Pathways of participation

Considering the case for empowering participation within humanitarian action

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“Humanitarianism is a creature of the very world it aims to civilize”

- Michael Barnett, 2011: 221
Abstract

When consulted, aid-recipients consistently report not feeling included or adequately consulted regarding the planning and execution of programmes. On top of a serious lack of opportunities to be engaged or empowered this seems to provide a sufficient reason to explore ways of making participation in humanitarian action an empowering experience in itself. This paper will explore how empowerment could be used in practice and employs the term empowering participation to refer to the desired process of including aid-recipients. To do so it uses a hypothetical example of how it might be accommodated in a programme’s feedback mechanism (FM), that controls a certain access to information and influence, identified as key to empowerment, as a case study to understand some of the potential, and limits, of empowerment as praxis. To get a better idea of how the special circumstances of different groups affect the process youth have been singled out as the programme’s hypothetical target group. The key finding is that for a FM to facilitate empowering participation a clear focus has to be on a commitment to, and recognition of, an incentive to see the relationship within it as one between experts. Requiring the reasons for entering into a communicative relationship to be clearly stated as well as clarifying the roles of those involved. Perversely, confusion or vagueness could frustrate or counter empowerment efforts. There are certainly challenges, but without confronting them we will not know what benefits could have been reaped and if we take serious the view that people should fundamentally be supported to help themselves, we should not shy away from asking and giving serious consideration to difficult questions.

Keywords
Empowerment, empowering participation, feedback mechanism, youth.
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Abbreviations

FM – Feedback Mechanisms
PYD – Positive Youth Development
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/UN Refugee Agency
UNSC – United Nations Security Council
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

By placing humanitarianism firmly within the context of human experience, as demonstrated in Barnett’s quote adorning the second page of this paper, we are reminded that far from being an elated pure idea, floating high above human reality, ideals such as humanitarianism are a visceral part of culture. Ideals can serve the purpose of a guiding light, leading us towards what we generally understand to be a desired course of action. Less straightforward is bringing those ideals close enough to dissect their precise meaning, let alone consider the full-blown consequences of applying them in our daily work. No small task when considering operations within the field of humanitarian action, tasked as it is with negotiating the provision of adequate help to those in the most desperate of need in the most dire of circumstances. As straightforward as the ideals that guide humanitarian work might seem the plethora of writing that delves into the meanings of, for instance, the humanitarian principles themselves (especially the core principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence) and how they shape our work such as through the “politics of compassion” (Gordon & Donini, 2015: 81) tell a different story. This paper is concerned with the ideal of empowerment, a concept seen as a most desirable goal. It wants to move beyond it’s application as guiding ideal to dissect it’s desired effect and then provide a hypothetical example of how that effect might be adapted into doing humanitarian work. In order to understand how empowerment might be employed as a useful tool in the process of carrying out a successful humanitarian programme we examine how it might be used to define the interaction between aid-providers and aid-receivers that would emphasize an empowering participation of the latter. Identifying a feature of humanitarian programmes that controls a certain amount of access to information and influence, the paper considers the possibilities to accommodate empowering-participation within a programme’s feedback mechanism. To do so in a convincing manner the hypothetical programme will have to take into consideration the special challenges that arise when working with an identified target group, which here is youth, and consider the specific challenges that face humanitarian action when shaping it’s policy. The aim is to examine how humanitarian action, as a process, could itself become a resource for empowerment, hopefully contributing a stepping-stone on a pathway to participation.
1.2 Positioning research

This paper aims to examine the term empowerment, now prevalent in the language of policy, and to analyse what could support and what would hinder the process of the implementation of a humanitarian programme becoming an empowering experience for aid-recipients. It therefore builds on an approach to humanitarian action that is rights-based, where organizations highlight an obligation to ensure local participation and empowerment in relief activities (Kabau & Ali, 2015: 813; UNHCR, 2008: 16) bringing issues of quality and accountability to the fore (Kabau & Ali, 2015: 813-819; 822-825). Unlike classical or a Dunantist, approach it focuses attention on the role of participants as rights holders as well as having duties. A rights-based approach thus offers a more complex image of the person in need; one who is not just a passive receiver but a person who has a great deal to offer.

A standout feature when reviewing the literature is the lack of consensus and a general vagueness regarding the definition of some of the papers key terms. Empowerment is seen to relate to engagement and it is often not easy to differentiate between the intended use of the terms participation and empowerment, as they seem to serve a circular role in relation to each other. Participants are empowered to participate and are empowered through participation (WFP, 2001: 13). Participation is then used interchangeably with engagement but also as one element of engagement along with consultation, information provision, two-way communication and accountability (Brown, Donini & Clarke, 2014: 5-6). In line with a rights based approach to humanitarian action this paper will consider the participation of aid-recipients as stakeholders, whose participation in decision making and thus managerial processes are not only desirable but constitute a responsibility (de Camargo et al, 2017: 10). The term empowering participation will be used throughout the paper to refer to the desired process of engaging aid-recipients.

A rights-based approach requires giving a special consideration to how differences of circumstances shape the experiences of different groups (UNHCR, 2008: 19-20). To provide a more specific analysis these considerations direct us to select a specific target group whose unique attributes the paper’s hypothetical example of practice would have to consider. The group will be youth, whose engagement is becoming more and more prominent and poses some specific challenges. Though generally understood to consist of individuals aged between 15-24 years old (UNDP, 2016: 23) youth actually refers to what is perhaps best understood as a transitional
period, lodged between the dependency of childhood and the independence achieved by adulthood (UN, 2013: Definition of Youth). Because their status is so tied to the context of their societies (UNDP, 2016: 23) youth pose particular challenges for accommodating the circumstances needed to ensure an empowering participation and should provide the paper with some challenging questions.

