Restitution of findings in humanitarian research: Guidance note

Practical approaches to sharing research findings in a meaningful way with communities affected by humanitarian crisis

elrha

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Introduction

Community engagement is an ethical imperative in health research within humanitarian settings, yet its role in promoting the uptake and use of new evidence is often underexplored and lacks practical guidance. A rapid literature review commissioned by Elrha[1] highlighted that while community engagement in humanitarian research is considered important for research quality, and ethically mandated, it is still inconsistently defined and operationalised.

Effective community engagement not only empowers communities, it simultaneously leverages their influence on research uptake and intervention success. Community engagement can be understood as a continuum – from ad hoc interactions to co-creation of research – offering opportunities for deeper collaboration throughout the research cycle.

Elrha's literature review outlines five key components of community engagement, which are the underpinning principles for engaging crisis-affected communities as active agents of change in research that takes place in humanitarian settings.

Box 1: The key components of community engagement are:

1. Building on existing relationships and networks
2. Offering external resources and direction
3. Strengthening leadership and capacity
4. Sharing power and learning
5. Giving voice and agency to minoritised groups.

Focus of this guidance note

This guidance note focuses on the Dissemination and Knowledge Translation stage of the research cycle (see Figure 1 below). In particular, it addresses the task of 'restitution of findings' – an area identified as a key knowledge gap among humanitarian researchers, with a dearth of practical guidance available. While the note draws primarily on sources from the health sector, the principles and practices described can be useful for researchers working in many sectors and disciplines.

Community engagement throughout the research cycle is a much broader topic than this note can cover. Extensive literature exists on this topic, so this note should be seen as a complement to existing resources. A resource list is provided at the end to support comprehensive planning.

1 Busza, Joanna (2023)., Understanding Community Engagement for Evidence Uptake in Humanitarian Settings. Elrha, London. Available at https://www.elrha.org/resource/understanding-community-engagement-for-evidence-uptake-in-humanitarian-settings

Box 2: Defining 'community'

The term 'community' is a simple word for a complex concept. For the purposes of this guidance note, a community is a group of individuals connected by shared characteristics such as geography, health conditions, behaviours, social identities/culture, resources or vulnerabilities, who may participate directly in research or be affected by its outcomes. These commonalities affect their wellbeing and can shape their experiences, risks and needs.

Communities may self-identify or be externally defined, and individuals can belong to multiple communities simultaneously; they may also have roles within structures or organisations linked to the community, such as a local authority or patient group. Communities can exist at local, national and international levels, and the interests that connect them may be very specific or very broad. For further information see the resource list.

