# TOOL 17: Community meetings tool

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#### 1. Purpose of this tool

#### This tool[[1]](#footnote-1) provides guidance on running an effective community meeting, including planning, facilitation, and how to document questions and feedback. It also discusses potential challenges and how to mitigate these.

#### 2. Why hold a community meeting?

A community meeting is one of the most versatile and commonly used approaches to engage communities. Community meetings can be used for many purposes, including:

* Plan the programme or response with communities, including agreeing activities, timelines, roles, and responsibilities
* Discuss important information about the programme or operation, including details of upcoming assessments, timelines, activities, and delays or changes
* Collect and respond to community feedback, including answering questions, listening to concerns, suggestions for improvements, and complaints
* Monitor people’s satisfaction with the programme or operation
* Ask for community input to key decisions, such as selection and targeting, approval of plans, how to act on feedback, or how to close the programme
* Presenting the findings of assessments, monitoring and evaluations.

**Advantages of community meetings**

* Build trust with communities, as the National Society is there in person and able to answer questions and respond to concerns directly
* Can be a good way to agree a consensus with the community on key decisions
* Provide a way for communities to debate issues amongst themselves
* Support transparency, as everyone gets the same information at the same time so there is less opportunity for rumours or misinformation to spread
* Usually inexpensive to organize and do not require any technology or equipment.

**Disadvantages of community meetings**

* If the programme or response is covering many locations, it can be time consuming to hold meetings in every community
* Physical access is needed, which can be harder in conflict settings or during epidemics like COVID-19 when face-to-face contact is restricted
* Larger meeting can be hard to manage, and there is a risk only the loudest, most powerful voices are heard
* Not everyone will feel comfortable to speak in front of a large crowd, so some views may be missed
* Not always appropriate or safe to discuss some sensitive issues in public settings
* Those with limited mobility may struggle to attend.

#### 3. Before: Planning a community meeting

* **Have a clear purpose for the meeting.** For example, is it to discuss next steps in the programme? Respond to community feedback? Share information? Being clear about the aims of the meeting will help you make the most of your time and the communities
* **Plan the meeting with key community representatives or groups**, especially for large meetings or meetings about potentially difficult topics, like the end of a programme or targeting. Plan with the community committee, community volunteers, or community leaders. They can advise on where, when, and how to organise the meeting, and mobilise people to attend. This can be done through a phone call if time is short
* **Don’t plan the meeting at inconvenient times**, for example, during prayer times, when people are working, or engaged in household tasks
* **Understand the context in the community in advance**. For example, what is the security situation? Are there any tensions between groups that could disrupt the meeting or put people at risk? What are the power dynamics in the community, and could it lead to certain people being excluded from either attending or speaking during the meeting e.g., women or minority groups?
* **Consider the meeting size.** Community meetings are usually very public affairs so it can be difficult to limit how many people attend. Large meetings are good because they reach more people and are more transparent, but they can be difficult to manage. They also make it harder to hear the views of all groups equally or even just those who are shy about speaking in public. Consider holding a series of smaller meetings with different groups, so people feel more comfortable to share their opinions
* **Coordinate with other agencies.** If multiple agencies are providing support in the same community, for example in camp settings, it can be a good idea for agencies to hold community meetings together. This limits the number of meetings people are asked to attend and means they are more likely to get an answer to their questions, as all providers are present. An added benefit is less issues for the National Society to refer on to other agencies after the meeting[[2]](#footnote-2)
* **Be prepared,** consider what questions people are likely to ask in the meeting and come with the relevant information to respond. It can also help to have details of all the other organisations operating in the community and their contact details so questions that can’t be answered can be referred accurately
* **Advertise the meeting.** Make sure people in the community know about the meeting in advance, including the purpose, location, date, time, and length. Unless it is an emergency and cannot be avoided, it is disrespectful to turn up in a community and expect people to make themselves available immediately.

