TRAF·G

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

# Multi-stakeholder community consultations as a multi-purpose research tool:

## Experiences from the Democratic Republic of Congo

Deliverable 4.3

Documentation of multi-stakeholder community consultations (MSCC) in Africa

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## Summary

The Multi-Stakeholder Community Consultation (MSCC) is a participatory research tool that has been developed by the DR Congo team of TRAFIG and that will be applied in other countries in the course of the project too. By bringing together a mixed group of respondents (displaced, hosts, authorities, civil society), the tool is geared towards collecting additional insights through an interactive dialogue on intergroup relations, validating findings gathered through other methods, and jointly seeking solutions for problems that are identified by the participants. In this note we provide methodological guidance and share our experience of using the tool in the DRC. Other TRAFIG country teams, interested researchers and practitioners can learn from it and adapt it to their own needs.

**Keywords:** community consultation; research methodology; validation; action research; DRC

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# Introduction

A Multi-Stakeholder Community Consultation (MSCC) is a participatory tool that enables research teams to bring together a mixed group of respondents with three aims: to collect additional insights from this group through an interactive dialogue; to validate findings collected previously; and to jointly seek for solutions of problems that are identified by respondents. This note provides methodological guidance on how to conduct a MSCC, some dos and don'ts, and some of the lessons that were learnt in practice in the Democratic Republic of Congo, both methodologically and in terms of content.

The MSCC is a tool that is used as part of the TRAFIG research project. TRAFIG aims to generate new knowledge to help develop solutions for protracted displacement that are tailored to the needs and capacities of persons affected by displacement. One of the five key themes of TRAFIG is 'Building Alliances: Integration and intergroup relations between refugees and hosts'. This is a topic that is particularly useful to address in a MSCC in which different stakeholders are brought together to discuss the intergroup relations, the mutual prejudices and misconceptions and to look for ways in which relations can be improved. This note has been developed for internal use by other TRAFIG country teams in the preparation of their MSCC, but is also made public in the hope that it may inspire other researchers in thinking about their methodological toolkit.

# 1 Origins of the MSCC

The MSCC draws on previous experiences of the members of TRAFIG's Congo team. Inspiration is loosely drawn from a practice called *barza* (derived from baraza, literally: council/marketplace in Swahili).[1] Literature shows that both inter- and intracommunal meetings have traditionally taken place in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In some places they have always continued to exist, in other places they disappeared but have sometimes been revived at the initiative of civil society actors looking for locally rooted mechanisms to mediate in disputes. In the North Eastern Ituri province, *barza* have been revived with the support of civil society. The meetings are intended to bring together a large number of representatives from different communities that are in conflict. Van Puijenbroek reports that such meetings can have on average 400-500 participants, including traditional and administrative authorities, representatives from the police, army, civil society and members of the communities (Van Puijenbroek, 2008). In North Kivu province, *barza* have taken place in a slightly different way, gathering only the leaders of the nine major ethnic groups of the province to discuss issues with the aim of resolving low-level conflicts between different groups. In North Kivu, the *barza* are closely connected to politics, which means that there is a risk that it is not seen as a neutral tool and that it is used for political manipulation (Clark, 2008; Tunamsifu, 2015). In Ituri, this seemed to be less the case.

In case of conflicts within a single community, participants are all coming from that same community. In case of conflicts or frictions between different communities, the meeting obviously gathers representatives from both groups. During the meeting, an interlocutor invites all parties to talk openly

[1] The barza seems to have some similarities with the 'arbre à palabres' that is known in some West-African contexts.

about their concerns and to jointly seek for a solution. Participants are encouraged to speak out their commitment to contribute to the proposed solution. Because the meeting takes place in a rather public setting with representatives from all sides, participants feel they have to stick to their promises as they will be held accountable if they do otherwise. This contributes to solving the problems that are raised during the meeting and helps to regain mutual trust and for state actors to (re-)take their role in creating a safe environment for all (Puijenbroek, 2008). Tunamsifu suggests that a *barza* could even be used as a mechanism for peacebuilding and transitional justice that can address root causes of violence (Tunamsifu, 2015).