1.3 Relevance to the field of humanitarian action and research

The paper aims to contribute to the field of humanitarian action by looking at how the very process of carrying out a humanitarian programme might be utilized to strengthen the capacity of those being targeted; the aid-recipients. The impetus for this is not only found in the continuing need to examine the nature of our assistance but is also informed by the duty to address how aid-recipients are reporting their experience of humanitarian programmes. When given the chance aid-recipients reveal that as far as they are concerned aid organizations generally have a long way to go before reaching an adequate level of consultation regarding the planning and execution of programmes (World Humanitarian Summit, 2015: 14). Allowing for aid-recipients to feel included or empowered when it comes to humanitarian efforts still has a long way to go as the first assessment of humanitarian activities after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 demonstrate (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017a;2017b;2017c).

When considering the circumstances that bring forth a humanitarian response another compelling reason emerges. When consulted our target group, youth, identify a lack of empowerment and engagement opportunities that limits their involvement, having few opportunities to analyse issues, devise solutions, share their ideas with decision makers, and be heard (UNHCR & Women’s Refugee Commission, 2016: 22-23). As humanitarian action takes place in situations where people face a disruption of their lives with fewer opportunities in terms of engagement it seems reasonable to examine the way participation in a humanitarian programme might be designed to serve an empowering purpose. At the very least it is apparent that youth expresses frustration over being dependent on humanitarian aid (UNHCR & Women’s Refugee Commission, 2016: 18) so exploring ways of making their experiences of participating in a humanitarian programme more meaningful should merit a serious consideration.
1.4 Research set-up and questions

Because of the paper’s limited scope a specific feature of the operation of a humanitarian programme has been identified to facilitate a discussion on how power plays out in the relationships established in humanitarian action and to consider what would have to be done do gear them towards a more empowering use. This we find in the way the role of feedback is imagined within a programme and will place a focus on what has to be considered when establishing a feedback mechanisms (FM). In a FM we see an aspect of the operational environment of a humanitarian programme which controls a level of communication and some access to information and as such has a potential to be opened up for participation of aid-recipients that is not as solely service focused but actually facilitates empowerment. The research question is thus:

How a humanitarian feedback mechanism could contribute to empowering participation of aid-recipients?

The answer of the research question will rely on the identification of facilitating and/or hindering attributes that are affected by both the special considerations of humanitarian action and by factoring in the special challenges facing youth. To do this a couple of supporting questions are posed which ask:

What kind of a relationship does empowering participation require?
And:

What special circumstances of youth could affect the establishment of empowering participation?

What special considerations face empowering participation in a humanitarian context?

In addition to this exactly what is entailed in empowerment will have to be defined. This will be the subject of chapter two, which offers a theoretical definition of power and empowerment as well as offering thoughts regarding the position of youth in terms of power. To understand the positive and negative implications of empowering youth chapter three explores the reasons behind the prevalence of youth engagement and empowerment. With those conclusions in mind chapter four turns it’s attention to
feedback mechanism and what relationship they need to establish for empowering participation of youth. Chapter five then considers the special challenges facing the use of empowering participation in a humanitarian setting with chapter six summing up the findings and providing specific answers to the research questions.

1.5 Methodology

As the nature of the study is exploratory it employs a hypothetical programme as a case study that offers the kind of descriptive inference (Gerring, 2004: 346) that can add to our understanding of how empowerment may be applied in practice. Never limited to one specific case (ibid: 344) a case study is useful as it allows for an examination of the meeting points of the specific and the general. The case study will bind together data relating to prior and current learning experiences of the humanitarian sector with a wide range of writings on the subject of empowerment, participation and youth engagement. Feedback mechanisms then serve as a unit of analysis into how a relationship could be constructed between the staff and the aid-recipients of humanitarian programme.

As policies determine the premises for entering a programme, and therefore the groundwork for the relationships that are fostered within it (Mayers, 2005: 2-3) it will serve as data to inform the place of individuals within the programme’s framework and their (here attributed interests) and influence on said programme (ibid: 2). The presence of humanitarian action is not static, it brings with it to the scene not only a willingness to assist, but a whole package of procedures, codes of conduct and organisational culture that are informed by previous experience. Therefore the materials covered in relation to the rights based humanitarian action include material that relates to the development of these practices. In addition evaluations, reports, news items and previous academic research form the main backbone of the analysis selected on a basis of their relevance and validity.

1.6 Delimitations

The nature of the study will limit it to a desk review of published official documents and records that may arguably ignore the wider life of a programme. According to David Mosse (2005), there is a significant divide between the vision of policy makers and the logic that then informs implementation on the ground. However that does not mean that considerations of policy are irrelevant, as they constitute a large role in the whole construction of meaning making (Mosse, 2005: 232). That the data that informs
this paper all, with occasional exceptions, stems from the organizations themselves or independent evaluators, means that a serious limitation is put on the voices of our main subjects of concern, the aid-receivers or the youths, that could inform the study. Their perspective on needs is limited to testimonies that have already undergone a certain processing, been filtered and controlled by those who release the documentation of their experiences and opinions. There is a risk that the dataset does not accurately echo the sentiments that youth wished to convey even if a report or an evaluation claims to have consulted youth on issues relating to their involvement. That this is a partial view of one aspect of a relationship should be kept in mind throughout the reading of this paper.

The paper will not venture into a discussion on whether a focus on youth as a distinct category is desirable but it is important to mention that treating youth as a comparatively homogenous group hides any inherent bias that could relate to a youth’s gender, status or indeed age. This has been observed to influence aid-recipients’ perception of a programme’s impact (Chaffin, 2016: 9). This and the fact that the terms youth, young people and adolescents are used interchangeably through much of the material informing the study should be kept in mind when this paper refers to the specific attributes of youth as a unique group.

