as it has always been.

The Movement's strength fundamentally lies in its ties with communities, and ability to work with people to maximise our combined capacities to meet humanitarian needs.

Meaningful participation as a concept offers a route to achieving this, supporting people to actively engage in humanitarian action and decision making, at the same time ensuring that our work is relevant, trusted, and as impactful as possible.

Essential across all Red Cross Red Crescent work, participation can be especially valuable in migration contexts, where people on the move may struggle to have their voices heard. Involving migrants and host communities in decision-making and the delivery of activities not only improves the quality and relevance of our work but also fosters dignity, inclusion, and trust laying a foundation for stronger relationships and, over time, for integration in their new communities. People on the move also bring invaluable skills, insights, and experiences that, when meaningfully included, help ensure our programmes better reflect diverse needs and realities. Despite being



so central to our philosophy and approach, the concept of participation has too often been a source of misunderstanding, anxiety, and overthinking – the imagined challenges and complications creating a reluctance to embark upon participation as an approach.

This guide, drawn together from existing materials and research and input from National Societies across the Region of Europe, seeks to go some small way to rectifying that, setting out real-life examples and practical steps to integrate meaningful participation into our work across a variety of contexts, and ensure that our activities continue to be done together with communities, not to or for them.



FOUNDATIONS

What do we mean by participation, and why does participation matter?

The lack of any common definition of participation within the humanitarian sector is one cause of the common confusion around what participation is. If as an entire global sector we cannot agree on a single definition, it is hardly surprising that so many of us struggle with it.

In Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA), participation generally refers to people playing an active and influential role in decisions which affect their lives with their voices actively shaping outcomes.

The Movement Migration Strategy (2024–2030) applies participation to migration directly, defining it as: “creating and ensuring accessible opportunities for people with first-hand, lived experience of migration to engage in and substantially influence all aspects of the Movement’s migration programming and advocacy, from initial design and discussion to implementation, monitoring and ultimately decision-making”.

The main thing, for this document at least, is that we all have a shared practical concept of what we mean by participation in humanitarian programmes. So, for now, let’s go with something very broad and simple:

For the purposes of this document, participation will mean the inclusion of people from crisis-affected communities in both the decision making around, and the physical delivery of, humanitarian activities across all stages of our work – preparedness, inception, assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation.

When we refer here to “people from crisis-affected communities” we mean this broadly: not only people who are directly affected, but also people who may be indirectly affected or facing secondary impacts. In relation to migration, this could mean not only including people who have experienced migration themselves, but also people from host communities. It could also mean reaching out to people who have faced similar experiences in the past who may be able to share insights from their own lives, even if they are not directly affected by the current crisis.¹

What makes participation meaningful?

The addition of “Meaningful” alongside “Participation” is relatively new, and— while intended to increase clarity — has, in some cases, created misunderstanding:

“Is meaningful participation different to the participation we were doing before?” people ask. “What new things are IFRC insisting we do this time to make participation ‘meaningful’?” they say, with a deep sigh.

For the sake of simplicity, it is probably easiest if we consider “meaningful” here to simply be the opposite of “tokenistic”.

When we ask people to participate, it should be with a clear and meaningful purpose, their time and effort must genuinely contribute to a worthwhile result. Participation is not an end in itself; it only has value when it influences real outcomes. Whether people are contributing to an activity or taking part in decision-making, their input must have a tangible impact, shaping our actions, guiding priorities, and ensuring their voices are truly respected.

Carrying out unnecessary surveys, consultation exercises or community meetings, to trick people into feeling included and involved when decisions have already been taken, would be the absolute opposite of meaningful participation.



¹ Further information on building participation into our work can be found in the [Community Engagement and Accountability Guide](#), particularly in the Assessments and context analysis and Implementation sections, P40–68.



POWER SHARING

We can have participation, but we're still really in control, right?

At its very core, meaningful participation is really about sharing power more equally between the Red Cross Red Crescent and people affected by crisis.

While we may aspire to giving all our power over to communities, we cannot do so recklessly or without taking steps to avoid potential negative impacts. Part of the Red Cross Red Crescent's whole reason for being is precisely to provide an effective structure through which to harness the power of communities in humanitarian response.

What we are seeking to achieve is the best possible balance between Red Cross Red Crescent organizational capacities, and the capacities of individuals and communities, to achieve the greatest humanitarian impact.

This balance will vary from context to context: are we in an emergency or is this a long-term programme? It will also vary over time within individual contexts: has an activity not started yet, or been running for three months, or for three years?

The potential impacts of meaningful participation are huge, but harnessing the power of participation effectively requires bravery, thoughtfulness, and careful planning.

Are you saying meaningful participation is not just a single thing that can be ticked off my to do list?

Participation is not a single activity, nor is it something that can ever be considered "done" or neatly concluded. It is best understood as an ongoing, continuous, and flexible process that can be integrated into everything we do. We should not carry out a survey and then consider the participation element of our work as complete.

