



Improving beneficiary feedback mechanisms for refugees

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Question

Please provide:

- *Examples of best practice support for beneficiary feedback in humanitarian response;*
- *[If possible] evidence of impact of improved approaches to beneficiary feedback in humanitarian responses;*
- *Examples of the use and impact of digital technology on improving beneficiary (refugee) relationships with the agencies there to support them.*

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Summary

This review looks at beneficiary feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts. The review was asked to focus on three areas in relation to beneficiary feedback mechanisms: best practice, impacts of feedback approaches, and the use and impact of digital technology on beneficiary-agency relationships. A number of case studies and examples from international non-governmental organisations and agencies are used to demonstrate different feedback mechanisms and lessons learned from the implementation of these. Some of these case studies include information on 'impact', however, it was found that impacts were often limited to the activity and programme level and few demonstrated sustained or substantial impact higher up within organisations or in strategic decision-making. Attribution to feedback mechanisms is also difficult. Although the use of digital technologies in humanitarian contexts is now common practice, little literature or evidence could be found around the impact of these on beneficiary-agency relationships. This is an emerging area where more research is urgently needed.

In the last decade, multiple learning initiatives, guidance and tools have been developed to support meaningful and effective engagement with communities (e.g. ALNAP-CDA Practitioner Guidance on Feedback Mechanisms [see Bonino et al., 2014; Bonino, 2014], and BOND's Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group [see Jean, 2017]). In practice, however, organisations continue to struggle with sustaining feedback loops through funding and project cycles; scaling-up project level feedback mechanisms; and demonstrating effectiveness and value of investing into feedback processes (Jean, 2017). There is a lack of evidence on the real impact of beneficiary feedback mechanisms (Jump, 2013). As has been previously highlighted in the literature, much anecdotal evidence exists which demonstrates the importance of collecting information from beneficiaries and including recipients in the design, implementation and evaluation of aid projects (see Jump, 2013). However, despite increased interest in accountability in humanitarian contexts, the empirical evidence is still weak. More detailed evaluations and robust studies are needed in order to better capture the impact of feedback mechanisms and use of digital technologies, to strengthen the evidence base for decision-making.

Key findings:

- *Prioritising feedback and embedding it in decision-making processes key.* Beneficiary feedback, though deemed important, often gets 'crowded out' by other types of information during decision-making processes, so needs to be embedded into organisational processes.
- *Mixture of different feedback mechanisms and communication channels key.* Feedback mechanisms usually rely on a mix of tools ranging from in-person visits to more technological, digital, or SMS-based systems. The provision of multiple mechanisms aids inclusion of different groups. E.g. in Somalia a toll-free line ended up being more popular than a suggestion box or SMS, in part because beneficiaries could get an instant response to their feedback or query. Agencies need to involve affected communities when choosing and designing these mechanisms.
- *Face-to-face is often the preferred method.* Face-to-face feedback channels are often most valued by beneficiaries, but require formal procedures to ensure follow-up and learning. Technology-enabled mechanisms are often less accessible for women as compared to men and other marginalised groups.
- *Importance of context.* Feedback mechanisms should ideally be built around tools that are commonly used, preferred, and well understood in a given context by the people

expected to give feedback (including women, children and other marginalised groups). Also take into account literacy rates, confidentiality, and safety of communication tools for different groups. Analysis also needs to recognise that beneficiaries' enthusiasm to use technology in theory may not translate into practice

- *Need to consider marginalised groups.* Need for humanitarian actors to better differentiate among crisis affected people and pay attention to whether the most marginalised and vulnerable segments of the population are being adequately engaged. This includes children.
- *Sensitisation and two-way communication instead of only extracting information.* To receive meaningful feedback, agencies need to invest in making communities aware of available feedback channels, and inform them about their rights and entitlements. There is a need for clear and consistent communication and messaging on the purpose and usefulness of the mechanism to both affected populations and agency staff.
- *Engage programme staff during project design:* By bringing staff members into the conversation about feedback mechanisms early, it is possible to dispel misconceptions, build organisational buy-in, and allow all staff to take ownership of the system. Resources also need to be allocated to allow for sustained feedback collection.
- *Where multiple agencies are present, more collaborative communication with communities is required.* From a community perspective, joint or inter-agency feedback mechanisms are less confusing and more user-friendly.

Some considerations of gender issues and those of youth are included in the examples of best practice and discussions, especially in relation to access of different feedback mechanisms for women. However, there are no discussions on accessibility of mechanisms for people with disabilities. Data on the use of feedback mechanisms is often not disaggregated.

2. Guidance for best practice

Embedding feedback in decision-making processes

Aid agencies routinely receive solicited and unsolicited beneficiary feedback. Beneficiary feedback is the means by which beneficiaries exercise their right to assess the relevance, quality and effectiveness of development and humanitarian interventions (Jean, 2017: 2). Bonino (2014: 2) states that a feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received, thus forming a closed feedback loop. Where the feedback loop is left open, the mechanism is not fully effective.