Focusing on feedback mechanisms means that the paper does not delve into how feedback will have to be processed as a part of the wider set of evidence bundles that inform the management of humanitarian programmes. This is necessarily a simplification of one aspect of a humanitarian programme, designed to move the ideal of empowerment nearer to the practical considerations of praxis.
Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

In order to understand the implications of applying the term empowerment in practice the first step will have to be to build an understanding of what kind of process it is meant to facilitate or what kind of results it is meant to deliver. This chapter will clarify the theoretical understanding behind the use of the term empowerment which will inform the following analysis of it’s possible use in humanitarian practice. In addition a few words on the special situation of youth in terms of power are offered.

2.1 The usefulness of discussing power

Despite the unwavering interest that the concept of power enjoys there exists no widely applicable universal definition. In fact one could say that the key to the term’s continuing fascination lies in its tendency to defy denotation; the power of power is owed at least partly to its versatility. As a result, power as an analytical tool offers a myriad of approaches to it’s usage but also presents considerable challenges when attempting to describe, measure or otherwise elude to what is meant by power. As such power is identified as working on different levels and in various ways, which tools such as the Power Cube (see Eyben, 2014) have tried to incorporate. What is important for anyone interested in looking at power is the need to constantly shift ones attention from one sphere of influence to another and consider the complexity at work. Given how tricky it can be to pin down exactly how power is seen to work it is little wonder that even when recognising the usefulness of discussing and treating power as a tool it’s “great conceptual ambiguity” (Wallensteen, 2015: 16) is frequently brought up. So why bother with such an elusive term? Here the utility of power is seen as serving as an effective tool to provide a standard for comparison by deepening an understanding of, and providing an opportunity to reflect upon what we are doing in a specific situation and thus inviting us to consider the alternatives (Dahl, 1957: 214; Pantazidou, 2012: 6). By choosing to focus on how power is manifest in and through relationships their whole raison d’être is put into question. It allows us to critically ruminate on practice as process, refusing to accept the existence of an inevitable trajectory. It enables us, in short, to reflect.

2.2 Theoretical framework for empowerment

To establish criteria for identifying how power is manifest in and through relationships, be they on an individual, cultural or societal level, is far from a straightforward task. It
requires an identification of how power can be seen to manifest itself in the relationships that a person has, to itself or others. In the literature power is usually described as taking four discernable forms. Apart from ‘power over’ defined as a direct influence in a hierarchical relationship and the most immediate connection that most make with the concept of power there are; ‘power to’ (agency: awareness and ability to act), ‘power with’ (collective: ability to organise and act in cohort) and ‘power within’ (individual: relating to self worth and dignity) (Eyben, 2004: 15-22). Definitions do vary depending on how they are meant to be applied and the ideological stance of those applying them, the same is true of empowerment. This may be problematic. Rowlands (1995), for example, maintains that the widely differing understanding that can be given to the fundamental concept of power, exactly what kind of power (power over vs power within) is being displayed and why, explains why the concept of empowerment enjoys support from people and parties that otherwise fundamentally depart in their political approach (Rowlands, 1995: 103). If a workable definition is to be provided we must further define what is to be understood by empowerment in this paper.

It is imperative to try to establish what kind of effect empowerment is meant to have by those who seek to promote it. Is it simply an improvement of conditions or is the involvement of individual agency in the process leading to change a prerequisite (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005: 72)? A focus on power dynamics in practice and policy formation highlights questions regarding the theory of change that humanitarian programmes employ (Pantazidou, 2012: 15-16). If there is a lack of direction or coherence regarding the scope of empowerment there is a risk of measures meant to empower becoming counter-effective, leading to disillusionment (Zimmerman, 2000: 52; Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012: 125-6) that can then, perversely, translate into a feeling of disempowerment. A measure meant to increase participation and empowerment through a form of decentralization might therefore actually entail deconcentration, whereby power is simply dispersed via it’s original holders instead of passing into the hands of aid-recipients. Such a process would mean that ‘experts’, in providing assistance for instance, extend their presence without conceding any power (Checkoway, 1998: 791-2; Couch, 2007: 38). The danger being that the role of an ‘expert’ may have a negative impact on the capacity already in place at the local level (Zimmerman, 2000: 44). A major concern in providing assistance is to clearly define and understand what is warrant in taking on that role, to avert a situation whereby the self claimed solution provider perversely limits self-help. Therefore this paper will
embrace definitions of empowerment that emphasise the need to increase the consciousness of the one being empowered and therefore rely more firmly on their own agency. That is, to be empowered is not only to be familiar enough with the opportunities and the limitations of the social or institutional context in order to be able to direct ones efforts along the appropriate channels individually or through organization (Petesch, Smulovitz & Walton, 2005: 43-44). But more specifically involves a process where people are able to identify and communicate their interests or needs in an appropriate manner, i.e. the capacity for informed decision making, for which they need access to both information and influence (Khwaja, 2005: 273-274). Here this process is furthermore informed by ideas pioneered by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. Preoccupied with the liberation of the oppressed, his understanding forms a view of empowerment that requires reflection, one that is not limited to either action or reflection but involves an engagement in both in order to ensure praxis (which is informed action) (Freire, 2005: 65). Importantly such an endeavour requires trust in the “ability to reason” (ibid: 66) of those being empowered. Freire raises an important point, seeing the failure to establish trust as resulting in a sloganized monologue devoid of meaningful dialogue (ibid 65). Freire’s ideas act as a reminder of the mutual mission of knowledge production and invites us to consider empowerment as a relationship, benefitting all if allowed to be considered outside off a unilateral power-to relationship.