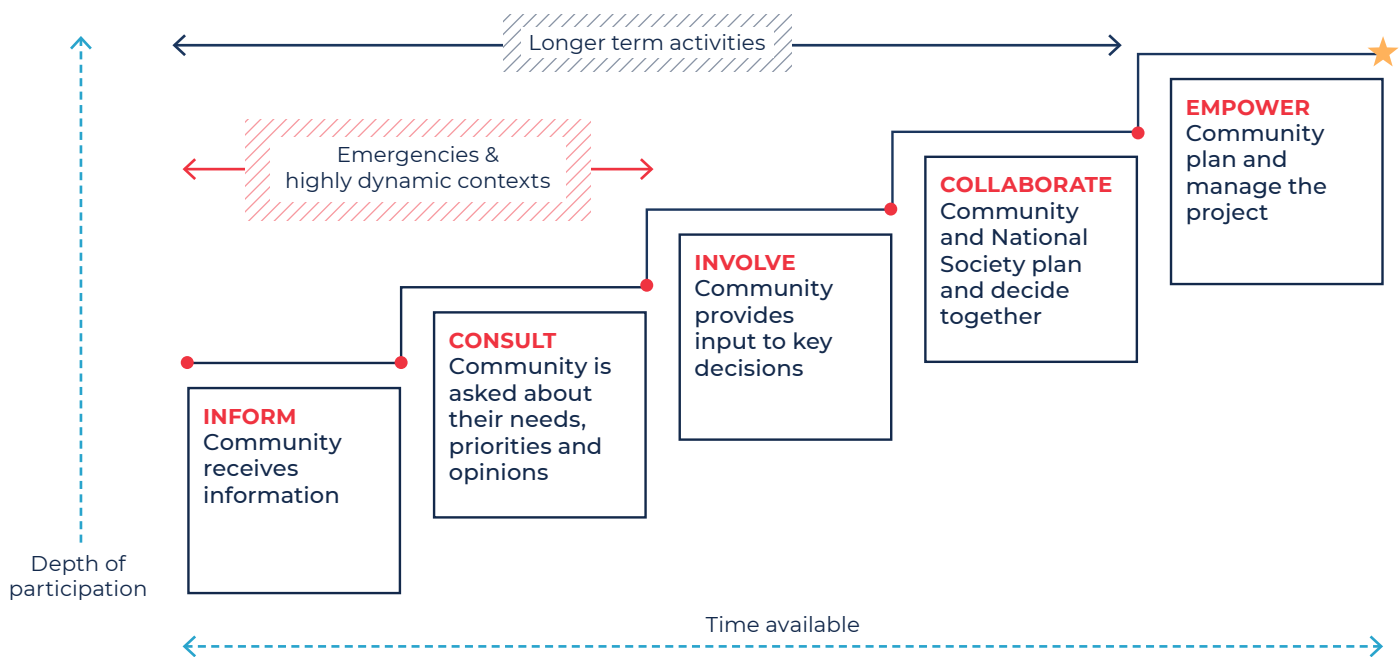
If participation, at its most simplified, can be seen as a form of course correction, we cannot just ask people once and consider it finished, even if we implement all the changes identified. We will not know if changes have been effective unless we ask again, nor can we know if our activities are still relevant unless we continue to **listen** to what people tell us.

The "ladder of participation" below illustrates five main elements of participation, with the degree of participation increasing at each stage. While we should aim to involve community members as deeply as possible at every stage, the higher levels on the ladder should not necessarily be seen as "better." The level of participation and the approaches adopted should fit the context and the people we are working with.

Generally, as the level of participation increases, so does the time require. In emergencies, when time is short and the situation is changing rapidly, informing people with key information and consulting them for quick feedback may be the most realistic and effective approach. As more time becomes available and situations stabilize, opportunities grow for deeper participation, including longer-term planning, decision-making, and management of activities.



Levels of community participation



Based on IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum, 2014

Activities at different levels of the participation ladder

The below table gives an indication of some of the more common activities at each level of the participation ladder.

Again, it is important to stress that the higher stages on the ladder are not necessarily “better” than the lower stages - what is appropriate and most impactful is entirely dependent on context. Also, that activities at the “lower” level provide a foundation and may be essential to contributing to those at the “higher” end of the ladder.



Level of Participation	Description	Example Activities
Inform	Community receives information	Posters, flyers, leaflets, social media messaging, website info, radio adverts, audio messaging in HSP, branches or in community centers, etc. This can also be provided through digital tools
Consult	Community is asked about their needs, priorities and opinions	Surveys, feedback channels, key informant interviews, conversations with staff and volunteers, community meetings with migrants and host community, focus Group discussions, radio phone-ins, discussions on social media platforms
Involve	Community provides input to key decisions	Formal community steering committees or participation boards with community members regularly reviewing and providing recommendations which are concretely acted upon. Regular community meetings with formal decision-making responsibilities. Have influence on “how” things are done, but not necessarily “what” is done.
Collaborate	Community and National Society plan and decide together	Community members recruited into the National Society. Community steering committees or participation boards established at very outset of planning activities to contribute to identifying priority needs, and activities – setting the “what” as well as refining the “how”
Empower	Community plan and manage the project	RCRC offer resources and operate as technical to support capacity of organisations and community structures independent of

Who is the “community” that should participate in our work?