Jean (2017: 4) summarised select issues and lessons discussed in Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group (BFLG)¹ events (between 2013 and 2016) into a learning paper. In the last decade, multiple learning initiatives, guidance, and tools have been developed to support meaningful and effective engagement with communities (e.g. the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, IASC Taskforce on Accountability to Affected Populations, ALNAP-CDA Practitioner

¹ The BFLG came out of DFID's Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPA) and served as a platform to share, debate and critically engage on topics related to listening and responding to feedback; it continues to serve as a learning platform.

Guidance on Feedback Mechanisms, Feedback Labs Toolkit², Ground Truth Solutions³ and numerous agency-specific resources). In practice, however, Jean (2017: 4) argues that organisations continue to struggle with sustaining feedback loops through funding and project cycles; scaling-up project level feedback mechanisms; and demonstrating effectiveness and value of investing into feedback processes. There is far more literature available on how to establish feedback mechanisms than on how to support the analysis and use of that feedback (International Rescue Committee et al., 2018). Beneficiary feedback, though deemed important, often gets 'crowded out' by other types of information during decision-making processes.

Jean (2017: 11) highlights a number of useful recurring observations on the decision-making processes that were raised in Programme Partnership Arrangement learning events, peer-to-peer discussions, and case studies:

1. *Accessibility and ease of use.* Decision-makers want feedback data presented in a concise, visually organised format. They want compelling feedback summaries that can be used for programme steering. And they want to see the personal stories that illustrate critical points.
2. *Timeliness and appropriate timing for decision-making.* For sensitive complaints, senior management establish a clear protocol for escalating urgent issues and for follow-up. For non-sensitive feedback, staff require a solid understanding of key decision-making points in the project and programme cycle.
3. *Aggregated feedback for future programme design and operational course corrections.* Most feedback processes focus on project-level information and have very little influence on institutional policies and practices. Few examples were available where data from feedback mechanisms was regularly informing institutional processes. Day-to-day implementation feedback can be addressed by problem-solving project teams and partners. Senior decision makers want to see aggregated and cumulative feedback from across the projects on key issues consistently raised by community members.
4. *Improved documentation of decisions and closing the loop.* The most common problem in understanding how decisions are made and based on what evidence, is that the process is rarely transparent or documented. When senior management does not communicate their decision to relevant staff, in turn, they struggle to close the loop and inform the communities. Institutional memory of why decisions were taken can also be lacking. Also, need to document the influence of feedback in decisions, the lessons learned and to share it with relevant organisational units.

Brown and Donini (2014: 39) summarised current understandings of methods and approaches to engaging with crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. The paper was informed by discussions at the 29th ALNAP Meeting in Addis Ababa in March 2014, with the theme of 'Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action'. A key point raised in the paper was the need for humanitarian actors to better differentiate among crisis affected people and pay attention to whether the most marginalised and vulnerable segments of the population are being adequately engaged. For example, the opportunities and ways to engage with women and youth in particular differ depending on the context (Brown and Donini, 2014: 43).

² See <http://feedbacklabs.org/>

³ See <http://groundtruthsolutions.org/>

ALNAP-CDA guidance on designing feedback mechanisms

In 2012 ALNAP and CDA started collaborating on action research looking at feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts, to establish what makes them work effectively and to focus on bringing different stakeholders' perspectives into the conversation. Bonino et al. (2014) is the culmination of this research, and is accompanied by other resources including a guidance paper for people designing/or implementing feedback mechanisms in a humanitarian programme (see Bonino, 2014). Three case studies document the experience of three different agencies that use feedback mechanisms as part of their humanitarian programmes (these are listed below under 'World Vision in Sudan', 'The International Organisation for Migration [IOM] and the Shelter Cluster in Pakistan,' and 'The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC] in Haiti'). The three case studies were compared to see if any significant correlations occurred across all three. The insights and evidence generated from the stakeholders throughout the research process are presented and analysed in Bonino et al. (2014).

Bonino et al. (2014: 33-34) tested seven propositions, on the assumption that each of the seven contributed to an effective humanitarian feedback mechanism. These propositions were:

1. Periodic reassessment and adjustment
2. Cultural/context appropriateness
3. Expectation setting and knowledge
4. Feedback collection
5. Verification and analysis of feedback information
6. Feedback acknowledgement, response and utilisation
7. Individual and organisational support

The data analysis in Bonino et al. (2014: 109) suggests that the initial seven propositions tested are not equal contributors to the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. As the propositions overlapped by design and in practice, it seems that an effective feedback mechanism can be established without the presence of all the seven propositions, because one proposition may compensate for another. The guidance by Bonino (2014) based on these propositions, recommends 15 guidance points that each contribute to an effective humanitarian feedback mechanism (see Bonino, 2014: 2-3 for the full list of guidance points). Bonino (2014: 30) emphasises that while most feedback mechanism features studied appear to contribute to more effective mechanisms, no single factor is enough to guarantee success. From the analysis, key factors that seem to contribute more decisively to the overall functioning of mechanisms include:

- the ability of staff involved with the mechanism to process, analyse, synthesise, and report on feedback data;
- clear and consistent communication and messaging on the purpose and usefulness of the mechanism to both affected populations and agency staff in different roles/ positions;
- whether the design and 'institutional' location of the feedback mechanism within a programme, or agency's organogram, creates a 'path' for feedback information to be shared within the agency and looked at by different users together with data from other monitoring sources to support decision-making on activities, operations etc.; and
- whether implementing partners and other local actors are aware of the feedback mechanism's purposes and functions, and are supported in their role of collecting feedback and relaying responses to affected communities.