2.3 Youth on the threshold of power
As has been noted deciding how to define the category of youth has not been a simple task. The important thing to note here is that youth is not necessarily understood as a physiological phase, but is rather an expression of one’s status in society as is evident in the UN’s definition of the term which addresses the inherent sense of fluidity it possesses, pointing out that youth is perhaps best understood as a transitional period from the dependency affiliated with childhood to the independence ascribed to adulthood (UN, 2013: Definition of Youth). This can be elaborated on and understood in terms of the transitional stage of liminality, described by the anthropologist Victor Turner. Simply put it consists of being “no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner, 1994: 6). This liminality or threshold throws all that a person is and is about to be into disarray, and this morphing could be perceived to entail notions of danger (ibid: 7-8) as well as possibilities. It’s usefulness is here seen in relation to the tendency to
bring up, or hint at, both notions of building upon the potential and reducing the risk that youth could pose when discussing reasons for engaging youth as partners in the literature.

2.4 Conclusion:

Power is a useful tool to reflect on the way we do things, inviting a consideration of possible alternatives. As empowerment is an ambiguous term, organisations must firmly stipulate what is meant by their use of it. The working definition for this paper sees it as a process that allows individuals to become aware of their situation and to translate that awareness into action, requiring access to information and influence. The purpose of seeking empowerment should always be sought out and the loaded meaning inherent in the term power kept in mind. A firm focus on the relationship of those involved in an empowerment effort is a lesson we take from Freire, highlighting the role of trust. Youth’s liminal position in society, seen as standing on the threshold of being dependant children or independent adults, is seen as useful to understand the dual notion of potential and threat that are applied when referring to reasons for engaging youth as partners in the literature.
Chapter 3. Engaging youth

Here a closer look at how empowerment is used as a strategy is offered by examining how empowering participation can be envisioned in relation to working with youth. By tracing the different stances taken regarding the impetus to work with youth this section singles out the special considerations that arise when developing an empowering participatory programming for youth.

3.1 From preventive measures to participation?

Youth focused agendas are becoming both more numerous and more visible. This can be traced partly to the acknowledgement of youth’s inherent rights, evident in human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) which inter alia affirms their right to have a say in the processes that inform any decision-making that will affect their lives (ibid, article 12). Major benchmarks that also bear evidence to the on-going effort to include youth participation are the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) adoption of resolution 2250 (S/RES/2250), on youth, peace and security (UNSC, 2015), and implementation efforts such as the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) Youth Strategy 2014-2017: Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future. These measures indicate a shift towards a positive engagement of youth. Before delving further into how such measures are envisioned a clearer idea of why the participation and empowerment of youth has come to be championed will be given.

Moving towards treating youth as valuable partners represent a step away from what has been perceived as a tendency to view youth as incapable of making informed crucial decisions, if not directly requiring some form of interception to impede their inclination towards impulsive action (Furlong, 2013: 25). This can be seen to belong to a broader general shift in the ways participation is being thought of, heralded by ideas such as those intrinsic in Empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment theory offers an integrated view of the individual and society that highlights the role of participation, seeing opportunities for individual participation in community decision-making as benefitting the individual as well as organizations and the wider community. As such, it not only looks to possible outcomes (that are always context specific) but also dedicates significant attention to the process itself, directing attention more firmly towards actions, activities or structures that might result in empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000: 45). A more specific example, one that relates directly to the participation of
youth is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach. Sharing the perspective of empowerment theory, of emphasising the positive attributes that are perceived to result from participation, PYD is further noteworthy in that it addresses the ingrained difficulties perceived to accompany work with youth. Namely, it indicates a shift from focusing primarily on the problems youth face, or are seen to pose, towards the inherent strengths they are understood to possess (Damon, 2004: 14). It is partly informed by research emphasising youths’ resilience in the face of challenging circumstances, highlighting their level of adaptability (ibid: 16) and is linked to the identification of youth as a potentially critical period for developing features such as cognitive empathy (Poelker et al, 2016: 290). PYD therefore promotes holistic development, an awareness of both the self and one’s role in society and proposes that an increased understanding of elements such as social justice leads to a keener sense of human compassion. PYD further emphasizes the journey of creating an identity that is influenced by mutual relations to both the people and the institutions of youths’ social world and invites a consideration of what consequences it’s nature has for youths future contribution to their environment (Lerner, Almergi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005: 12). The preceding examples all seem to highlight the need to look at the very process of engaging youth as opposed to solely keeping an eye out for a pre-established end-goal. Such a focus is in line with ideas that stipulate that the construction of a link between the formation of a civic identity and a moral one leads to the presumption that more supportive communities could be created (Iwasaki, 2016: 268; Checkoway, 2011: 344; Damon, 2004: 21-23) making an approach such as PYD a desirable choice for those engaged in humanitarian work. Not least because research focusing on peace building and democratisation has indicated that a more participatory, democratic society, where a strong and vibrant civil society is in place, is less likely to collapse into a state of violent conflict which leads to an emphasis on civil engagement as a part of a structural approach to peace (Wallensteen, 2015: 154-5; 294). Locally informed methods and a more decentralized involvement of actors from all layers of society are then seen as constituting a more successful approach to address root causes and mitigate demands in complex situations of fragility or unrest (OECD, 2016: 28; McCandless, 2012: 25). Thus, as a part of a holistic approach, youth’s empowerment towards participation is seen as a positive feature to be encouraged.

