SHEAR Science for Humanitarian Emergencies & Resilience

January 24, 2022

Putting stakeholder needs at the centre

SHEAR learnings

Photo: volunteer briefing during Uganda floods response, May 2020. Photo by URCS/Climate Centre.

Key stakeholders, including at-risk populations, need to be at the centre of research prioritization, design and delivery. Putting the needs of stakeholders at the centre is critical to achieving programme objectives, and to ensuring long-term sustainability. This brief explores key learning from across the SHEAR programme related to stakeholder engagement.

Summary

For research to be successful in achieving improved resilience and response to disasters, it must meet the needs of the people and institutions who will be taking it up in the long-term.

Identifying and understanding those needs is a collaborative, ongoing process that requires time and support from the outset.

Research projects need to consider the political and institutional landscape in which they are working, as well as issues of language, capacity, cultural norms, working practices, existing workloads and commitments of stakeholders, and power dynamics.

Stakeholder mapping

Understanding who stakeholders are is critical to identifying their needs and can often be complex. The Science for Humanitarian Emergencies and Resilience (SHEAR) programme research teams highlighted the importance of considering all stakeholders in a context or system, noting that there may be stakeholders who are not visible in the initial stages of conceptualizing a project. Stakeholder and institutional mapping are key processes in understanding who all the actors in a system are, their roles and relationships to each other, and who needs to be included. SHEAR teams recommended early prioritization of stakeholder mapping, to enable a comprehensive understanding of critical actors.

In many SHEAR projects, local government authorities for disaster risk management were critical stakeholders, responsible for planning and implementing disaster risk reduction and response measures. Their key stakeholders included communities directly affected by disasters, who themselves have diverse needs. Research teams emphasized the importance of understanding how well the needs and priorities of diverse community members are understood and prioritized by governmental or influential stakeholders in research programmes. Research programmes may need to play a facilitative role in building an enhanced understanding of at-risk communities across stakeholders.

Identifying stakeholder needs, mandates, barriers and capacities

Effective research needs to be underpinned by an accurate understanding of stakeholder needs, mandates, challenges and capacities. Capacity analysis is vital to ensure interventions build from the current technical capacities as well as the levels of understanding of decision-makers and other stakeholders. It is important to ensure that stakeholders are not homogenized, recognizing the different roles, capacities and areas of experience and expertise that each stakeholder brings.

SHEAR teams emphasized the value of a clear understanding of mandates, institutional roles and organizational capabilities when conducting research which aspires to legacy and uptake. SHEAR teams noted examples where institutional and political barriers to effective practice were identified, with targeted advocacy leading to important institutional reform of roles or mandates.

In partnership with:

Understanding of cultural and political context

SHEAR teams recommended early analysis of institutional priorities and policies. Research needs to align with, or be adapted to, existing and ongoing policy processes and institutional priorities, to ensure sustainability and impact. Underestimation or under-prioritization of the importance of this understanding can lead to insufficient resources and time being allocated to this in project planning. Time and resources also need to be allocated to refreshing understanding and adapting as political and policy contexts evolve.

Cultural and political norms can also greatly determine the extent to which a project is successful. SHEAR projects highlighted the importance of gaining a shared understanding across all project researchers and partners and ensuring a collective understanding of the cultural and political context. This step of building common ground can be insufficiently resourced or addressed in project plans. Research that is not grounded in an understanding of the context, risks being ineffective, obsolete, unused, unsustainable or actively harmful. SHEAR teams noted that an over-reliance on one partner or type of partner to provide comprehensive contextual understanding can also be a challenge, overburdening national or community partners, or leading to incomplete or inaccurate perceptions of the context.