Obviously, reality is often unruly and the potential of a *barza* should not be overestimated. Nevertheless, a number of NGOs have resorted to setting up *barzas* in the east of Congo with varying degrees of success. People who had been involved often speak quite positively about it (Jacobs & Weijs, 2015; Puijenbroek, 2008; Tunamsifu, 2015).

# 2 What is our MSCC about?

As part of our project, our research teams gather insights into the challenges that refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) face in rebuilding their lives after initial displacement. We hear from them about experiences of stigmatization and discrimination, difficulties they have in finding proper housing, in earning a living etc. We also talk with local authorities and members of host communities about the impact of the large-scale presence of newcomers in their communities, the doubts they have about their integration, their concerns about competition on the labour market, criminality, and the loosening of community life when people in a neighbourhood no longer know each other on a personal basis. As often the case, a lack of interaction and of mutual knowledge leads to misunderstandings, prejudices and preconceived ideas about 'the other'. As researchers who talk to different stakeholders and who try to get a multi-sided perspective and understanding, we feel that we could try to provide a bridge in helping people to increase their mutual understanding and subsequently to improve inter-community relations between displaced and members of the host communities, or at least to provide further insights and tools for state and non-state practitioners to foster dialogue and build trust between these groups in the future. The Multi-Stakeholder Community Consultations are meant to bring these different groups of people together and to promote a dialogue. As such, the MSCC are loosely modelled after the *barza* that have been taken up by civil society actors elsewhere in the DRC.

# 3 MSCCs as a multi-purpose methodological tool

Through MSCCs a research team can gather additional data on intergroup relations. In some regards, the MSCC can be seen as a focus group discussion with a mixed audience. The interactions between people can be studied to gain a better understanding of inter- and intra-group dynamics, and can reveal tensions. Whereas individual interviews provide information about an individual's experiences and opinions, group discussions provide more information about behaviour and opinions that are seen to be socially desirable.

The MSCC can also help to triangulate data. Moderators can raise certain issues for discussion to find out whether previously found data are supported by the participants of the MSCC. This helps to make our findings more robust.

It is important that a MSCC takes place at the end of a research period. This enables the researchers to gain a good overview of the relevant actors that can be invited; of the existing relations between them; and of issues that are sensitive. This helps them to carefully manoeuvre and to assess which topics can be discussed in the open and whether there are also certain topics that should be avoided. Researchers should be aware of the risks of bringing out sensitive issues into the open. Careful moderation is therefore an absolute requirement as it is certainly not our aim to worsen existing situations.

Apart from collecting data, the MSCC is a participatory tool that is geared towards improving intergroup relations. As such it can be seen as action-oriented research that is not just about collecting data but that is also intervening. By bringing people together, by creating an atmosphere of trust (between researcher and respondent, but also among respondents), and by speaking out about the mutual prejudices and perceptions, participants are encouraged to discuss possible ways forward that can improve relations. Such solutions can consist of very concrete plans to cooperate, interact and engage. It is our firm conviction that dialogue leads to better knowledge and understanding of each other and that this can improve the way in which people are living together. It is important here to know that two of the Congolese team members work at NGOs in the field of human rights and conflict prevention and mediation. In their capacity of NGO-workers they have ample experience in setting up and moderating dialogues. This made us feel confident about the organisation of the MSCC. Research teams without such experience may consider adding an experienced NGO-worker to the organising team.

# 4 How to prepare and carry out a MSCC?

The following is an overview of suggested steps to follow to prepare for a MSCC. It is most relevant to carry out a MSCC in settings where there is close interaction between displaced and non-displaced people, i.e. in settings where displaced live in host communities. The MSCC is less useful in settings where displaced live in camps and where –direct– interaction between displaced and their surrounding environment can be more limited.

***Step 1*: Take stock of existing knowledge**

Look at the findings you have gathered as part of the research thus far, especially in relation to TRAFIG theme 4 'Building Alliances'. Make sure that every team member who will be involved in the organisation of the MSCC is aware of the knowledge gathered thus far, also by other team members.