Given unlimited resources, the answer to this would be: “everybody affected by the crisis we are responding to” people and families who have been directly impacted, their neighbours experiencing secondary effects, host families and host communities accommodating people who are directly affected, local institutions and businesses that have been affected and may be involved in the response, schools, hospitals, emergency services, financial institutions etc etc etc: everybody.

But since resources are limited, prioritisation is essential. Identifying which communities to engage depends on who the National Society already works with, areas of expertise, who is most at risk or marginalised, where we have safe access, and what we can realistically act on. The aim is to focus participation on people whose perspectives can meaningfully influence our actions.

In fast-changing contexts, such as migration or urban areas, it may be most practical to engage whoever is available and willing to talk to understand needs and adapt the response as the situation evolves. In other cases, focusing on a specific vulnerable group; for example, undocumented migrants in a particular area, may be more effective and manageable.

Communities are complex and diverse, so it's best to start small and focused: engage a clearly defined group with whom we can build relationships, maintain ongoing dialogue, and act on their input. As confidence and capacity grow, we can expand or replicate the approach with other groups, but the principle remains: start small, stay practical, and build from there.





INCLUSION

Does everybody from the identified community need to participate directly?

No. Participation does not mean engaging every individual but rather working with a diverse and indicative sample of people whose perspectives reflect the wider community. We aim for a broadly representative group, people who are interested, have relevant experience or insights, and are willing to engage.

It's important to ensure that marginalised or underrepresented groups are included safely and meaningfully. This may include ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, or sexual minorities, people with disabilities, or other groups with reduced influence or access to services. PGI colleagues can support identifying and engaging these groups.

There is no fixed number of participants; what matters is quality over quantity. Work within available resources and focus on listening to those least likely to be heard. For technical guidance, including on sampling, surveys, KIIs, and focus groups, refer to the CEA Toolkit (Tools 16–17) and seek support from PMER colleagues when needed.

How often do we need to have participation?

Participation should be an ongoing process, not a one-off event.

Feedback mechanisms such as feedback boxes, QR codes, or volunteer reports should be reviewed regularly, at least monthly, or more often in dynamic situations, to identify priority issues and trends and act promptly on feedback received.

Surveys should be conducted according to purpose and context, but in most cases running them quarterly is sufficient to capture changes in needs or perspectives. For feedback linked to a specific service or activity, review the data monthly to ensure timely action.

Community meetings, such as open or town hall sessions, can be used at key stages of a project, at the start, mid-point, and conclusion, to ensure two-way dialogue and accountability.

Steering groups or participation boards should meet as often as useful, typically monthly, but flexibility is important. Too few meetings risk losing engagement, while too many may reduce interest or relevance. Adjust the frequency based on members' availability and what feels meaningful to them.

How do we decide what decisions and activities people can participate with?

Defining the scope of people's participation, and the decisions they will and won't be able to influence is extremely important from the very beginning.

In the first place this helps to keep participation sessions focussed but also helps manage expectations. Constantly receiving suggestions or ideas outside the scope of our work, and which we then have to tell people we cannot act on is time consuming for the National Society and frustrating and demotivating for those participating, undermining our relationship with them.

Before starting out, we need to identify what decisions or changes are available to be made and within our power to deliver, and which of these participation from the community will be relevant for.

Create a framework describing exactly the role that participation and participants will play in our work and set out the decisions participation will and won't be able to influence.

Often "what" we are doing may already be defined, but "how" we do it and how activities can be improved upon once they have started, can benefit greatly from community input.

For example, the provision of language classes may be a set activity, but the way the classes are held, when, where, the content of lessons, etc. can all be open to suggestions and change.

Those taking part should give informed consent to participate and they can only do that if they know what they can and can't influence.

Unfocussed participation sessions without a clear purpose can lead to scattergun ideas outside the mandate of our work, and disillusionment and disengagement on the side of those participating.

Setting clear boundaries and expectations from the outset can help ensure participation is focused and practical.



IMPLEMENTATION & LOGISTICS

How do we recruit participants for participation groups?

When setting up any participatory group such as a committee, advisory board, or reference group it is important to define clear terms of reference: what the group is for, what level of decision-making it holds, and what criteria will guide participation. These may relate to the community you wish to engage with, as well as the skills, experiences, and diversity needed within the group, such as age, gender, and background.

The recruitment process should be transparent and inclusive. Decide how people can express interest, how participants will be selected if more apply than there are spaces, and who will be involved in the decision-making. Applications can be reviewed by a small panel of RCRC staff and volunteers together with respected community members, to ensure fairness and alignment with the agreed criteria.

For practical guidance and templates on setting up participatory groups, community committees, and advisory mechanisms, refer to the Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) Toolkit – particularly Tools 17 and 18, which cover community meetings and committees.

How do we compensate people who participate? Should we pay them?

How participants are recognised for their time and effort will vary from National Society to National Society depending on the norms and systems they have in place, but it is paramount that people are made to feel valued. In some cases, participants may be inducted as formal volunteers for the National Society, including induction trainings, and compensated for their time in line with existing rules. In other cases, participants are not formal volunteers but – at a minimum – are reimbursed for their travel costs. It is also advised to provide food and drinks for participants if meetings (including travel time) coincide with a mealtime.