3. Lessons learned

Rural and urban contexts

World Vision UK, together with INTRAC and Social Impact Lab, were commissioned by DFID to pilot *Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms* in seven Global Poverty Action Fund (GPAF) maternal and child health projects. The pilots took place in six different countries and in a variety of rural and urban contexts between 2014 and 2016.⁴ Three approaches to collecting feedback were trialled (World Vision et al., 2016a):

1. Unsolicited feedback via technology-based channels: Mobile phone technology for feedback through SMS and voice calls, and suggestion boxes;
2. Feedback solicited via pre-determined indicators: Structured questions to seek feedback about aspects of the project at regular intervals through focus groups, questionnaires, community/public meetings and suggestion boxes; and
3. Community designed feedback systems where communities decided what issues they would like to provide feedback about and how they would like to provide feedback, e.g. through focus groups, community/public meetings and suggestion boxes.

For comparisons, each pilot focused on collecting feedback through one of these approaches. All pilots included a suggestion box for confidential feedback.

A number of reports and resources have been developed from this pilot programme, including a website⁵, Key Findings report (World Vision et al., 2016b), and Practice Notes (World Vision et al., 2016a). Key findings include (World Vision et al., 2016b):

- Establishing feedback mechanisms required flexibility in the initial design phase, a thorough context analysis, and willingness to adapt mechanisms during implementation.
- Sensitisation of target beneficiaries to the purpose and process of giving feedback was essential to build confidence and overcome fears about giving feedback.
- Face-to-face mechanisms were preferred in contexts with lower literacy and high poverty. Technology-enabled mechanisms and suggestion boxes required adaptation to these contexts.
- Technology-enabled mechanisms were less accessible for women as compared to men.
- The provision of multiple mechanisms aided inclusion of different groups.
- Responding to feedback required flexibility in project activities and budgets, clear referral pathways and relationships with external stakeholders.
- Beneficiary feedback supported real-time adaptation of projects to the needs of their target groups and contexts, and accountability of programmes and government service providers.
- The process of giving feedback empowered beneficiaries and was valued in its own right.

⁴ Pilots took place in: The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Zimbabwe; The African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) Health Africa, Ethiopia; Child in Need Institute, Kolkata, India; Doctors with Africa CUAMM, Tanzania; Health Poverty Action (HPA), Somaliland; Mamta Health Institute for Mother and Child, Uttar Pradesh, India, and Rahnuma (formerly the Family Planning Association of Pakistan), Pakistan.

⁵ See <http://feedbackmechanisms.org/>

- Most feedback loops were closed at project level, meaning that complaints were resolved and feedback responded to direct to the beneficiary. However, there was limited use of feedback higher up the aid delivery chain, and feedback did not inform upward accountability to the donor.

In the pilots, using the mobile-enabled approach with SMS messages and voice calls augmented suggestion boxes (Somaliland and Tanzania), the context analysis and initial meetings revealed that beneficiaries were excited by the opportunity to give feedback via mobile phone at the outset of the project, and SMS and missed call systems were developed. However, in practice (and despite awareness raising), these channels accounted for only a small proportion of feedback received during the pilot. Reasons for this included gendered access to mobile phone handsets, low levels of literacy and cost. Voice calls avoided the literacy problem, and a direct toll-free line was introduced in Somaliland mid-way through the pilot. By the end of the pilot, the toll-free line was more popular than the suggestion box or SMS, in part because beneficiaries could get an instant response to their feedback or query. While this reduced the literacy barrier, women were still underrepresented in calls, and answering voice calls proved to be resource intensive. The lesson from this pilot is that the context analysis needs to be sensitive to the gender dynamics around access to technology and also needs to recognise that beneficiaries' enthusiasm to use technology in theory may not translate into practice (World Vision et al., 2016b: 5).

A number of recommendations have been developed from the pilots (World Vision et al., 2016b: 10):

- At the outset, ask whether there is sufficient time, resources and flexibility to implement a feedback mechanism and respond to feedback once the mechanism is in place.
- Conduct a thorough context analysis before deciding on a particular feedback mechanism, including whether literacy or cost are barriers in marginalised contexts.
- Sensitise beneficiaries to the purpose and process of giving feedback, both at the start of the project and on an ongoing basis, and allow time to build trust in the mechanism.
- Engage with external stakeholders (particularly local government agencies and community leaders) about the feedback mechanism and establish referral protocols.
- Ensure that there is sufficient scope in the programme design to make changes and respond to requests to increase or reallocate resources.
- Ensure those with 'first contact' with beneficiaries (often project staff) understand the purpose of the feedback mechanism and the scope for responding to feedback.
- If feedback is intended to integrate with monitoring systems, give careful consideration to how feedback will be analysed and aggregated, and the capacity of staff and systems to do that.
- Consider the sustainability and exit strategy for a feedback mechanism as part of the initial design phase.