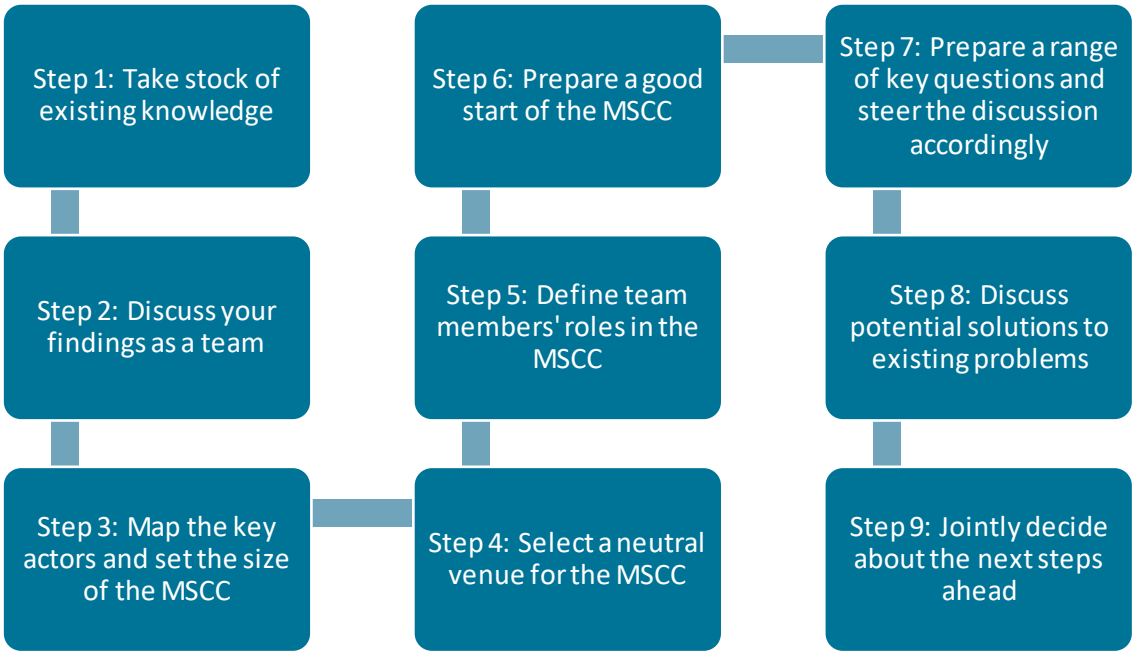


*Figure 1: Implementation of a Multi-stakeholder Community Consultation on 'Building Alliances'*

***Step 2*: Discuss your findings as a team**

Define some key questions and discuss your (initial) findings. How would you describe the relations between different groups of displaced? How would you describe the relations between displaced and non-displaced? How would you describe the relations between men and women; between young and old? Which challenges and problems do people frequently note? What are the causes and consequences of this? Do you see examples of peaceful and constructive relations? What are the causes and consequences of this? Are there any topics that should be avoided because they are too sensitive and could cause or increase tensions?

***Step 3*: Map the key actors and set the size of the MSSC**

Make an inventory of relevant actors that contribute to the way in which the relations in the community are shaped/people that contribute in positive/negative ways to these relations and invite them for a MSCC. You may decide on focusing on a particular neighbourhood or community to ensure that people know each other and can work together towards a solution. You may also decide to focus on two or three neighbourhoods/communities where relations between displaced and hosts differ. Your MSCC can then focus on elements that work in one place and that could be introduced in the other place as well. Note that a *barza* can be very large, with hundreds of attendants. For our MSCC we recommend a number between 20-50 participants.

***Step 4*: Select a neutral venue for the MSCC.**

Make sure the meeting takes place at a venue that is seen as 'neutral' by all invitees. Be clear about expectations. In many humanitarian aid settings, motivation to turn up at meetings is triggered by expectations that there will be delivery of goods or services. Make sure that people know beforehand what they can expect and what not. Schedule about half a day for the meeting.