It is important to pay attention to the social aspects of participation meetings. Consider including icebreakers and opportunities for informal interaction to help participants get to know each other and make the event enjoyable. Offering small tokens of appreciation, such as vouchers or cinema tickets, can also be considered as a way to acknowledge people's time and effort, though what is reasonable and possible will vary between contexts.

To make participation as inclusive and easy as possible, convene meetings in locations that are accessible for participants rather than expecting them to travel to a National Society office. Consider timing events around work, school, or household responsibilities, ensure venues are accessible for people with disabilities, and where possible, provide the option for online participation.

How do we measure participation?

It is important to try to measure the degree of participation that has been achieved, its impact, and people's satisfaction with their involvement.

This can be done through collecting data on quantitative indicators – e.g. counting how many meetings are held, surveys carried out, FGDs conducted, how many people attend meetings, or at a slightly more sophisticated level: how many suggestions or decisions are made, or how many adaptations are made to RCRC work in response to input from community members. (these last two can be harder to track than they sound).

Quantitative indicators are good for capturing the amount of activity or effort we have put into trying to be participatory but are less good for measuring the actual impact of what we do. We can know that we held 4,397 meetings, but that doesn't tell us anything about what was actually achieved.

To understand impact, it can be more useful to look at qualitative indicators – do people in the participation groups feel that their participation has had impact? Do people in the wider community feel they are listened to, that their concerns are taken on board, and reflected in how activities are planned and carried out?

These can be collected through surveys or interviews – so can be more demanding to collect and analyse than quantitative data.

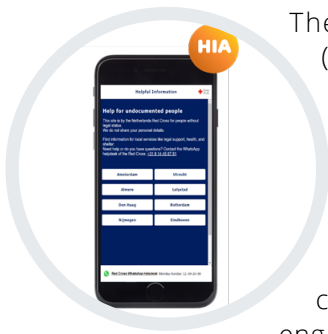
It will be important to consider the resources required to do this – and to consult members of participation groups and members of the wider community (maybe the ten people in the participation group feel participation is a huge success, other people not in the group may feel otherwise) – but ultimately, the qualitative indicators should tell us whether the activities measured by our quantitative indicators are having an impact.

Some suggested indicators and data collection methods can be found in [Tool 7 of the CEA Toolkit](#).



CASE STUDIES FROM NATIONAL SOCIETIES

Netherlands Red Cross Co-Design



The Netherlands Red Cross (NLRC) has been applying participatory approaches for several years in both domestic and international work, particularly through the 510 data and digital team. The team regularly conducts co-design sessions, engaging people from priority

communities in structured one-to-one discussions to identify challenges and develop practical solutions. These ideas are then refined and tested together with community members to create useful digital tools.

In 2019, this approach led to the creation of the Helpful Information App (HIA), developed with undocumented migrants to provide information on where to access assistance. During COVID-19, the app expanded, again through co-design, to include a WhatsApp helpdesk and digital supermarket vouchers. The same methodology has since been used to adapt the platform for people displaced from Ukraine.

Working with undocumented migrants and four migrant-led organisations, NLRC has also co-designed an online training module to help people recognise exploitation in employment, understand their rights, and know where to seek help. “For me the key things have been to start small, clearly define the issue you want to address, and make sure there is an action in response to people’s input,” says Jonath Lijftogt (CEA Advisor). “While the process of participation is important, it’s only when we make a concrete change in response that it truly becomes meaningful.”

For more information, learn about 510 [here](#), see the online learning about exploitation [here](#), see the helpful information web-App [here](#) or contact: Jonath Lijftogt CEA Focal Point at 510.JLijftogt@redcross.nl or Rony Rasho, Product Developer rrasho@redcross.nl.

Bulgarian Red Cross MHPSS and RFL



Under the IFRC Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and the EU4Health project the Bulgarian Red Cross established a helpline for people displaced from Ukraine.

Offering guidance on available humanitarian assistance, legal status, and social services, as well as offering psychological first aid and referral to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), the Greenline, as it is called, is staffed by people who themselves have been displaced from Ukraine. Recognising that people with the lived experience of being displaced were best placed to understand the challenges faced by others in a similar situation, the Bulgarian Red Cross took a conscious decision to hire people displaced from Ukraine (who also already possessed the necessary language skills) to operate the line.

And participation is not limited to simply answering calls: “Everything we do is based on the needs assessment, but the operators are always sharing feedback and ideas for how we can improve,” explains Desislava Ilieva, Bulgarian Red Cross MHPSS Focal Point. “It is not that they are working for us, we are all working together, and it’s brilliant to see the change in people as they move from being vulnerable themselves to being active participants helping others.”

Participatory approaches are also informing the work of Bulgarian Red Cross Restoring Family Links (RFL) work. Faced with engaging a highly mobile group of people who may only stay in the country a matter of weeks or even days, the RFL team have devised a combination of a survey, and structured Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions to feed into their understanding of the situation and planning.