There are, however, some special characteristics that can be identified that are relevant to youth engagement specifically. Youth are understood to have a unique
capacity for seeing beyond conventionality (stepping outside the box) and identifying creative solutions singling them out as vanguards of change, providing possible solutions to some of our most serious challenges (Glassco & Holguin, 2016: 28). Indeed, what a beautiful contrast creativity and passion (ibid: 28) pose to the intractable destruction and stagnation that we increasingly face when dealing with modern conflicts. However, when discussing the positive contributions of youth there is seldom more than a mere mention of the obstacles that youth face when working towards a solution to their (or our) situation (Glassco & Holguin, 2016: 25). Youth activity might single them out as a threat against the status quo, which would significantly complicate any effort that champions their empowerment. The image of threat that youth are seen to pose, referred to as a more “susceptible segment of society” (Rogan, 2016: 58), must not be shied away from when discussing the rigour that has found its way into the push to engage youth. This is doubly relevant for humanitarian work as the experiences of youth living in a context that brings forth a humanitarian response are sadly marked by a wide array of negative factors, such as feelings of despondency, loss of control or frustration, that affect their psychosocial health (Chahine et al, 2014: 3) which could act as pushers into negative behaviour. Their trust of those perceived to hold authority roles might then be fundamentally impaired (Couch, 2007: 38) whereas, conversely, treating youth as untrustworthy or even with an element of fear can hinder participation efforts (Checkoway, 2011: 342-3). This may not be such a simple thing to overcome. Youth often face various challenges in their societies such as in procuring work or securing genuine political representation, meaning that phenomena such as youth bulges raise concerns, sometimes highlighting the risk their situation could pose in relation to political violence (Urdal, 2006: 623-4). The composition of the populations of fragile or crisis affected countries offers a further explanation for why the need to discuss the societal role of youth has emerged as a discernible trend. It is estimated that of the 1.4 billion people currently living in crisis-affected countries, around half are under the age of 20 (OECD, 2015: 83-84). The desirability of policy approaches that treat youth as valuable partners rather than a liability is therefore perhaps not entirely surprising. But how that will be carried out has to recognize that youth may be perceived as a threat just as much as they may be perceived as assets, and all such feelings can be translated into programming. In order to work with youth we have to accept this duality, this capacity for opportunities and challenges at the heart of youths’ liminal position in society.
3.2 Placing youth at the heart of policy

Transcending the marked tendency to presuppose positive results and instead assess what kind of impact youth empowerment programmes actually have, has hitherto only offered tentative empirical results (Morton & Montgomery, 2013: 23–24) and nearly always stating the near impossibility of estimating the extent of any impact. Even so we see this positive association in the language employed by organizations in their policies and reports where it may be suggested that by giving youth a role in their community they are at the same time given an opportunity to transcend the violence and discrimination they face and instead define and develop alternatives to the obstacles that they face (UNICEF, 2016: 24). It is necessary to deal more thoroughly with the practicalities of adopting empowering participation as policy.

Writers concerned with development studies have noted the relative ease with which empowerment entered the discipline’s discourse. Donors seemingly latched onto empowerment as a buzzword, with the result that it was quite simply ingrained into organizations policies’ as a matter of protocol and the resulting scant or vague content outlining the term’s intended use is seen by some as essentially castrating it (Batliwala, 2007: 561). As humanitarian action is no exception when it comes to worries of participation being simply symbolic, where efforts to disseminate power constitutes little else than another box to tick when wording the newest version of an organisation’s policy (Winters, 2010: 238–239) it is necessary to look beyond stated intent and towards the intended implementation. For a start, recognizing the value of youth voices does not equal empowerment if all it results in is an effort to institutionalize their consulted role in participation (Lansdown, 2003: 281; WFP, 2001: 15). A programme may be initiated by adults but then make arrangements to incorporate youth participation (ibid) but such an arrangement calls into question the sincerity of a call for a youth led initiative where youth have access to the knowledge to identify their needs, formulate responses to them and then act upon them, on their own terms. If as is done in this paper, the position of power that youth hold is understood in terms of the liminal no-man’s land they are allotted between the contrasting spheres of being dependent children to achieving the independence awarded by adulthood it is not unreasonable to assume a tendency to define youths’ needs and aspirations without necessarily seeking their own insights. It has been noted that even when youth do express their concerns these may often have perceivably been initially identified by adults (Checkoway, 2011: 342). An approach that seeks to empower must therefore consider how youth’s role is envisaged within the
development but also the implementation of the programme. That youth who have been empowered to identify and formulate their needs through research have expectations of being able to then address them (Charles & Haines, 2014: 116) underlines the need to fully consider the consequences embarking on an empowerment centred approach. Working with youth will require some distribution of power, which may lie outside of the comfort zone of the providers of aid, both in their role as providers and as adults. It is perfectly possible that an understanding of participation as an administrative measure and not one that cedes a level of control, in the form of access to information for example, over to youth is preferred (Checkoway, 2011: 341). Especially if issues of security linger at the back of peoples minds. Such an approach to participation cannot be said to be empowering. Lastly it is worth mentioning that though power can seemingly been said to be transmitted to youth, it might simply pass into the hands of those best equipped to access and successfully navigate the operational environment themselves which presents the danger of youth simply replicating the same approach as employed before (Lansdown, 2003: 283). This could then lead to a mechanism that promotes an elitist approach, where more advantaged youth work for the more disadvantage youth, instead of empowering a broad spectrum of youth to carefully and democratically formulate their concerns and negotiate solutions (ibid: 283).