***Step 5*: Define team members' roles in the MSCC**

Prior to the meeting, the team should decide who is going to lead/mediate the discussions and who is going to take notes. You might want to record the meeting but since different people will be talking, it might be helpful to have notes that record who is talking. A moderator should make sure that everybody's voice is heard. This means that a moderator will sometimes have to interrupt people who are too dominant in the discussion.

***Step 6*: Prepare the introductory part of the MSCC**

At the start of the meeting the team should take some time to explain the purpose of the meeting and of the TRAFIG project. It is important that the moderators/researchers create a safe environment in which everybody feels free to speak.

Consent from all participants is needed to make sure that participation in the meeting is free and on a voluntary basis. A space for open dialogue among participants from different social categories is required by showing that the meeting is held for the purpose of research activities and that none will be accused or asked to justify their statements during the meeting. But every statement should be substantiated or illustrated as much as possible, and moderators should invite participants to do so throughout the meeting. Moderators should avoid taking position themselves and should not steer the discussion. Note that moderators should not share any knowledge they have acquired during confidential and individual conversations with respondents. Before the actual discussion starts, participants can be invited to briefly introduce themselves. One team member should take notes of the discussion on flip charts.

***Step 7*: Prepare a range of key questions and steer the discussion accordingly**

Ask the participants to describe the relations between displaced and members of the host communities/authorities: What are prevailing opinions? What are the problems and misunderstandings that people note? How do people feel they are treated by 'the other' group? Which prejudices and feelings exist about each other? Participants will be invited to discuss in a plenary session about general problems that displaced people/refugees face in the area. Once the general problems are mapped, participants can be divided into sub-groups in which they are invited to discuss in more detail their specific problems. It is suggested that sub-groups are created in terms of place of living; people living in the same neighbourhood/street will discuss together. Each sub-group should be moderated by one of the team members.

***Step 8*: Discuss potential solutions to existing problems**

Invite your participants (still in sub-groups) to come up with solutions: How can they be achieved? Whose participation will be required? What advantages will it bring? Invite participants to contribute to the required solution and decide on practical steps to be taken to achieve this and how everybody involved will be held accountable. Discuss the suggested solutions in a closing plenary session.

***Step 9*: Jointly decide about the next steps ahead**

Encourage participants to make concrete plans for the next steps ahead and to speak out their commitment in public. How can you jointly work towards the realisation of the previously discussed solutions? Make sure to check whether all participants feel satisfied with the outcome of the meeting and leave with a positive feeling.

# 5 A practical example from the DRC

On April 9, 2020 the Congo team carried out a MSCC in Bukavu. This is a city with an estimated one million people in a region with longstanding armed conflicts. Because of the armed conflicts, many people flee to the city where they hope to find security and protection. There is no formal registration of IDPs and their exact numbers are therefore unknown. IDPs are especially concentrated in the peripheral and densely populated neighbourhoods, where they compete with longer-term inhabitants over the scarce resources and opportunities that are available. In our research we already noted that the relations between IDPs and members of host communities vary. In areas in which there is a lot of criminality for instance, people often feel insecure. IDPs – as the 'unknown strangers' – are often the ones that are suspected in cases of robbery or theft. In other areas we find very active local chiefs that keep track of newcomers; they help IDPs to find housing or employment and make sure that no tensions arise between their inhabitants. Some IDPs testify of support they received from members of the host communities when settling in the city and when finding their way towards integration. Other IDPs testify of discrimination and stigmatization they experienced which feeds into their reluctance to establish closer relations with others. On the other side, we have heard members of host communities complaining about IDPs who have come to the city and construct houses in 'anarchic ways', who would compete in the local labour market, and whose presence would contribute to an increase of crime rates. Others argue that many IDPs in fact are not 'real' IDPs but just economic migrants that come to the city to seek better lives but who do not have a real right to the city.

On the basis of findings like the ones sketched above we felt that the topic of 'Building alliances' would be a good topic for a MSCC. Due to sanitary measures against COVID-19, the MSCC in Bukavu, DRC was kept quite small, as gatherings of no more than 20 people were allowed. Because the research had taken place in three different neighbourhoods of the city, the team decided to organize a meeting with representatives of all three and see whether there could be inter-communal learning between them. For each neighbourhood, two IDPs, two long-term residents of the host community and two representatives of local authorities were invited. In the end two invitees cancelled their participation. This meant that there were 18 participants in total. The group was mixed in terms of gender, age and place of origin.