“It’s a challenging context without a stable group of people we can engage with, but it is really important that we talk to people directly and hear from them how they see things,” says Kalinka Yankova, Senior RFL Expert with the Bulgarian Red Cross. “This mixed approach with quite focused questions, will give us a foundation we can build from.”

For more information contact: Desislava Ilieva, MHPSS Focal Point d.ilieva@redcross.bg or Bulgarian Red Cross RFL Tracing Service tracing@redcross.bg.

Norwegian Red Cross Participant Boards



In their domestic work the Norwegian Red Cross (NRC) have adopted “participant boards” to inform their work with input from the communities they work with.

For the national Helpline for Children and Youth the Society manages, a group of 13–17-year-

olds meets six times a year to suggest ideas, review work so far, and provide input into ongoing projects. Aiming for between six and 15 members, recruitment takes place twice a year to ensure numbers are maintained and new faces are brought in.

“Article 12 of the convention on the rights of the child talks about a child’s right to be heard in cases when decisions are being made about them, and that is really at the heart of this,” explains Nelli Kongshaug, Head of Unit at the NRC helpline for Children and Youth. “I don’t know what it is like to be a teenager today, but these young people do, and they know what is helpful for them and their peers.”

As well as the participation board, sessions at schools are also held around the country to gain insights into young people’s experiences and how the helpline can better meet their needs. In the Oslo branch of the NRC, a participation board has also been set up for participants of language classes, the Stella group for women, and a homework help club for adults. The board is made up of 6–8 participants of the activities, and meetings are hosted by NorCross volunteers, meeting around every three to five weeks.

“We have two semesters a year and recruit a new board at the start of each semester, in the first meeting of each semester it is just the volunteers and the new board participants, who will identify key areas they want to focus on,” says Eve Talling-Bell, coordinator of the Oslo Red Cross Integration Unit. “After that a member of staff will join for the first half of meetings to answer questions that have been raised previously and to discuss solutions, but then they leave to allow the group to discuss amongst themselves more – we find this is a good balance between having open discussion and actually being able to make strong recommendations.”

For more information contact: Nelli Kongshaug, Head of Unit, Norwegian Red Cross helpline for Children and Youth nelli.kongshaug@redcross.no. Further examples of NRC’s commitment can be found in the [Integration and Inclusion: Practical Examples Across Europe](#) document.

Hellenic Red Cross Participation in Accommodation Centres



In Greece, the Hellenic Red Cross has adopted multiple participatory approaches in their work with people on the move, not least in their accommodation centre for unaccompanied minors.

Efforts are made to ensure that practical, accurate information is made easily available

to residents through information boards and posters that are regularly updated. Feedback is collected through feedback boxes, questionnaires, focus group discussions and face-to-face interactions with, and observations from, staff and care givers. Residents regularly vote on activities they would like to take part in, and monthly meetings between residents and staff provide a further forum to seek suggestions and solutions.

Participation also informs HRC emergency responses with deployments consulting and coordinating closely with communities through local organisations, administrations and direct engagement with local people.

“In recent deployments responding to earthquakes and wildfires, connecting with local people and groups to more deeply understand needs and how we can best help has been crucial,” says Maria Zygouri, HRC’s CEA coordinator. “This contributed to HRC training hundreds of local people from affected communities in Psychological First Aid (PFA), to help embed those skills in communities where they are most needed.”

Vasiliki Dalla, Focal Point for HRC’s Health Division, adds: “Time and again we see that to be successful we need to work together with communities, to have a relationship of mutual trust and understanding, and that is not something that just happens, it’s something we need to consciously build in to how we work.”

For more information, view in depth HRC case studies [here](#) or contact: Maria Zygouri, HRC CEA Coordinator m.zygouri@redcross.gr or Vasiliki Dalla, HRC Health Division Focal Point v.dalla@redcross.gr.

French Red Cross Expert Advisory Committee



Launched in 2023, the French Red Cross (FRC) Migration Advisors' Network brings together volunteers with lived experience of migration to help shape and strengthen the organization's work with migrants and displaced people.

Acting as both experts and community representatives, they ensure that programmes are grounded in real experience and address actual needs.

Advisors are regularly consulted by different departments and projects across the National Society to share their perspectives, contribute to programme design, test new tools and approaches, and provide feedback on ongoing initiatives. Their lived experience helps the organization better understand the realities of exile and adapt its responses accordingly.

In return, members benefit from tailored training and guidance and are supported to develop their own initiatives. Their insights foster a culture of participation, inclusion, co-construction and accountability, helping the French Red Cross move from "doing for" to "doing with" the people it supports.

For more information, read the full case study (in French) [here](#) or contact: Elisa Mora, FRC Head of the Domestic Migration Program elisa.mora@croix-rouge.fr.

Lithuanian Red Cross Feedback in Orientation Courses



In Lithuania, participation and input from migrants, refugees and asylum seekers was critical for the development of the National Society's orientation course.

Starting slowly, by developing and testing content with smaller groups and adapting based on their feedback, the course developed.

The course took shape by starting slowly, developing and testing content with small groups and adapting based on their feedback. Over time, feedback systems evolved to provide ongoing guidance for the content and delivery of courses, ensuring that sessions continue to reflect the needs, priorities and preferences of those attending.