3.3 Conclusion

Partly in recognition of youth’s right to have a say in the processes that inform the decision-making that will affect their lives we have witnessed the emergence of policy approaches that treat youth as valuable partners rather than a liability. Treating youth as a distinct group also highlights how their specific insights as a group have come to be valued. Youth are seen to possess an innate creativity, a useful resource in the face of the multiple challenges they and their societies face. However a decidedly positive association with youth engagement, especially when a causal relation is so hard to establish, cannot avoid addressing the threat that is also seen to be linked to youth. Youth’s liminal position, having the possibility to work as agents for stability or instability, needs to be kept in mind when working with youth as both will affect the way the transmission of power that is necessary for youth empowerment will be viewed. Attitudes toward youth may influence a dissemination of power that does not represent true empowerment, but simply encourages an elitist response that replicates the established practice of those in power.
Chapter 4. Empowering participation in practice

This chapter will consider the possibilities that youth could have to be empowered through participation in a humanitarian programme. As a certain level of access to information and influence has been identified as necessary for empowerment, feedback mechanisms (FM) seem to provide a reasonable channel for empowering participation. In line with a focus on programmes as process, the use of a FM in a more consistent way throughout the programme is highlighted, as opposed to simply summarizing lessons learned after its completion.

4.1 Feedback mechanisms’ potential for empowering participation

The minimum requirements for an effective FM according to Bonino, Jean & Clarke (2014) are the: “collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received” (Bonino, Jean & Clarke, 2014: 89) visualized as a feedback loop, which is only effective (i.e. closed) when all four stages are being carried out (ibid: 28). The implications of having an incomplete feedback loop are of course context specific, but it is generally understood that meaningful participation of aid-recipients, throughout the project cycle results in a more focused response that better satisfies the needs that arise and could potentially identify drivers of conflict (McConnell, 2015: 9). A closed feedback loop also complies with the ethical standards of participation, which stipulate that aid-recipients who have become involved by providing information should be kept involved throughout the process (UNHCR, 2006: 14). A closed feedback loop is therefore seen as participatory and accountable, but can it facilitate empowerment as it has been defined in this paper by opening up access to information and communication that would allow aid-recipients to identify and then address their own needs? Designing a mechanism for the handling of feedback means dictating the nature of communication between those involved in the implementation of a programme. As such it should take into consideration the whole reasoning for entering into a communicative relationship with aid-recipients. These could vary greatly (see Bonino, Jean & Clarke, 2014: 90) but here we assume the will to contribute to their empowering participation. That is; aid-recipients are given an opportunity to influence a programme through accessing relevant information that they can use to form and convey their opinions to relevant parties which then processed them in line with the standards of a closed feedback loop.

There are features relating to the intended use of FM that raise questions about their practical potential for empowering participation. The distinction between feedback
and complaints is one. Whereas complaints can be understood to relate to specific grievances that demand a response, feedback is seen to consist of what could be described as less urgent communications such as suggestions, opinions and concerns which do not necessarily require a response (Baños Smith, 2009: 9;33). In terms of implementation this seems to immediately pose problems. Aside from running into difficulties that could result from attempting to give a satisfying translation of the difference between complaints and feedback in a local context (ibid: 935) there is the clear indication that in an attempt to emphasise the imperative to respond to complaints (which can of course be justified) a crucial step in establishing good communication, such as would be emblematic by a closed feedback loop, is simply wiped off the table. A FM needs to be efficient but its open-endedness will be crucial for it’s potential empowering use. Establishing what kind of feedback is to be solicited is a balancing act between keeping a more open approach, to gather unprompted insights or concerns that might otherwise never come to light, and ensuring that the feedback being received is appropriate. If suggestions that are clearly unrealistic (Chaffin, 2016: 34) keep popping up it could be evidence of either the desire to express concerns or ideas through what is essentially an available platform, or lack of knowledge regarding the limits and opportunities present in a programme. The importance of clarifying the expressed purpose of the FM and the role of each stakeholder within the programme is imperative and should be seen as a part of a wider effort to provide education on the humanitarian system to aid-recipients. How this is dictated and the level of information open to aid-recipients will then significantly affect their empowerment but that is not saying that limits cannot be introduced. A clear understanding of what is entailed in a programme leads to a greater acceptance even if it runs against the suggestions being provided: “we can understand your constraints if you just explain them to us” (aid-recipient quoted in Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012: 133). Transparency includes clearly recognizing the limits of an aid workers and programme capabilities as well as allowing the aid-recipients, as stakeholders, to access information regarding the structure, processes and policies of the organization or it’s programme which allows them to make informed decision and build realistic expectations (UNHCR, 2008: 22-23). By thereby sharing the role of experts the negative impact on the capacity already in place at the local level mentioned by Zimmerman (2000: 44) and indeed a wastefulness of humanitarian expertise through miscommunication might be ameliorated or avoided and prevent a
situation where aid-recipients perversely see themselves as objects in the process of the carrying out of aid programmes (Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012: 135-6).

As the empowerment efforts of humanitarian organizations is mostly evident in their advocacy efforts, which aim to give youth a significant voice in their societies, an idea from such an effort might illustrate how such a practice might be adapted to empowering participation in a humanitarian programme. U-report, a channel used to register complaints, comments and receive feedback, which has been successfully implemented in places such as Jordan, is one example. With it youth are presented with the opportunity to contribute with an interactive mobile application and U-report portal (UNICEF, 2015: 22; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicines, 2016: Section 5). The experience of using U-report as a forum to express opinions and to direct questions to decision makers has been a positive experience. The whole idea is that such a platform might engage youth that would otherwise not have actively sought to participate in such a process and allow them to influence their situation by, for instance, providing location specific feedback (UNICEF, 2016: 58; UNICEF, 2014: 3-4). It provides access to influence and a certain access to information and is an example of how a platform that focuses on information gathering can be put to positive use for youth issues. To promote a more empowering use such a portal might further embrace the platform to provide access to information on a programme provided by the aid organization. A focus on the mutual creative use of the material assembled, would allow the humanitarian organisation to see it’s contribution as a resource for disadvantaged people to use as a tool themselves. It would require, as stated in a study by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on participation and empowerment, moving away from a relationship that revolves around “providing service to entering an equal partnership” (UNHCR, 2014: 58) one that recognizes that it is not only a tool provider, but a tool in itself. Some challenges facing the translation of these sentiments into humanitarian practice are discussed in the following chapter, but first a final complication to the practical use if FM empowering use is discussed.