Child-friendly feedback mechanisms

An inter-agency study by five child-focussed international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)⁶ explored the accessibility of feedback and complaint mechanisms targeted at children and youth within the INGOs' programmes. It aimed to help fill an information gap on the extent to

⁶ Educo (a member of the ChildFund Alliance); Plan International; Save the Children UK; War Child UK, and World Vision.

which children are using feedback and complaint mechanisms in humanitarian and development settings (Wood, 2015). Fifteen surveys took place between October 2014 and March 2015 covering a range of countries and regional contexts where the agencies worked (including Afghanistan, Egypt, El Salvador, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Nepal, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and South East Asia).

The survey responses confirmed the original premise of the study – that children’s access to accountability mechanisms is not yet universal. Some children are using agency channels to voice their concerns, but others remain unable or unwilling to do so. Agencies are already aware of the principles for establishing feedback mechanisms for children, but as the surveys reveal, some gaps in information, practice and contextualisation of these principles exist. Based on the information provided in the surveys, several factors stand out as having potential to help agencies establish mechanisms that will be more accessible for, and better suited to the needs of, children (Wood, 2015: 31). These are:

- *Engagement of children in design and establishment of feedback channels and in monitoring and evaluation of the overall mechanism.* The process of engagement will help to increase children’s confidence in using the channels and their understanding of the feedback process. It will raise children’s awareness of their rights and promote trust in the agency.
- *Collection of locally defined, disaggregated data on the use of the feedback channels.* This will help to identify or confirm children’s preferences and determine which groups of children are accessing the channels and which are not. This information can be used to design feedback mechanisms that are better targeted.
- *Systematic evaluation of the feedback mechanism* is also required to ensure that it continually reflects and responds to the preferences and needs of children.
- *Collection of socio-economic data and application of context mapping* can help to more accurately identify the factors that influence children’s access in certain contexts. This contextual analysis should specifically cover rural, urban, development and humanitarian programming.

4. Examples and impact of feedback processes

Food Security & Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) Afghanistan

FSAC Afghanistan undertook a mapping exercise to capture existing mechanisms used by FSAC partners in Afghanistan for obtaining feedback from beneficiaries, as a step towards producing evidence-informed guidance on feedback mechanisms for affected populations in food security and agriculture contexts (FSAC, 2013: 4). Interviews with 18 member agencies revealed five main beneficiary feedback and complaint mechanisms used: informal interaction with project staff, formal interaction with project staff, letterboxes, community based organisations/institutions, and hotlines (FSAC, 2013: 9).

The study found that grounding a mechanism in a clear policy on beneficiary feedback can ensure the mechanism is implemented with the overall policy objectives in mind. A successful and effective beneficiary feedback and complaint system will only be established when it is developed in a participatory manner, and include representatives from all relevant stakeholders (FSAC, 2013: 4). FSAC highlight that there is no one ‘right’ process for beneficiary feedback

mechanisms, beneficiaries have different capacities and preferences so one mechanism will not suit all. Accordingly, it is best to have a combination of feedback mechanisms – such as having staff open to receiving informal comments, having a hotline, and holding periodic community consultations (FSAC, 2013: 23).

Action Against Hunger in Pakistan and Uganda

To document good practices and lessons learned, a qualitative study was undertaken focusing on the feedback and complaint mechanisms in use by Action Against Hunger in Pakistan and Uganda (Action Against Hunger, 2017). The following recommendations for establishing feedback mechanisms draw on the experiences of Action Against Hunger staff in both countries (Action Against Hunger, 2017: 7):

- *Engage programme staff during project design:* By bringing staff members into the conversation about feedback mechanisms early, it is possible to dispel misconceptions, build agency organisational buy-in, and allow all staff to take ownership of the system.
- *Invest time and energy into sensitisation:* Sensitising stakeholders to the existence of the complaint system is the first step in promoting its use and empower communities to voice their concerns and needs.
- *Build several modalities into feedback systems:* Both missions used more than one modality to access stakeholders' feedback. When complainants do not have phones or do not have the literacy to use complaint boxes or mail, they can rely on face-to-face communication to submit their complaints. Having several channels ensures that feedback mechanism users can choose the method that best fits their circumstances and comfort.
- *Maintain confidentiality:* Designing the feedback system and training implementers to minimise potential risks are crucial for safeguarding users.
- *Monitor feedback mechanism usage:* Monitoring usage is essential for evaluating how well it is being implemented, how well certain components of the system work, and disparities in the population's access to the system.
- *Use feedback to improve the programme:* There is no reason to solicit feedback if it will not be used to improve programme services. For example, beneficiary feedback was instrumental in informing Action Against Hunger Pakistan that female sanitation pits were not a culturally appropriate service to provide. Ignoring these complaints could have jeopardised the community's trust in Action Against Hunger.

Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms pilot in multiple countries

Between 2014 and 2016, the UK Department for International Development supported seven non-governmental organisations to pilot beneficiary feedback Mechanisms as part of their maternal and child health projects (see section above on 'Rural and urban contexts').

Impact of mechanisms

In early 2017, World Vision UK contacted partners to see what has happened since the pilot programmes finished in 2016 and whether they have been able to sustain the feedback mechanisms in the communities they worked in (see <http://feedbackmechanisms.org/findings/>). For the organisations interviewed, the technical capacity that setting up a feedback system

enabled was the lasting legacy of the programme. However, continued funding and assigning staff and resources to ensure that feedback is collected, analysed, referred and acted upon is the greatest issue facing organisations.

World Vision in Sudan

Bonino et al. (2014: 12-14) in their first case study, looks at the feedback processes in World Vision Sudan's food assistance programme in South Darfur camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The research team conducted interviews with World Vision staff in Khartoum and Nyala and residents in Otash, Alsalam, and Kalma camps.

The study looked at the Community Help Desk, feedback/suggestion boxes and informal channels (including periodic community meetings and focus group discussions), as these are the primary communication channels used by World Vision in Sudan for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback (Bonino et al., 2014: 12). There are links between the different feedback channels. For example, when local community mobilisers hear of issues related to food rations and nutrition they pass this feedback on to the Community Help Desk focal points, so that the correct World Vision team will record them and follow them up. Feedback is documented in logbooks and questions are answered on the spot as much as possible. When feedback requires a response or action by the World Vision team, staff respond in both written and verbal form and, where appropriate, make announcements at meetings with the community and with camp leadership about the changes that have been made or action steps in progress.

Bonino et al. (2014) use the case study to underscore two design-related points that have implications for effectiveness of feedback mechanisms. First, much of the literature on feedback processes emphasises the cultural appropriateness of the feedback channel itself. The South Darfur case study points to the importance of taking both the local culture and the context (i.e. operational, security, phase of programming, institutional) into account to ensure an appropriate and effective mechanism. The second aspect, which receives less attention in the literature, is the importance of correctly locating the feedback mechanism in the organisational structure, and ensuring integration into other organisational systems.

Impact of feedback

World Vision has used feedback from IDPs in Darfur to modify and improve programme design and implementation. Some changes have been small and approved at the sub-office level; others have been more significant modifications in the delivery of food assistance and have required the approval of senior management, World Vision's Food Programming Management Group, and WFP. Among the examples of changes that have been made to programmes based on feedback from camp residents are the following (Bonino et al., 2014):

- changes to the content of food rations;
- structural improvements in the food distribution areas and temporary school buildings;
- enhanced extracurricular programming for children; and
- introduction of a milling voucher programme.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Shelter Cluster in Pakistan

Bonino et al. (2014: 14-16) for their second case study explores feedback processes in IOM's shelter programme in the flood-affected regions of Pakistan and, by extension, feedback activities in the Shelter Cluster led by IOM. The research team conducted interviews with IOM programme staff, Shelter Cluster focal points, and IOM's implementing partners in Islamabad, North Sindh and South Sindh provinces, where IOM provided assistance in flood-affected communities. Conversations included community members who have received assistance since the floods of 2010, 2011 and 2012 in several rural areas of North and South Sindh.

The case study looks at the following tools and channels for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback:

- Humanitarian Call Centre – IOM's primary feedback channel based in Islamabad providing basic information about IOM projects.
- Monitoring teams – used to follow up any complaints and feedback received through the call centre and the monitoring process itself.
- Shelter cluster coordination mechanisms and focal points – deployed at the district level to ensure timely and reliable mapping of needs and to share activities and information with operational agencies, the Cluster System and district, provincial and national authorities. There was no formal feedback mechanism at the cluster level and hence no explicit complaints/feedback/response mechanism. Instead, local people used several informal channels, including sharing feedback in face-to-face conversations with focal points and sending SMSs to Shelter Cluster focal points.

A distinctive feature in the Pakistan case study was the role of the Shelter Cluster in sharing feedback and enabling feedback loops. At the time of the field visit by Bonino et al. (2014), there was no explicit or formalised feedback mechanism across the cluster system in Pakistan. However, it became evident from the conversations that the strong presence of the Shelter Cluster at the district level, and the day-to-day work of the cluster focal points who routinely share information, are notable features that enable and enhance feedback activities.

Impact of feedback

Bonino et al. (2014) highlight that IOM's overall response, implementation process and specific procedures have been modified as a result of a steady stream of feedback arriving through the call centre and through monitoring visits and face-to-face conversations with community members, and include:

- modifications to the contents of emergency kits
- adjustments in cash transfer procedures
- changes in payment amounts and payment schedule in the One-Room Shelter programme.