Course participants also stepped forward to suggest ideas for additional modules, even offering to present them, drawing on their own skills, experiences and resources to support their fellow participants.

For more information contact: Jurgita Jagminaitė, Head of Lithuanian Red Cross; Integration Programme jurgita.jagminait@redcross.lt. More in-depth examples from Lithuania can be found in the [Integration and Inclusion: Practical Examples Across Europe](#) document.

Ukraine Red Cross Cash support for IDPs



The Ukraine Red Cross Society's (URCS) Prykhystok programme provided financial support to households hosting internally displaced people (IDPs) to help cover rising utility costs.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with hosts and displaced people were held in addition to existing feedback systems, including a helpline. The FGDs enabled URCS to better understand the relevance and impact of assistance, resulting in adjustments such as improved information sharing, enhanced psychosocial support materials, and strengthened management of feedback. The sessions, also identified risks and tensions in shared housing arrangements, informing the development of a communication campaign and improved provision of information about access to protection services.

To learn more about this example, read the full case study on the [Community Engagement Hub](#) [here](#).

REPAIR Participatory needs assessment of family reunion journeys



In the Reunification Pathways for Integration (REPAIR) project, participating National Societies – Austria, France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom - carried out a participatory assessment of needs and potential areas for development in people's family reunification journeys.

Data collection tools, including a survey questionnaire, were designed in cooperation with people from relevant diaspora communities and external organisations

working in the field. Alongside the survey, focus group discussions, stakeholder interviews and discussions with community partners were also conducted.

Results, findings and recommendations arising from the needs assessment were reviewed and verified by people with lived experience, before being finalised. National Societies then used these findings to inform their own work, as well as producing a final report to support external advocacy,

[Family Reunification Toolkit \(REPAIR\) - Community Engagement Hub](#)

For more information contact: Jasmina Buhre at the Austrian Red Cross Tracing Service Jasmina.Buhre@roteskreuz.at.

Iceland Red Cross InterAct



The InterAct project was created by the Icelandic Red Cross (IRC) in 2023 in response to requests – primarily from Asylum Seekers the National Society was working with – for greater opportunities to participate in civic life.

Active in two cities in the country, InterAct specifically focusses on recruiting people who are migrants as volunteers for the National Society and working with them to create volunteering opportunities that match their preferences and expectations.

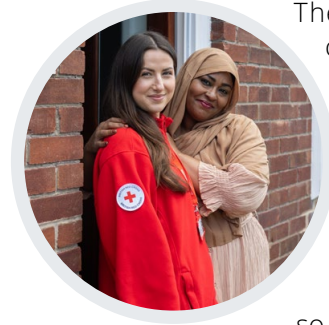
“One of the challenges has definitely been the language, because we were very keen to include the participation of people who don’t necessarily have Icelandic or English, so that can be a challenge, but actually we always make it work – it can take time and patience but through peers supporting with translation, using translation apps, and providing time for individual briefings, it has worked out,” says Noelia Zapata, IRC’s project representative for Refugee Programmes. “The key to making the project work has been to be flexible – everything depends on the group of volunteers, their preferences and their capacities, as to what they want to do and how involved we as staff need to be.”

“There was an established group in Reykjavik and the volunteers were very hands on for managing the group themselves, and that was our vision too when we started the group here in Akureyri, but actually the situation is quite different,” adds Róbert Theodórsson. “Many people here already have refugee status, they have jobs and have less free time, so they much preferred it if we did the research and offered them a menu

of volunteering opportunities, and they could decide which to choose and when would be convenient for them. It’s important not to be too dogmatic.”

For more information contact: Margrét Gíslínudóttir, Quality and PMER Coordinator, margretlu@redcross.is.

British Red Cross Commitment to Community Involvement



The BRC's strategy makes it clear that everything they do must put people and communities affected by crisis at the centre. BRC will work with people safely and meaningfully and develop its services in light of their experiences. In doing so, they'll build trust and make sure that their work is accessible and relevant in helping people prepare for, respond to, and recover from crisis.

A dedicated co-production and community engagement team leads efforts to embed participation across the organisation, delivering training, creating tools, and hosting regular drop-in sessions to make involvement accessible and meaningful.

In 2024, BRC ran community listening activities in six UK locations. People were asked what mattered most before, during, and after crisis – focusing on dignity, safety, choice, and connection. These insights directly shaped the organisation’s Theory of Change and measurement framework for all UK services.

The Voices Network, a UK-wide collective of people with lived experience of migration, continues to influence national advocacy, policy, and education design. BRC also co-developed an evaluation framework – with staff and people with lived experience – to assess whether participation feels valued and acted upon.

Co-produced initiatives, such as refugee services volunteer recruitment campaigns and Life Skills courses designed with refugees and asylum seekers, and delivered by peer educators, demonstrate the impact of meaningful participation. During the pandemic, the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) further showed how shared decision-making improves inclusivity and responsiveness in times of crisis.

For more information please visit [here](#) and to contact the co-production team at the British Red Cross: coproduction@redcross.org.uk.

