



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STAGES FRAMEWORK

OBSERVATIONS FROM
ALERTEUNITÉ

Executive Summary

Most funding is designed for belonging and deployed into survival. That is the quiet failure underneath a lot of community engagement.

Communities do not all engage from the same place. When a programme hands belonging-stage instruments (detailed reporting, co-design workshops, multi-year logframes) to a survival-stage reality, and the community cannot hold them, the funder concludes the community lacks capacity.

The community does not lack capacity. The programme lacks calibration.

This guide names three stages of social cohesion observed through AlerteUnité fieldwork, shows how to read which stage a community is in from behaviour rather than claims, and sets out what engagement to design at each stage.

Context and Constraints

Performative engagement:

A warm welcome, a full meeting, or strong early interest do not by themselves signal readiness.

Track actions, not energy:

Were messages answered, were small commitments kept, did the same people return?

The Three Stages

- **Survival:** planning horizon of days
- **Safety:** planning horizon of this season
- **Belonging:** planning horizon of years, chosen deliberately
- **Diagnostic:** read from behaviour, never from claims

The Discipline

- **Look for the fruits:** returned messages, kept micro-commitments
- **Understand the stage** those fruits reveal
- **Never blame** the community for the stage it is in

Field Observation: Port-au-Prince

"AlerteUnité observed high enthusiasm that did not convert into consistent follow-up. Resilience is not only about what communities need, but when they need it, and what they can hold right now."

Reading the Stages

A community's stage is visible in three things: its planning horizon, how its cohesion is organised, and whether small agreements are kept.

Stage	Planning horizon	Social cohesion	Observable signal
1. Survival	Days	Thin and personal, organised around whoever can get things done today	Inconsistent contact. Basic questions go unanswered, or answered differently each time
2. Safety	This season	Norms forming. A coordinator role exists and is answered	Small agreements kept. Check-ins happen. Confirmation within a couple of days
3. Belonging	Years, chosen deliberately	Strong. Shared norms and internal accountability	Someone inside asks the hard question out loud. Trust survives disagreement

The diagnostic is behavioural. A community can describe itself as organised and ready while its contact pattern shows survival. **Believe the pattern.**

Signal before structure. A heartbeat before a framework.

Performative engagement is a signal

Enthusiasm, a large turnout, or warm language can be genuine, but can also be shaped by habit, hope, or an outside funder's presence. One person who answers the same simple question the same way three times, on schedule, tells you more than ten who applaud a plan and disappear.

Look for the fruits

A returned message, a kept micro-commitment, a second person who shows up unsummoned, a contact who warns early that something will be late. Where they are absent, ask what stage would produce exactly this pattern, and design from there.

Stages Are Not Permanent

Stages are not a ranking of worth. A shock, a security incident, or the loss of a key person can push a community back. Re-read the stage whenever conditions change.

Stage 1: Survival

1 Ask for signal, not structure

DAYS HORIZON

Definition. Energy goes to immediate needs: water, physical security, getting through the day. Little bandwidth remains for anything that does not solve today's problem.

Social cohesion. Thin and personal. Cooperation is transactional, often organised around one figure. Trust does not yet extend to processes or institutions.

What AlerteUnité Looks For

- One consistent contact who remains reachable
- Any reports coming in at all, however rough
- Basic questions answered the same way twice

What To Design

- A heartbeat: a minimal, regular signal that the site is alive
- One named contact, one simple channel
- No reporting frameworks, no co-design workshops

From Survival Toward Safety

The transition does not happen by adding reporting requirements. It happens by reducing friction until follow-through becomes possible. Name one contact and protect that relationship. Keep asks to a size answerable within days. A missed day is data, not a breach, provided the signal resumes. Record the first kept agreements: they are the fruits that show the stage is shifting.

Survival communities are best served by humanitarian assistance designed as accompaniment, not an endpoint, carrying from day one a light-touch pathway: one stable contact, one repeatable signal, one small agreement that can be kept.