During the first part of the meeting, one of the team members gave a general introduction of the research project and explained the purpose of the meeting, followed by a plenary discussion on the topic. The following is a summary of main points that were raised during this discussion, which also reflect the limited understanding and knowledge that exist about each other:

1) Collaboration between displaced and hosts is not self-evident. It was pointed out that many longer-term residents feel that IDPs unlawfully occupy urban plots in places that are not suitable for habitation, or in places that already belong to somebody else. Sometimes they buy plots informally, without involvement of local chiefs or neighbours and therefore do not know which delimitations they have to respect. This can lead to disputes.

2) Displaced are seen and treated by residents and local chiefs as 'villagers', with a mentality that is not adjusted to urban living conditions: 'they leave the village, but the village does not leave them', as a participant argued. An example that was used to explain the difference was that displaced women rarely take their children to the health centre in case of illness. Others would even go as far to argue that displaced are dirty.

3) Long-term residents felt that local chiefs do not take the effort to register IDPs. IDPs themselves indicate not to register themselves because they assume they have to provide informal payments for the registration. The local chiefs indicate that IDPs do not follow the usual habits of registration, which also makes it more difficult for them to claim their rights when they get in trouble (about limits of their plots for instance).

4) IDPs indicated that it is difficult to find employment or to join networks, which help to generate own income, because they are less connected. According to the long-term residents and chiefs the problem is firstly, that IDPs have less financial means to 'buy' their entry into the market and secondly, that there is not enough trust and collaboration between residents and displaced. Residents are therefore often reluctant to support displaced people to integrate in the city.

In the second part of the meeting, participants were split up according to their neighbourhood. This allowed discussing in more detail specific experiences and challenges and ways in which participants imagined that relations could improve. Each subgroup was led by the researcher who had collected data in that particular neighbourhood to ensure a good understanding and an atmosphere of trust. This researcher took notes of the discussion for our own record and to feed back to the plenary session.

During the third part of the meeting, each of the groups reported back to the plenary to exchange ideas. The issues discussed and the solutions proposed showed a strong commitment from all sides to work towards better relations between IDPs and residents, under the leadership of the local chiefs. Several of the solutions aimed to set up more regular interactions between the different groups by organizing for instance community meetings more regularly. Other proposed initiatives that could help to improve the economic position of IDPs, for instance through the organization of local saving groups or solidarity funds, in which displaced and long-term residents could both contribute. To improve IDPs' social position it was suggested to raise more awareness about the problems they face in the local media, in churches and in community meetings. It was also suggested that IDPs should be more informed about modes of living in the city and the expectations about their behaviour.

# 6 Some concluding remarks

The MSCC is a methodological tool that needs to be handled with care: Team members should have the confidence – based on their experiences – that they have a good understanding of sensitivities that could simmer below the surface when bringing together a mixed group of people. If needed, research teams may consider seeking collaboration with a civil society actor with experience in facilitating intergroup exchanges. Ideally, researchers do some follow-up in the months after the meeting to check whether any of the plans are being realised.

It was remarkable to see during the discussion that all participants were frank and open about the way in which they viewed the relations between IDPS and residents. Some of these views were based on prejudices, others on concrete experiences. We will discuss in forthcoming publications to what extent such prejudices are conform reality or not and relate them to our further findings. It is important here to point out that all participants showed willingness to listen to each other, to increase their understanding about the other, and to work together towards better relationships. This is a positive comportment that could be used as a small basis for the neighbourhoods to build on in the future.

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TRAFIG (Transnational Figurations of Displacement) is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 research and innovation project. From 2019 to 2021, 12 partner organisations investigate long-lasting displacement situations at multiple sites in Asia, Africa and Europe. TRAFIG provides academic evidence on refugee movements and protracted displacement, analyses which conditions could help to improve displaced people's everyday lives, and informs policymakers on how to develop solutions to protracted displacement.

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