The research cycle

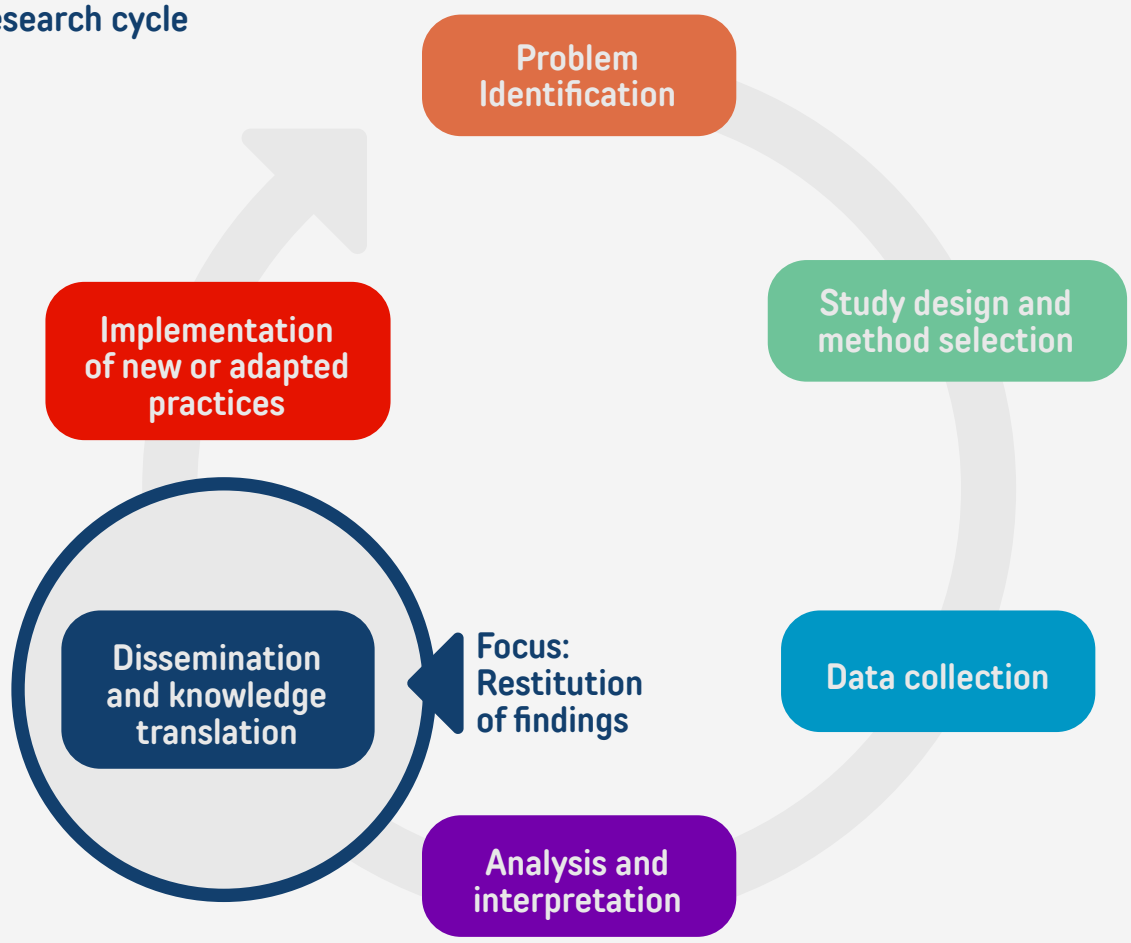


Figure 1: Where restitution of findings sits in the research cycle. Source: see footnote 1 - the Elrha literature review by Joanna Buscza. Understanding Community Engagement for Evidence Uptake in Humanitarian Settings. Elrha, London. www.elrha.org/resource/understanding-community-engagement-for-evidence-uptake-in-humanitarian-settings

What is restitution of findings?

Restitution of findings is a concept that is gaining increasing attention. It draws on principles introduced in the WMA Declaration of Helsinki[2] for ethical conduct in health research, and refers to ensuring that the social value of research is shared with participants and communities where the research was conducted.

Restitution implies **returning data, evidence and knowledge arising from research to communities** in a way that grants them meaningful ownership. This includes understanding what benefits the new knowledge provides i.e., its translation into improved services and/or health outcomes. The rationale for doing so is explored in the next section.

'Meaningful ownership' will look different for every project. In humanitarian settings, there might be instability, rapidly changing circumstances and high mobility of people, all of which make it difficult to plan and sustain longer-term engagement. Researchers should strive to make true restitution of findings possible through an equitable co-production model[3]. If this is not feasible, researchers can take steps to improve how they share research results. This includes using participatory and interactive means of dissemination, and focusing on making new evidence useful and understandable to community members. This guidance note aims to provide researchers with support and advice on how to progress along the community engagement continuum towards more meaningful and empowering engagement of community members in research studies.

There is an important distinction to make between *validation of findings with communities and restitution of findings*. Both activities enable meaningful and ethical engagement with communities in research, and should ideally be done together. However, the objectives, target audiences, activities and intended outcomes of the two activities will likely be different.

	Validation	Restitution
Purpose	To inform data analysis and improve research quality, by ensuring data is complete and accurate. It may also capture community inputs to enhance the legitimacy of research recommendations.	To return data, evidence and generated knowledge arising from research to communities, in a way that grants them meaningful ownership and use.
Target audience	Usually a small target community group, already engaged in research eg, an advisory board.	A wider community that is intended to benefit from the research.
When	Before/during the research process, to strengthen research questions, design, analysis and conclusions.	After data has been analysed and findings have been identified. Restitution can also be accompanied by validation activities, to strengthen and inform analysis, conclusions, recommendations, and any decisions or next steps, but the two concepts should still be seen as distinct, to ensure that restitution happens in its own right.
Who benefits?	Researchers are the main beneficiaries, as the process of validation adds value to research results. Effective validation processes can also benefit community stakeholders by enabling influence and input into research findings and messaging.	The community is the main beneficiary. Researchers can also benefit, as the community may become more actively engaged in the use and application of results to policy, practice or behaviour change, which enhances research impact.