All of these changes have been communicated to people through community meetings, announcements, or face-to-face interaction with local partners and staff.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Haiti

The third case study by Bonino et al. (2014: 17-18) focuses on communication and feedback processes for affected populations used within the IFRC's programme on return and relocation in Haiti as well as their sanitation and health programming. The research team conducted interviews with programme staff at IFRC and several other Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies that operate in Port-au-Prince, Leogane and Jacmel and supported earthquake-affected people with a resettlement grant to cover one year's rent and a livelihoods grant.

The case study observed and described several communication tools and channels for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback:

- Toll-free call line for questions and complaints ('Noula') – staff were trained to answer questions and provide up-to-date information.
- Telefon Kwa Wouj ('Red Cross Telephone') – a toll-free SMS-based interactive phone line with pre-recorded messages about public health, hygiene, disaster preparedness and violence prevention. Feedback questions were included in the phone-based automated survey as well.
- Radio Kwa Wouj ('Radio Red Cross') – broadcasted several hours a week with a live call-in show featuring distinguished doctors and experts on specific health and sanitation topics, and allowed people to call in with questions and concerns.
- Feedback solicited through ongoing programme activities.
- Community mobilisation and face-to-face engagement – IFRC and its national counterpart Haitian Red Cross continued to rely on traditional methods of both conveying information and seeking people's input and feedback.

Bonino et al. (2014) highlight a distinctive feature in the Haiti case study as being the use of information and communication technology such as the TERA (Trilogy Emergency Relief Application) SMS system to enhance and expand feedback activities. IFRC has invested extensively in developing communication tools and accountability mechanisms in Haiti. It is the only country where IFRC can afford to support this work to a significant extent, and where there is dedicated funding to resource it.

Impact of feedback

IFRC's process for absorbing feedback and acting on it has been iterative from the start. It is recognised that, due to the nature of humanitarian response, there is a loss of institutional memory about the important changes that have been made based on feedback over the last few years. IFRC staff shared with the ALNAP-CDA team a number of examples of use of feedback in adjusting programmes and making decisions:

- The initial design of the Return and Relocation programme was informed by a steady stream of feedback from camp residents who spoke to IFRC delegates and shared the details of their living arrangements prior to the 2010 earthquake.
- Temporary shelters that IFRC constructed were redesigned to include more than one door and a veranda. This improved design has been institutionalised.

- Types of construction materials were changed due to leakages and complaints from households.
- The content and messaging function of the Interactive Voice Response system was adjusted based on user data analytics and feedback from users.
- The Haitian Red Cross, adjusted the content for the Health Department sensitisation campaign based on the survey data gleaned from the interactive voice response system.

Kenya Red Cross Society Accountability to Communities framework

Kenya Red Cross Society commissioned CDA to develop a detailed operational case study that documented its experience of mainstreaming the Accountability to Communities (AtC) framework across the organisation over a two-year period (Kenya Red Cross Society, 2017). AtC provides a framework and a set of minimum standards intended to support National Red Cross Societies' pivot towards greater accountability. Transparency, participation, feedback mechanisms, and community-led monitoring and evaluation represent the four minimum standards or pillars of the AtC framework.

This case study highlights a number of lessons learned that allowed for a successful mainstreaming process (Kenya Red Cross Society, 2017: 55-58):

- *Piloting Phase:* launching AtC as a pilot in one project in one sub-county office was a useful starting point for the mainstreaming process.
- *Flexibility & Adaptability:* Kenya Red Cross Society's willingness to be flexible and adapt its processes was essential to both the pilot and larger mainstreaming effort's success. While guidelines and frameworks were developed at the beginning of the initiative, these were all modified based on input and feedback.
- *Shared Responsibility Early in the Process:* strategically, the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning (MEA&L) team sought to ensure that AtC was seen as an institutional process and not an MEA&L task. They did this by engaging staff across the organisation early on in the AtC pilot phase and again during the AtC mainstreaming design and planning stages. Involvement of Kenya Red Cross Society's communities early on in the process helped to ensure the process was inclusive.
- *Organisational Prioritisation:* accountability was highlighted as an agency-wide priority. High-level engagement and prioritisation of AtC from the organisation's senior leadership were also important, senior leaders were engaged early in the process and provided ongoing input.
- *Linking AtC to the Programme Cycle:* integrating the minimum standards of AtC into key elements in each phase of the project lifecycle made it easier for staff to think about and act on them.
- *Strong Training & Effort of MEA&L Team:* well-designed and robust trainings about AtC, provided by staff who were versed in accountability and strong facilitators, was a key feature of Kenya Red Cross Society's success.
- *Dedicated Resources:* adequate resourcing of AtC meant that there were dedicated staff who had the appropriate skills to manage the process, and that the necessary financial resources were available for the larger roll-out and on-boarding of all stakeholders

- *Reflection & Review*: establishing periodic opportunities to review the pilot and the mainstreaming initiative enabled Kenya Red Cross Society to document key lessons and make alterations. Building in review time from the start is essential.