Key risks and challenges

While participation brings many benefits, there are common risks and challenges that should be managed to keep it meaningful and sustainable.

Tokenism

Participation is performative rather than genuine, with little real influence or change.

Working beyond our mandate

Raising expectations or addressing issues we cannot influence or deliver.

Overambition

Seeking levels of participation beyond our capacity to deliver and maintain.

Loss of momentum

People losing interest when they do not see results or continued engagement.

Weak relationship maintenance

Not keeping communication and trust outside formal participation events.

Participant safety

Failing to ensure participation remains safe, voluntary, and sensitive to people's experiences.

Duplication

Creating new structures when effective ones already exist.

Closed decision-making

Participation becoming dominated by a few individuals rather than inclusive.

Underestimating effort

Assuming participation means communities act for us, when it actually requires strong facilitation, planning, and resources from the RCRC side.

Key recommendations to ensure meaningful participation in our work

The following recommendations summarise key lessons and good practices to help ensure participation is meaningful, realistic, and sustainable across different contexts.

Do what you can

Start small with what you already have and grow from there.

Participation has to lead to something

We have to be able to demonstrate its impact for it to be worthwhile. It's not just an activity to tick off the list.

Participation is about being open to change

But this needs to take place within a defined structure and scope.

Context is everything

The level of participation and the approaches and activities adopted need to be those that fit best and that will have the most positive impact for the context and people we are working with. This means success is adopting the right level of participation that we can effectively deliver, not just aiming for the highest level of participation regardless of all other factors.

Flexibility is key

Contexts, needs, capacities, the level of participation which is "right" for us and for communities: all these will change over time. We should not be dogmatic but be prepared to adapt quickly when contexts and needs change.







ANNEX 1: **PLANNING TOOL** GUIDING QUESTIONS

Below is a tool to help planning how to integrate participation into activities.

As every context is different, the tool is structured as a series of questions – you may not have exact answers for all of them right now, but working through each stage should help you shape an initial plan for participation appropriate to your context.

The tool can be used for both new initiatives and to strengthen participation in ongoing work.

1. Starting Out – Setting the Foundations

- What are the decisions or activities we want to work together with people on? What would be their role?
- Who is the “community” – what are the priority criteria for identifying the people we will work with?
- What is already fixed and what decisions are open for our community partners to decide or influence?
- Do we think this leaves enough scope for meaningful participation? Does this scope affect how we manage the participation?

2. We know who we want to work with and on what – Let’s refine it further

- How much time do we have?
- Are we in an emergency phase or is this for a longer-term project or programme?
- Are the people we want to work with settled or highly mobile/ people on the move? Will we be able to involve the same people every week or month?
- Are there local authorities, NGOs, or community-based organisations already facilitating participation that we could connect with?
- Given this context, what activities are realistic to support participation for the moment? Could we expand on these later?

3. Now we have an idea what activities might work – Let’s think about implementation

- Who are the marginalized or hard to reach people within our priority community that we should make additional efforts to include? Work with Protection Gender and Inclusion (PGI) colleagues for advice and to ensure this is managed safely and with dignity.
- How does what we are planning fit with existing decision-making structures, cultural norms, and potential barriers (in RCRC and in host and migrant communities)? What considerations or mitigating steps would we need to make to accommodate these?
- Do we want to set up a participatory steering group or similar that will meet regularly, or will we rely instead on surveys, interviews and focus group discussions?
- If we want to have regular meetings with a group – do we need to set this up from scratch, or are there existing groups or initiatives – internal or external to the RCRC – that we could partner with, or work with to support recruitment?
- If we are having a regular group meeting, or carrying out surveys/interviews/focus groups – what is it we want these activities to discuss and find out, and how often should we repeat them?
- What resources will this require – time, human resources, money etc?
- What existing feedback channels are already in place? Can we make use of these in our plans?
- What are the mechanisms by which we will turn the information and decisions from the participation activities into concrete action? Who will be responsible for this?
- How will we keep those involved, and wider communities, informed of the actions taken in response and the impact participation overall is having on our work?