2 World Medical Association (2024) Declaration of Helsinki – Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants. Available at https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki/

3 For background on co-production of research and the 'continuum of engagement' see Busza, Joanna (2023) Understanding Community Engagement for Evidence Uptake in Humanitarian Settings. Elrha, London/Cardiff. https://www.elrha.org/resource/understanding-community-engagement-for-evidence-uptake-in-humanitarian-settings

Why should researchers undertake restitution of findings?

As well as the ethical and rights-based imperative behind restitution of findings, there are three key benefits. These are underpinned by the principle that crisis-affected communities have a right to play an active role in the use and uptake of evidence to which they have contributed data, time and resources.

→ Benefit 1: Community empowerment

Restitution of findings can empower community members to play an active role in research uptake, thereby enhancing the impact of research in improving communities' physical, social and economic wellbeing. Researchers can consider how restitution can harness the existing power of communities to strengthen the impact of research on policy and practice and on improved outcomes for communities.

→ Benefit 2: Risk mitigation

If researchers do not conduct or complete restitution of findings, there are risks for uptake and implementation. These risks include:

- The media can misinterpret results and share incorrect information with communities, resulting in fear, stigmatisation of groups or other harmful outcomes.
- Communities can lose trust in research as they do not understand the results of research or how their data has been used.
- Researchers can see a reduced response or action arising from studies, as community leaders do not buy into research findings or recommendations.
- The credibility of the research, researchers and institution(s) can be undermined.
- Future research projects can then see reduced engagement or cooperation from communities.

→ Benefit 3: Broader value for humanitarian outcomes

To truly work in the interests of communities, effective restitution activities should add broader value to humanitarian policy, practice and programming, beyond an individual research project. Community feedback on research findings and the research process can fuel future projects, programme development and uptake/advocacy strategies, providing evidence and contextualised insights from communities that have many broad applications. For this reason, it can be important to engage broader humanitarian programme staff in restitution activities to ensure community reflections reach a wide audience.

Simply undertaking restitution of findings does not guarantee that communities will respond as researchers intend or hope. However, you can improve outcomes by understanding the context from the outset. This means learning about the factors that may affect the community's responses to research, and tailoring study design, analysis and dissemination activities accordingly. This approach can make research outputs more contextually appropriate, take community views into account, and ensure that findings and recommendations may be more acceptable to them.

"There are two important audiences for research findings, affected communities and the professionals who support them. If you do not share your research with them, it will just be 'sitting on the shelf."

Dr Sayed Jafar Ahmadi, Behrawan Research and Psychology Services Organization/American University of Afghanistan and Elrha grantee

Key phases in restitution of findings

Preparing for restitution activities

- Recognise that it is difficult to define 'the community' (see Box 2 on p3). Not all groups will be equally affected by, or interested in, participation in research. Consider reaching a minimum of three broad groups: those who directly participated in data collection, local community leadership/authorities, and those who will be affected most if the research recommendations are implemented.
- Map, identify and seek to understand the key groups within the community who should receive the findings or will be affected by the research outcomes, as well as any community stakeholders who will be directly engaged in the full research cycle, as participants, advisors or collaborators.
- Initiate mechanisms (such as Community Advisory Boards) for communication and engagement with these groups to sensitise them to the research. Establish contact with key focal points (such as village chiefs or civil society group leaders) using channels they are comfortable with eg, WhatsApp or face-to-face meetings. Regarding restitution, seek to understand the communications needs for these groups, and what the community expects to be reflected in final outputs.
- Budgeting and resourcing: plan early and do not underestimate. Researchers can sometimes rely on partners to support restitution activities, but programme budgets are often limited, and the budget may need to come from elsewhere. Plan for, budget and resource the activities early in the research process and seek feedback on the plans from community members. (Input could come from a trusted community advisory board for the research study, or other community engagement mechanism.)
    - Consider allocating resources to capture voices and inputs from community members during the research process, and integrate them into any research outputs that will be shared to enhance their relevance and legitimacy. This may need to include translation. Participatory methodologies (eg, photovoice, qualitative interviews) can generate valuable outputs, but be sure to obtain permission before using them.
    - Allocate sufficient resources to engage different stakeholder groups separately if needed, in formats appropriate for their needs.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities among the research team, not only for leading community engagement, but for advocacy, communication and restitution activities. Be careful not to overpromise beyond what you can feasibly deliver.
- Seek to understand the role that the community members hope to play in the research uptake activities and set initial principles for how to move forward during the research.