While responding to feedback has been seen to have positive effects, such as encouraging it’s use and thus combatting initial reservations that might have been shown towards it (Bainbridge, 2011: 33) the nature of such responses will have to be given heed should empowering participation be the goal. Creating trust does not necessarily have to mean that the best interest of the aid-recipients or the integrity of the organisation is kept intact. That perceptions, for instance, have been argued to be likely
to trump the actual workings of FM in the mind of communities (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3) necessarily brings up questions of how that knowledge will be put to use by those in charge of eliciting feedback. Can a focus on empowerment trump effectiveness? Unless there is an expressed purpose to build up meaningful empowering participation in a realistic setting a FM might become little more than just another part of a programme’s monitoring and evaluation apparatus. In order to allow for an empowering FM it would have to reflect a clear commitment towards a policy that saw the target group, here youth, in the same light as theoretical approaches such as PYD, where there is a clear impetus to allow for a meaningful empowering participation through providing access to information and a level of influence to act on their self-identified needs. An emphasis on a two way feedback mechanism, where aid recipients and humanitarian staff work more like partners, guarding each others interests and representations might then possibly limit the risk of simply ensuring that the best of youth are empowered while the others are left behind as discussed in chapter 3. It would see a relationship that would firmly lay out the roles of each participant in a FM, one that would represent a step away from referring to aid recipients as users and “consumers” (see Bonino, Jean & Clarke, 2014: 31) when listing stakeholders. Such a commitment, not least in face of the lack of empirical causal evidence, will have to build largely on trust. But while trust may enjoy a privileged place on a policy level as a sturdy building block for an effective and accountable relationship, in praxis it might perhaps seem little better than an optimistic leap into the unknown. And for a discipline facing chronic underfunding, such trust will have to be explicit if it is to be put to use at all and not just constitute one of the many vague goals a struggling staff is trying to achieve to satisfy the needs of donors as well as it’s own humanitarian standards.

4.2 Conclusion
Effective feedback mechanisms need to form a closed loop, where feedback is gathered, acknowledged, analysed and responded to. The reasons for entering into a communicative relationship need to be clear, as do the roles of those involved, confusion or vagueness could lead to frustrated efforts or none at all. U-report illustrates how a feedback mechanism may become a platform for youth to comment on their environment, providing access to influence and a certain access to information. For a more empowering use it might be promising to focus on the shared value of the platform, providing incentive for sharing information and looking at the channel as an
important tool for dialogue. This would see the relationship in the feedback mechanism as one between experts, who use the accumulated material in a positive and creative way. This would require a commitment to view the relationship more as a partnership, where aid-recipients are not referred to as consumers as such terminology is evident of a fixed power imbalance which carries with it a perception of aid-recipients being but a passive part of the equation. A commitment to partnership might then counter a tendency to lose sight of empowerment when faced with the call for effectiveness or becoming just another vague goal to work towards.
Chapter 5. Considerations for humanitarian action

This last chapter discusses some challenges specifically facing the adoption of an empowering participative approach in the implementation of a humanitarian programme and offers some concluding thoughts on the subject.

5.1 Humanitarian scope for empowerment

It is only fair to face up to the ambiguities that arise when presenting an approach to programming which accepts the presumed desirability of engaging youth in empowering participation. As previous chapters have demonstrated, even safely assuming a positive impact would still present a colossal challenge when it comes to striking a balance in terms of power concession. When faced with a premise as tentative as assuming a positive outcome of youth empowerment it seems only natural that aid-providers might shy away from disseminating power and therefore responsibility. Thus, as touched upon previously, humanitarian action might foster a very different view towards the empowerment of aid-recipients in general as opposed to directly through humanitarian programmes. Noting the prerogative given to participation and the difference of ascribing it to participating in political affairs as opposed to in humanitarian programmes Calhoun (2010) contrasts political participation as an exercise of power whereas participation in decision making in humanitarian action is seen as a part of a consultation, just one of many stakeholder opinions expressed and entirely under the organization’s control (Calhoun, N. 2010: 5-6). For such a stance to be overcome and an alternative empowering approach to be adopted requires a significant shift that cannot be convincingly built on the vagueness that currently enshrines the use of empowerment in the discourse. Observing the lack of understanding shown by primary contact aid-providers (teachers) regarding meaningful participation, an evaluation of the Norwegian Refugee Council Youth programme in Jordan stresses the need to define exactly what is being meant by the concept participation (Chaffin, 2016: 24). A workable definition will have to permeate the entire effort, not just serving as a banner for the organisation to proudly state its relevance. The language of policy in the humanitarian field tends to apply terms without providing concrete definitions or substitutes more direct terms such as ‘local ownership’ with less specific notions such as ‘local involvement’ ‘capacity building’ and ‘participation’ (Pouligny, 2009: 5). Barring the need to allow for a relatively flexible programme design, the reason for this can partly be ascribed to the operational timeframe
humanitarian action is confined to as well as the overarching imperative of a timely humanitarian response, which focuses on the saving of lives and delivering of aid. The humanitarian aid system thus runs the risk of simplifying its approach to becoming supply driven in a top down manner (Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012: 135). But as humanitarian work is faced with both the increased complexity of modern conflict and a catastrophic lack of funding, should not many of the ideas linked to the desirability of empowering participation simply be dismissed as idealistic pet-projects reserved for those enjoying the luxuries of time and (relative) stability? While it is perfectly fair to want to avoid additional complications or to recognise the limitations facing underfunded and potentially understaffed programmes it seems fair to ask to what extent such fears are warranted? When faced, for example, with statements that link dialogue and continuous feedback to the reduction of worries about being bombarded by requests or demands (UNHCR, 2008: 48) when soliciting feedback, does that not invite us to confront our initial trepidations? Putting effort into a relationship that fosters dialogue and information dissemination, not least regarding what can and cannot be met by aid organisations, could save staff efforts and prevent aid-recipients from directing their genuine effort to participate through feedback by exhausting the wrong sources. It would also represent a step from treating aid-recipients as belonging to the opposite end of the service provider role, one who has to be sold the concept of aid, to one of a partnership, where they are invited to partake as valuable stakeholders.