The error to avoid. Do not ask a survival-stage community to perform belonging in order to earn survival support. Unanswered vetting questions are not a pending answer; they are the diagnostic.

Stage 2: Safety

2 Lightweight structure becomes possible

SEASON HORIZON

Definition. Immediate threats are managed, though not gone. Thinking shifts from today to this season. There is bandwidth to coordinate.

Social cohesion. Norms are forming. People keep small agreements. Someone can hold a coordinator role and be answered by others.

What AlerteUnité Looks For

- Follow-through on lightweight commitments
- Regular check-ins that happen without chasing
- Confirmation within about 48 hours
- A designated contact who can mobilise others

What To Design

- A heartbeat plus a verification rhythm, as in the Aux-Sources model
- Named roles with light accountability
- Small, kept agreements before larger ones

Field Note: Aux-Sources Model

Continuous monitoring as a heartbeat, verification questions with a 48-hour confirmation expectation, and connectivity provided so the rhythm is achievable. The structure works because it matches what a safety-stage community can hold.

Moving Toward Belonging

The coordinator role survives a change of person. Agreements are kept when keeping them becomes inconvenient, not only when it is easy. Members begin correcting each other in front of you, the first visible sign that accountability is moving inside the group.

At that point, larger commitments stop being a gamble. The community has shown, in behaviour, that it can hold them.

Stage 3: Belonging

3 Co-ownership is possible only here

YEARS HORIZON

Definition. The community has agency and is choosing its future. It can plan, own assets, and invest effort in outcomes years away.

Social cohesion. Strong. Shared norms hold and accountability runs inside the community: someone will ask the hard question out loud. Trust survives disagreement.

What AlerteUnité Looks For

- Self-organisation without external prompting
- Internal challenge: members question each other
- Local verifiers the community itself trusts
- Agreements kept even when inconvenient

What To Design

- Co-ownership: community-led data and local verification
- Lease-to-own assets that transfer on performance
- Participation in programme and reporting design

The error to avoid. Detailed reporting and co-designed interventions belong at this stage and only this stage. Demanded earlier, they filter out exactly the communities most in need, and mislabel the filter as a capacity finding.

Protecting Belonging

A security shock, a failed harvest, or the loss of a trusted leader can push a community back toward survival. The correct response is to lighten the engagement, not to accuse the community of backsliding.

Funders who understand this keep the relationship through the shock. Funders who treat the stage as fixed lose the community at exactly the moment the earlier investment was about to pay off.

Match the Ask to the Stage

If you observe	You are likely in	Design this
Unanswered questions, shifting answers, one person holding everything	Survival	Humanitarian assistance, low burden. Heartbeat only, one channel, patient pathway toward safety
Check-ins kept, confirmations within days, a coordinator who is answered	Safety	Heartbeat plus verification rhythm. Named roles, small kept agreements
Internal challenge, self-organisation, agreements kept under pressure	Belonging	Co-ownership. Local verifiers, lease-to-own, shared design

Funder Checklist: Six Tests

- **Contact:** one person reachable over weeks?
- **Consistency:** basic questions answered the same way twice?
- **Follow-through:** last small agreement kept without chasing?
- **Confirmation:** arrives within about 48 hours?
- **Challenge:** someone inside asks a hard question?
- **Fruit:** repeated, observable actions over time?

Scoring

Passing only the first test indicates **survival**. Passing the first four suggests **safety**. Passing all six, including internal challenge and consistent fruits over time, is **belonging**.

A final caution

Performative engagement is common in aid-saturated contexts, including Port-au-Prince. Reward the quiet, kept agreement more than the loud promise.

The Principle

“You cannot build a belonging-mode programme on a survival-mode foundation, and you should not ask a community to perform belonging to earn survival.”

Prepared by After Five Collective from AlerteUnité field observation. Prepare, respond, recover.