Example: The Trio Fantastico model used by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) embeds community co-ownership of research projects through roles such as 'Community Knowledge Holders'. Beginning this engagement at the research design stage ensures community members are not just beneficiaries but co-creators and co-owners of research. - *Source: Stephanie Stern, ACF, and Nixon Ochatre, Amani Initiative*

Key questions to answer in the early planning stage of restitution:

Your focus is on meeting community needs, to enable access to and understanding of research findings. You can use communications needs analysis to identify formats, channels, messages and messengers (named individuals) that are preferred by the community target audiences. Put the four headings below into a simple table, and brainstorm each with your community focal points and research team.

1. **Channels**: Do your target audience use social media or do they listen to the radio, read the news or watch TV? Do people get information from health practitioners or community/religious leaders? Do they get this information in person or via newsletters/other mass communications? How can you access these channels?
2. **Messages** will be determined by the research, but at this stage, ask: What kind of presentation/approach will suit the findings you are sharing and what are the key questions communities will have? (Qualitative and quantitative data need to be presented differently to aid understanding.) What level of technical detail is required? Should data be anonymised? Note that local

leaders may be interested in digging deep into research insights in their community, going beyond top-level findings.

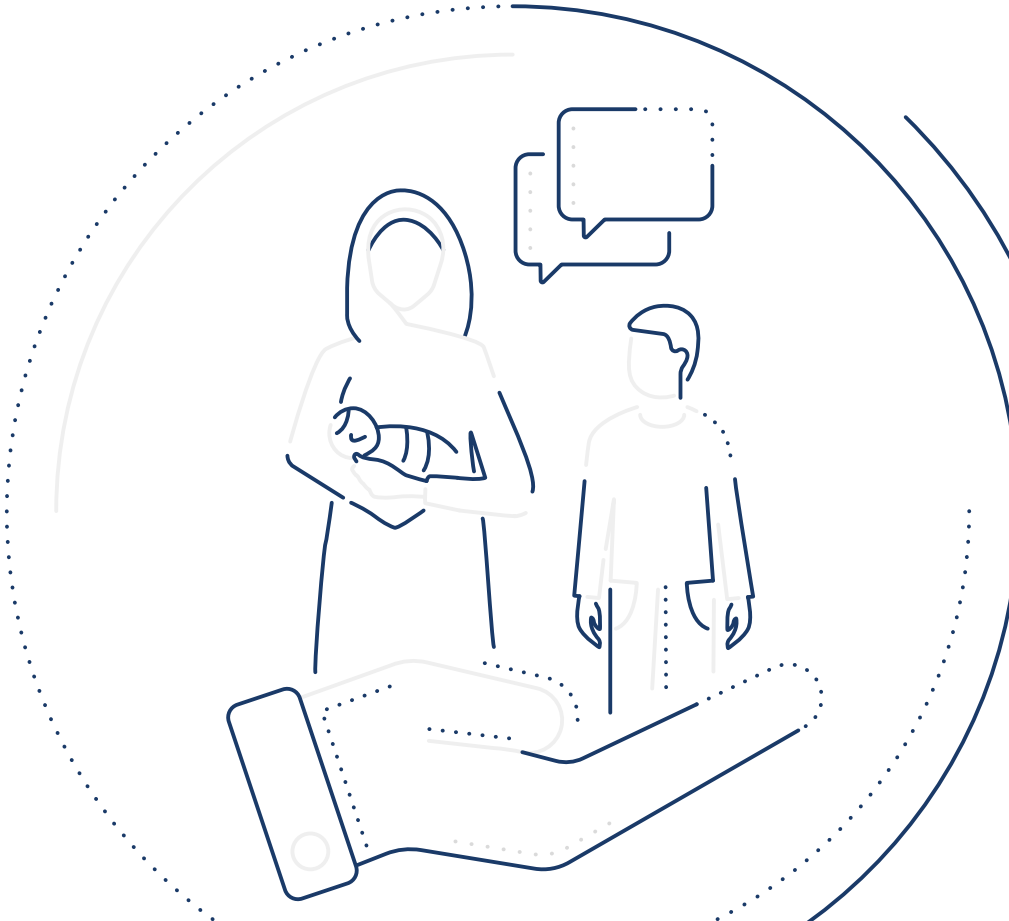
3. **Messengers**: Who will be best placed to communicate with community audiences via these channels? Consider the sensitivity of the topic and what credibility or existing relationships will be required. Partnerships may be needed to share information effectively.
4. **What formats or products** will be needed to support activities (eg, reports, flyers, posters, graphics or multimedia assets)? Consider materials needed for online and offline communications.