A major concern however is that empowerment cannot said to be risk free. It can, for instance lead those being empowered to question their surroundings and their role within it which could lead to tensions that might then translate into them being at risk (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002: 54). A the presence of aid is not envisaged as long term implementation of western ideas of the desirability of empowering participation into a culture that might oppose such notions without providing proper follow up or support might simply lead to those meant to be empowered ending up alienated (Kaspar, 1998: 183). The consequences of such a situation become even more daunting in light of our previous discussion of youth apprehension of power figures, inviting the dreaded possibility of contributing to and leaving behind a relationship of mutual distrust. This contrast sharply with humanitarian principles and the ethos of Do No Harm, which amongst other acts as a constant reminder of the peril of being so focused on trying to do good that we loose sight on the full impact of our actions which may actually be doing some harm.
This paper was born out of the sentiment that we are even more unlikely to achieve our ideals if we shy away from taking a realistic (nuanced) look at the challenges that we will face when seeking those ideals (Slim, 2005: 3). And whereas it is true that sometimes vagueness allows for a necessary amount of flexibility, in the case of empowering participation of youth it has little practical use. In order to push the agenda in contexts where youth may be viewed as posing a threat and where there are bound to be multiple sentiments and agendas to appease, confront or align with, the complications that could follow ambiguity cannot be treated lightly. Humanitarian action might be more comfortable with pushing the agenda of empowering participation as a part of their advocacy efforts rather than opening their own programmes up to it. And while some concerns, overwhelmingly ones relating to the principle of Do No Harm, seem to discourage experimentation on the subject, the motivation for this paper has been that these kind of questions are relevant and deserve a serious consideration. There are challenges to be sure, but those may be confronted successfully. We will not know unless we are willing to explore them in depth.

Working towards empowering participation in a humanitarian programme requires a commitment to a relationship more aching to a partnership. One that embraces the fundamental views of a right based approach, and the common view intrinsic in theories relating to empowerment, that people should fundamentally be supported to help themselves.

5.2 Conclusion

While vagueness allows room for adaptation it will have to give way for a clear definition and commitment to empowerment if it is to establish a relationship that would facilitate empowering participation. A part of the reason for the existing power asymmetry in the relationship between aid-providers and aid-receivers is the responsibility that accompanies humanitarian action to ensure the former never contribute to a deterioration of the situation of the latter; to Do No Harm. This might seemingly cement the roles of aid-providers as the ultimate experts, with little room for opening up an aspect of a programme for a dissemination of power and with it responsibilities, preferring instead the familiar road of advocacy. But challenges that are simply shied away from are never overcome, and in the meantime it’s not only complications that are avoided but also gains that go amiss.
Chapter 6. Conclusions

This paper asked *how a humanitarian feedback mechanism (FM) could contribute to empowering participation of aid-recipients*. To provide an answer, the following support questions were posed:

In terms of *what kind of a relationship empowering participation requires* the paper has underlined the importance of establishing trust, building on mutual expectations, a clear understanding of roles and purpose and a commitment to recognize the value of working as partners to enjoy the benefits of each other’s expertise.

The paper also strove to understand some of the challenges that might face the effort of establishing such a relationship. By asking *what special circumstances of our target group youth could affect the establishment of empowering participation* the paper has illustrated that youth hold a liminal position in society which transcends into a sense of them being seen as having an innate capacity for problem solving but at the same time constituting a threat. This duality has to be kept in mind when working with youth, as both will affect the way the transmission of power that is necessary for youth empowerment will be executed and viewed.

Regarding *what special considerations face empowering participation in a humanitarian context* the paper notes that the overarching responsibility to Do no harm in humanitarian action seems to cement an unavoidable power asymmetry, which may thwart the establishing of a relationship that enables empowering participation. When the premise for doing so is as tentative as assuming a positive outcome of youth empowerment it is easy to see why a preference for engaging in advocacy may be shown. But while this might avoid complications it also eschews any benefits linked to working with aid-recipients as partners and may limit their capacity for self-help.

The answer to the research question therefore sees in a FM an opportunity to provide a platform for sharing information and encourage dialogue and thus; becoming a tool for empowerment. To do so the reasons for entering into a communicative relationship need to be clear, as do the roles of those involved as confusion or vagueness could lead to frustrated efforts or none at all. A clear commitment to empowerment calls for an incentive to see the relationship in the FM as one between experts, who use the accumulated material in a positive and creative way, as can be seen in approaches such as PYD. It requires looking at the process, perhaps not as much as a pathway of participation, but one to partnership.


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