Impact of AtC process

Broadly, the AtC mainstreaming process was described as a success by all those involved (staff, volunteers, and community members). Kenya Red Cross Society (2017: 17, 35) reports that the shift to AtC within project lifecycles and across operations has had a big impact on the way Kenya Red Cross Society works and on the communities it serves. Discussions with staff, volunteers, and community members all described various improvements to relationships and modes of operating that can be directly attributed to the AtC process. These include:

- *Increased trust* – AtC created an increased sense of mutual trust and engagement between Kenya Red Cross Society staff and volunteers. Trust has strengthened lines of communication, making it possible for community members to engage in an honest dialogue about project implementation and outcomes.
- *Enhanced project sustainability and user-driven projects* – The shift towards a consultative approach encouraged more community members to become involved in and lead their own development initiatives. This has enhanced project sustainability and community resiliency.
- *Improved access, security, and early warning systems* – Increased and transparent communication and enhanced trust between Kenya Red Cross Society and communities have allowed staff to operate more safely and appropriately in the context in which they are working.

Accountability efforts in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan

International humanitarian agencies invested more effort and energy into being ‘accountable to affected people’ (AAP) in the Typhoon Haiyan response than ever before. A case study and briefing paper by Buchanan-Smith et al. (2015, also see Madianou et al., 2016 and section below on digital technology) explore how affected people experienced these accountability efforts, comparing their perspectives with the perspectives of the agencies themselves. The research was carried out between November 2014 and February 2015 as part of the Pamati Kita common services project using a range of predominantly qualitative research methods.

Buchanan-Smith et al. (2015) find that while important advances were made in AAP, there are still some fundamental obstacles to overcome. International agencies set up many different communication mechanisms, including visits by agency staff, community consultations, suggestions and complaints boxes, help desks, and hotlines. Some worked well, such as responding to individuals’ concerns and a collective approach to summarising feedback. However, local people were reluctant to talk openly to agencies or criticise them. They felt obliged to be grateful. They were highly aware of agencies’ power to direct and withhold assistance, in ways that were mediated by community leaders. Agencies did not demonstrate an understanding of these constraints. Overall, affected people described their relationship with agencies as distant - contrary to agencies’ beliefs. International agencies invested in technological approaches, while local communities preferred face-to-face contact, because of the human interaction and the opportunity for dialogue. Consultations were regarded as one-way communication from agency staff to local people. International agencies did not generally make

major changes as a result of feedback from affected communities. For instance, the practice of targeting assistance according to individual needs did not fit the cultural context and caused real social division. This issue was discussed; but agencies did not adapt their approach.

How agencies engaged at the barangay⁷ level was a key determinant of how residents engaged with their AAP efforts. For example, where agencies had a weak relationship with the community, the influence of barangay officials as 'gatekeepers' was strongest; this hindered feedback where local officials discouraged residents from raising concerns, partly to 'maintain face' to the outsiders. Where agencies had a strong relationship with the community, local people were more likely to give them honest feedback, and to use their SMS hotlines.

Buchanan-Smith et al. (2015: 5) conclude that while AAP was given much greater attention as an organisational and sector-wide priority in the Haiyan response, there are limitations in the way it was done. First, feedback tended to focus on existing agency programmes: 'are we doing things right?', rather than on bigger strategic issues: 'are we doing the right things?' Second, local people's preference for face-to-face communication highlights that dialogue and building relationships are at the heart of AAP. This may require spending substantial time at community level. While technology should be used to support interaction between local people and agency staff, it should not become an end in itself. Third, while humanitarian agencies tend to see the aid transaction as between themselves as service providers and individual vulnerable households, the Haiyan experience demonstrates the relevance of the wider cultural and societal context. Fourth, this case study highlights the importance of working through local government structures in an informed and nuanced way, alert to power dynamics at local level.

Impact of approaches

Buchanan-Smith et al. (2015) revealed a number of examples of feedback triggering adjustments in existing programmes. For example an Oxfam programme to support fishing households switched from providing cash grants to providing vouchers to ensure that nets were purchased that complied with legal requirements, instead of illegal nets with fine holes that encouraged unsustainable fishing. Most agencies' feedback mechanisms were targeted at beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries of existing programmes, rather than other communities or community members. There were very few examples of agencies making substantial changes to programming on the basis of feedback from local people.

The Common Feedback Project in Nepal

On April 25, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake affected the lives of over eight-million people across 39 districts of Nepal. Affected communities were in need of reliable and timely information about the crisis situation, as well as about how to access the aid and services available to them. Most aid agencies operating in Nepal had their own communication channels in place, but there was no systematic collection, analysis or use of feedback. Three months after the earthquake, a mixed group of UN agencies, INGOs and media agencies launched an inter-agency common service referred to as the Common Feedback Project (CFP) (Communication with Communities Working Group Nepal, 2015). Originally established with support from DFID following the 2015 Nepal earthquakes, the CFP was adapted in early 2016 to address the reconstruction and

⁷ The *barangay* is the smallest government administrative unit in the Philippines (Buchanan-Smith et al., 2015).

recovery phase, and extended for two years (Nepal Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project, 2018).