Deepening your communications analysis: questions to ask

- What are the communications and engagement needs of minority groups? For example, you might need to communicate with low-literacy adults, children or people with disabilities. If you do not have the skills or experience to produce appropriate materials yourself, you could allocate resources to commission this.
- What translation or interpretation resource will be required, and what are the cost and time implications?
- Audience personas can be developed to better understand intended audiences and further inform analysis, if resource is available.

"Research that is ethical – meaning fair in the eyes of research participants and respectful of research participants – depends on community consultation, participation, and trust. Being informed about research results is a key right of participants"

Dr Mandy Kader Konde, Africa Lead for the Participants' Research Ethics Toolbox, and Executive Director of the Center of Research on Priority Diseases (CEFORPAG) in Guinea Conakry



Delivering restitution activities

Adopt a participatory approach that empowers community stakeholders to take an active role in using and applying the knowledge generated by the research study.

Activities could include:

- Public 'town hall' or smaller 'courtyard' meetings to present and discuss results. If possible, go to your audience rather than making them come to you. Plan to visit their village or community, or ensure an appropriate person from the team can go.
- Meetings with individual stakeholders such as community leaders, village chiefs and community-based organisations (CBOs), to discuss results and hear feedback. These stakeholders can play a key role in 'cascading' the results to their communities in a way they understand and trust.
- Collaboration with local journalists, bloggers or online content creators to share and discuss results.
- Providing summaries for lay audiences in appropriate formats to be distributed through key channels.
- Short videos and follow-up discussion questions/FAQ documents.
- Social media campaigns. Your social strategy should engage stakeholders who can reshare posts to reach your target community audiences.
- Supplementary engagement could strengthen the impact of these communications, such as:
- Collaborating with a community advisory board (CAB) to develop key messages and design restitution engagement activities.
- Using traditional storytelling or other appropriate methods to share results.
- Creative approaches to engage children or young people in results, such as theatre, films, cartoons or song.
- Hiring peer fieldworkers to return to study participants and explain findings.
- Collaborating with CBOs to develop key messages and explain findings to the groups they are most familiar with. For ACF's MAMout project, community focal points worked with the research team to understand results and lead dissemination to their own communities.

A critical part of planning for restitution of findings activities is determining the content and key messages you will communicate, as well as undertaking the four-point communications analysis in the previous section. The next section provides more detail on what should be included in your messaging.

"Meaningful engagement requires communities to be involved from the outset. Researchers must 'move out of centre stage' and make space for communities to lead, as they can become instrumental in driving behaviour change informed by research knowledge as well as holding leaders accountable for change."

Dr Gloria Seruwagi, Baobab Population Council/Makerere University

Developing messaging: the 'KNOW-ASK-UNDERSTAND' framework

When planning the information and messages you want to share and discuss in restitution activities, you should consider not only what you want to say, but what communities need to know from you, and what you should be seeking to learn from them. For this reason, adopt a multi-stage and bidirectional approach to restitution of findings built around the 'Know-Ask-Understand' framework, as there is a lot of information that could be exchanged.