#### 4. During: Facilitating a community meeting

* **Have at least two facilitators,** one to facilitate the discussion and another to take notes. Reassure people the notes are so the National Society can follow up on their concerns, and people’s names will not be recorded.
* **Introduce the facilitators and the National Society,** even if this is not the first community meeting, as it shows respect and there could be new people there. Share details of the National Society’s feedback mechanism so people can follow up with any issues they don’t want to discuss in public
* **Consider how the main facilitator will be perceived by the community.** For example, age, gender, language spoken, ethnicity, nationality, or profession, can all affect the level of trust and respect the community have for the facilitator
* **Use clear, simple, non-technical language** that people can easily understand
* **Encourage people to participate by asking for feedback and questions** regularly throughout the meeting. This helps the meeting to be a conversation, rather than a lecture, which builds trust and ensures the National Society is hearing people’s issues and concerns
* **Encourage participation from diverse groups,** including less dominant groups in the community. Observe behaviours during the meeting and how people react to each other, or who doesn’t attend or speak, as this can provide interesting information about the social dynamics in the community. If certain groups do not speak during the meeting, for example women or young people, hold separate, smaller meetings with these groups to ensure their views are heard
* **Keep the discussion on track, but still allow people to express their views.** Allow people to share their concerns and experiences, even if they fall outside of the programme’s remit, as it is important people feel listened to. However, it is also important to keep the discussion focused and not allow one person to dominate. If this happens, it can help to offer to speak to the person separately after the meeting. If everyone shares the challenge, allow people to express themselves and offer to help raise the issue with the relevant organization
* **Discuss and respond to sensitive issues carefully.** Be aware of the local culture and beliefs and if there are some topics that should not be discussed in public meetings, such as politics or family planning. If people raise sensitive topics or feedback in a public meeting, such as sexual or gender-based violence, listen carefully and allow the person to speak, but do not ask for details in front of the meeting. Speak to them separately at the end of the meeting and ask their permission to follow up on the issue and take their contact details. You may need to refer this to a Protection, Gender and Inclusion specialist or a manager
* **Don’t take sides in disagreements or express judgements.** If community members disagree on issues in the meeting, don’t side with one over the other or get personally involved. Attempt to mediate and calm the situation or allow the community or community leader to resolve the issue
* **If the community are angry with the National Society,** stay calm and acknowledge people’s frustrations. Depending on the issue, for example if it is delays to the programme, explain why this has happened, what is being done about the issue, ask the community for their ideas about how to tackle the issue or what more the National Society could do, and offer to provide regular updates while the issue is being resolved
* **If tensions are escalating**, and the meeting is not going well, options include asking community leaders to intervene or split people into smaller groups to deal with issues separately. However, if there is any threat to staff or volunteers, apologise and close the meeting and return when the situation has calmed down
* **Summarise the main points and any agreed actions,** at the end of the meeting to ensure the National Society and the community have the same interpretation of next steps. This includes being clear about roles and responsibilities and action points. This can help to address any unrealistic expectations or assumptions within the community about the programme.

#### 5. After: Next steps and follow-up

* **Discuss how to act on the issues raised.** It is very important that the issues raised during the community meeting are reviewed and discussed in team meetings, including what action can be taken and how the programme can respond to the community. If community members feel their feedback is being ignored, they will lose trust in the National Society, which will reduce their willingness to attend future meetings or engage in programme activities
* **Cross check and triangulate information** heard during the meeting against other sources, particularly if only some groups were active in the meeting. For example, is the programme receiving the same feedback through monitoring, the feedback mechanism, and community meetings, or are their differences? This helps to ensure the programme is not making decisions based only on the views of those who are most vocal during a community meeting
* **Refer issues the National Society cannot respond to.** If questions, suggestions, or complaints were raised about other organisations, it is important to share these with the relevant agency or pass the contact details for that agency to the community.

#### 6. Community meeting minutes template

This template form can be used to record issues discussed during a community meeting. Please modify and adapt to suit your needs.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **COMMUNITY MEETING MINUTES** | | | | | | |
| **Date:** | **District/State/Region/City:** | | | | **Village/town:** | |
| **National Society staff attending:** | | | **Community representatives attending:** | | | |
| **# of National Society staff attending:** | | | **# of community members attending:** | | | |
| **General observations:**  *(For example, did any groups not attend or speak during the meeting? e.g., women, youth, people with disabilities, other minority groups? Any unusual behaviour or group dynamics?)* | | | | | | |
| **Discussion point**  *Agenda points and any questions, suggestions, observations, or complaints shared by the community* | | **Raised by**  *NS or specific group e.g., leader, women, youth* | | **Conclusion / action points**  *Was an agreement reached, a response provided, what are the next steps or actions agreed?* | | **Person responsible**  *Who is responsible for any action points/next steps?* |
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1. This tool draws on the excellent ‘Participation Handbook for Humanitarian Field Workers’ by Groupe URD <https://www.urd.org/en/publication/participation-handbook-for-humanitarian-field-workers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Communities don’t always know who provides which services and will often ask questions during community meetings about the services of another agency. This agency hosting the meeting will still need to log these questions and try to refer them to the relevant agency for follow-up, which can be time consuming. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)