Stakeholder partnerships

Partnerships with key stakeholders can be essential to ensuring impact and sustainability. SHEAR teams emphasized that effective partnerships require early and continuous engagement, with effort to ensure stakeholder needs are met, including co-development and co-refinement of research priorities. In many contexts, government is highly dynamic in terms of personnel turnover, meaning effective partnerships across different levels and institutions of government can be important. SHEAR projects created partnerships with key stakeholders in three main ways: having or bringing core stakeholders for legacy into the core research team; having representatives on project advisory boards; and establishing stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

Building trust and managing stakeholder expectations

Understanding who stakeholders are and establishing the trust and working relationships needed to effectively identify their various needs requires time, which should be prioritized and resourced. SHEAR teams noted a key challenge in managing stakeholder expectations in medium-horizon research projects. Some stakeholders need to demonstrate short-term benefits to justify engagement and investment in areas of research, and project teams need to carefully manage the balance of maximizing short-term utility, whilst avoiding inappropriate uptake and the application of untested innovation that is not yet ready for application at scale. This can be particularly important where research outputs hold relevance for vulnerable populations. Open conversations on expectations and timelines for impact are important.

About SHEAR

The SHEAR programme (Science for Humanitarian Emergencies and Resilience) carried out innovative research, in some of the most hazard-prone parts of the world, to better understand and forecast disasters, and minimize the risk they pose to vulnerable communities.

SHEAR cutting-edge research aimed to enhance the quality, availability and use of risk information and early warning systems.

SHEAR research brought together the unique knowledge and skills of stakeholders in physical and social sciences, disaster risk management practice, and policymaking. Effectively managing this range of expertise enabled SHEAR to deliver holistic cross-disciplinary, high-impact work on disaster risk and resilience.

For further information please see the SHEAR Knowledge Product Directory.

Further information

For more information regarding approaches and project results relating to stakeholder engagement, please refer to the SHEAR website. Here you will find links to research publications as well as reporting and news regarding SHEAR projects.

(www.shear.org.uk)

Supporting stakeholder capacities

Action may be needed to strengthen stakeholder and partner understanding, to enable them to take an active role in action-orientated research. SHEAR teams working on forecast-based action initiatives found it important to strengthen decision-makers' knowledge of key climate concepts and understanding of how to interpret and use forecast information. This enhanced understanding enabled stakeholders to actively engage in the development of improved forecasts tailored to their needs.

Several SHEAR teams spoke of mentorship and capacity building as a useful way of building capacity and trust, while improving understanding of stakeholder organizations. Other SHEAR teams emphasized the value of SHEAR-funded institutionally embedded PhDs in building stakeholder capacities.

Examples from across SHEAR

- Two SHEAR projects (Forecast-based Preparedness Action (ForPAc) and Nowcasting Flood Impacts of Convective Storms (NFLICS)) used Participatory Impact Pathway Analysis (PIPA) to gain an understanding of the decision-making process and the forecasting product needs within a Drought Early Warning System. Through this approach, decision-makers, operational forecasters and researchers came together to jointly identify and agree key challenges and project priorities.

- The NFLICS project invested efforts in developing contextual analysis, combining policy and programme mapping with key informant interviews with a wide range of national and sub-national actors involved in flood risk management in Dakar, Senegal. Diverse stakeholders were brought together in a workshop for joint planning and priority setting. This collaborative process also had immediate benefits: engaging stakeholders in mapping improved awareness of non-governmental actors; expanding the distribution of existing forecast products.

- In Nepal, the Landslide Environmental Virtual Observatory (LEVO) project formed an advisory board that included government officials and national experts, enhancing research alignment with wider national priorities, and aiding sustainability and uptake.

- The SatWIN-ALERT (index-based drought insurance) team noted their achievements built on long-standing partnerships developed over the past decade; partnerships that pre-dated SHEAR.

- The Web-Based Natural Dam-Burst Flood Hazard Assessment and Forecasting System (WeAct) team conducted a series of virtual capacity building events for early career meteorologists in partner organizations, starting at the basics of remote-sensing and progressing to drought forecasting, land surface modelling and advanced statistical techniques for rainfall estimation. They found capacity building and ongoing mentoring was effective in building relationships and partnerships as well as being critical for long-term sustainability.