Communities need to KNOW:

- The research questions that the study sought to answer, and why they were relevant and important. (Note: your research objectives and expected outcomes should have been clarified at the earliest stages of engagement in the research cycle. During this dissemination phase, you should be reiterating what has already been communicated.)
- All the data collection procedures conducted (including any specific information related to data management and privacy that is in the community's interest).
- How participants were selected (and why some were not included).
- What was found, what was not found, and what it means. This might include reporting on the outcomes of shared analysis activities earlier undertaken with communities.

Researchers should ASK:

- How participants experienced the study, gathering their feedback and reflections on the process.
- Questions community members may have about the data elicited from them.
- Perceived gaps in the research, if appropriate. (Be cautious about raising expectations if no future research is planned.)
- Local interpretations of the findings (bearing in mind the distinction between validation and restitution; it may be helpful to make space for two separate engagements, considering the different stakeholders who may need to participate in each).
- Questions about the results, and reactions to possible implications.

Both parties should seek to UNDERSTAND:

- What the researchers and the community could do (together or separately) with the research findings, and what other actors could do ie, the implications for behavioural, policy or programme change.
- What are the best next steps, including how researchers could follow up on any questions.

Guidance on engagement and dialogue: things to consider

- Consider setting parameters for dialogue, in consultation with community leaders. Make sure that feedback is invited from key people in the group, and agree on ground rules for the discussion.
- Through prior engagement with communities, consider how to handle potential points of disagreement or differences in perspective. For example, there can be conflicting opinions about the causes of health problems in communities, stigma or misperceptions around issues pertaining to gender and disability, different ideas about how to treat mental health conditions, etc.
- Researchers may be concerned that a topic is too complicated or limit sharing findings because they worry community members will not understand the complex nature of the results. It is important to balance concerns with consideration for the rights of community members to understand and access information which affects them and to which they have given their time. Consider working closely with a CAB or other local advisors to break down and translate 'difficult' concepts in appropriate ways, or commissioning local communications experts to help turn concepts into messages that will resonate. Visual images, using storytelling with familiar metaphors or myths, and other creative methods may help to unpack complexity. It is also important to be honest if there are elements of the findings that you do not understand yourself, or answers that you do not have, and to invite communities to explore and share ideas about complexity.

- Be aware of conflict dynamics and the potential for certain topics to trigger trauma or judgmental responses where a topic carries stigma. Consult with local stakeholders early on to ensure that the findings you share do not exacerbate existing tensions or put any community members at risk. Assess risks related to conflict dynamics and the needs of vulnerable minorities in the community during the planning phase of research projects, and review them before you communicate findings. You may decide that the risks of sharing findings outweigh the benefits. For further guidance, see the resource list.
- Additionally, where topics are sensitive or traumatic, hosting large meetings may be inappropriate. Ensure that referral systems to suitable services are in place before sharing results, and consider segmenting audiences to avoid causing distress or harm, especially to vulnerable people.

"It's crucial to ask: 'Am I the right person to share this?'. 'Do no harm' must be a first consideration. Communities must be given space to reflect and respond, and researchers should be aware of power dynamics that could silence some voices."

Hannah Miles, Ground Truth Solutions

Conducting follow-up activities

When done with intention and care, restitution of findings can go beyond a one-off event linked with a single research study, and become part of an ongoing process of engagement and accountability. Researchers and humanitarian partners can build a rich, bilateral dialogue with community stakeholders over time, deepening the impact of the initial activities.

After restitution activities have been completed, researchers could plan and implement follow-up actions that respond to community interpretations, questions and concerns. This includes creating space for dialogue, clarifying findings, sharing longer-term research outcomes and impacts, and exploring implications for future programming or advocacy.

Where resource allows, evaluating the impact of restitution activities – such as changes in community understanding, trust, or uptake of findings in policy and practice – can reveal the effectiveness of the approaches used.

Researchers should also document and share lessons learned, including challenges faced and strategies that worked well, to inform future research design and community engagement practices. These reflections can contribute to a growing body of knowledge on ethical and impactful research in humanitarian settings.

Further reading

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