4. Setting up and maintaining participation

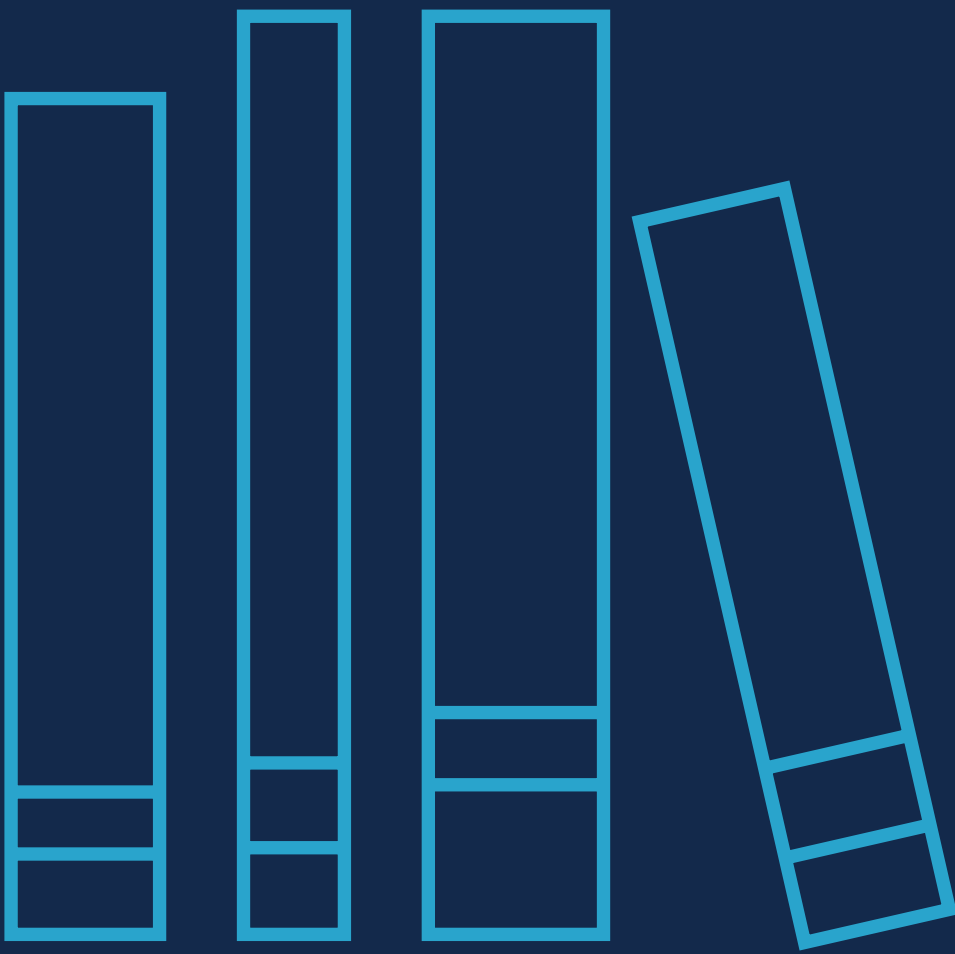
- If we are planning regular groups, in addition to the priority community criteria and considerations to include people who may be marginalised, are there any other skills, experiences, or other criteria we think should be present in the group? (language, professional skills etc)
- Will people participating in the group be official volunteers?

5. What training or orientation will be required for people joining the group?

- What will the Terms of Reference of the group be – how many people? How often will it meet? What is its mandate – decision making or simply advice and recommendations? How long will members be part of the group? How can members leave, or be judged to have left, the group? How and when will future recruitment take place?
- What considerations will be made to make it easier for people to attend the meetings? E.g. location, timing, online meetings, travel expenses, refreshments, meals, tokens of appreciation etc.
- How will you maintain engagement with participants between meetings? Regular check-ins, messaging groups, email updates etc.

6. Measuring Impact

- What will be reliable and meaningful indicators to measure the success of the activities we are planning to do?
- What quantitative indicators will be useful to we collect data on? (number of meetings, number of attendees at meetings,
- What qualitative data could we realistically collect? (perceptions of effectiveness, satisfaction etc.)
- How often will we collect, compile and report findings?
- How will we share those findings back to those involved and the wider communities?
- How will we use this data to inform how we work and strengthen participation across the organisation?



LIBRARY OF RESOURCES

Existing Red Cross Red Crescent Resources

Community Engagement Hub - [Co-production - Community Engagement Hub](#)

I&I Framework - [IFRC Integration and Inclusion Framework — Europe and Central Asia | IFRC](#)

EVCA - [Enhanced Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment - PrepareCenter](#)

Netherlands Red Cross 510 Team : [Human-Centred Design - 510](#)

Communities of Practice (Migration, Meaningful Participation, CEA etc) - [How to join the Community of Practice Platform - Community Engagement Hub](#)

KoBo Toolbox – survey tool - [IFRC Kobo | IFRC](#)

[AccessRC](#) – AccessRC- The RCRC mobile app for humanitarian aid- survey tool- link

Meaningful Participation of Migrants: From Words to Action [Meaningful Participation of Migrants & Displaced People - Discussion Paper - Community Engagement Hub](#)

External Resources

[Save the Children, The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children’s Participation ...](#)

[Save the Children, The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children’s Participation ...](#)

Save the Children, [“A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s Participation”](#)

Save the Children, [“How To Write a Child-friendly Document”](#)

The Council of Europe, [“Listen – Act – Change - Council of Europe Handbook on children’s participation”](#)

Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) - [Refugee Participation](#)

Refugee Participation at [Global Forum for Refugees 2023](#)

Kaldor Centre – [Guidelines for Co-Produced Research with Refugees](#)

Have Your Say - [Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#)

[TOOL | IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum](#)

[TOOL | Index of Community Engagement Techniques](#)

[International Association for Public Participation](#)

Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992) [here](#).

Shier’s Pathways to Participation (2001) [here](#).

The Lundy Model of Participation (2007) [here](#).

CHOICE’s Flower of Participation (2009) [here](#).

Wong et al.’s Participation and Empowerment Pyramid (2010) [here](#).



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 15.6 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.