The CFP team collected regular feedback from disaster-affected communities through bi-monthly Community Perception Surveys, using more than 40 enumerators to collect household level data from affected areas. To gain further insights, regular focus group discussions, periodic case studies and key informant interviews were also conducted, and partner organisations voluntarily shared feedback gathered through their accountability mechanisms that was then collated by the CFP. Findings were regularly reported to the humanitarian and development community (Nepal Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project, 2018).

Impact of CFP

An evaluation of the CFP was undertaken in February 2016 (Austin, 2016). The evaluation aimed to understand the use and added value to key stakeholders, particularly how feedback generated through the CFP was used by humanitarian agencies and what barriers existed in preventing use of such data. Overall, the evaluation found that CFP was valuable in terms of providing trend analysis or response performance in the wake of the Nepal earthquake. The project's flexibility and service oriented approach added value in coordination with partners to provide a common aggregation and analysis of community feedback. However, evidence of the CFP was limited in shaping strategic and decision-making at the national level, and it was most successful at shaping humanitarian action at the operational and programme level. At district level, the latest CFP findings became an agenda item at cluster and government-led meetings. A few NGOs also started using the CFP findings as outcome-level monitoring indicators. However, influencing cluster plans and programmes on the national level has proven to be more challenging (Austin, 2016).

A recent information flyer on the CFP highlighted the following as examples of where key issues arising from community feedback has been advocated for and helped change the direction of response and recovery activities and strategies (Nepal Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project, 2018):

- Following feedback on water scarcity from communities, DFID invested £4 million in the rehabilitation of water supply schemes in the earthquake affected areas and several I/NGOs redirected resources from within their reconstruction programmes to invest more heavily in improving the supply of water.
- Based on findings from the CFP Protection Survey, Care Nepal revised its gender-based violence programme.

5. Use of digital technology

Little evidence of improved beneficiary and agency relationships through the use of technology in humanitarian contexts could be found. Mesmar et al. (2016) highlights that this is an emerging field and more evaluations are needed. A lack of evaluation of these technologies, a paternalistic approach to their development, and issues of privacy and equity constitute major challenges to their use in humanitarian contexts. Rigorous evaluation of digital technologies in humanitarian crises must be integrated into design and deployment, to strengthen the evidence base for decision-making.

Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) Toolkit

Dette et al. (2016) produced a toolkit that provides an overview of different technological options for M&E in insecure environments, summarising the lessons learned from various pilot projects in countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria.

Using mobile phones for monitoring and gathering feedback

The rising usage of basic mobile phones and smartphones in volatile environments can make communicating with communities easier. Mobile phones offer channels for reaching difficult-to-access populations in insecure settings and can enable efficient information processing.

Dette et al. (2016: 23) use a case study from an INGO in Somalia to demonstrate the use of SMS and a call centre to aid recipient feedback mechanisms. In the wake of corruption and diversion scandals after the 2011 famine in Somalia, the INGO was seeking more effective channels for capturing feedback and satisfaction levels of the affected communities. In 2011, the INGO started working with a local contractor and the four main telecom service providers in Somalia. They created a system for affected populations to provide feedback by sending SMS messages or voice calls to the INGO. All incoming messages received a response to confirm that their feedback was received and responses were logged on a publicly accessible online platform. Responses and follow-up to all complaints and inquiries were also logged on the public platform and communicated to those submitting them. The development and piloting of the system received dedicated, external support and generated direct project costs of approximately £140,000. The system was piloted in relatively stable areas of Somaliland and subsequently expanded to Puntland and South Central Somalia, and a number of changes were made.

Lessons learned from the project:

- *Uptake takes time.* The team experimented with different approaches to raise awareness for the hotline. Overall, a mix of activities was successful, but the process required many months.
- *Feedback mostly concerns operative issues.* Contrary to initial expectations, people rarely report information on sensitive issues such as corruption or diversion. They prefer other channels such as one-on-one conversations to discuss sensitive issues.
- *The shift to a toll-free number has increased feedback volume.* This was only possible due to agreements with Somalia's main mobile telecom service provider.

Complementing feedback mechanisms with radio programmes

Radio remains the most popular technology that people use to receive news and updates in many resource-constrained contexts. Nevertheless, in humanitarian programming and monitoring radio is often understood as a one-way communication tool that offers limited use for humanitarian purposes. Dette et al. (2016: 81) argue that radio programming can also be used to explain aid efforts and feedback mechanisms to crisis-affected communities.

Lessons learned from the study:

Dette et al. (2016: 97) demonstrate the benefits of using radio through a case study in Somalia, where radio was used to improve communication between communities and humanitarians. In Somalia information sharing can be a big challenge, and humanitarians struggle to get important

messages to local communities, while these do not always find it easy to make their voices heard by agencies. 'Radio Ergo' was founded in 2008 to fill this gap. The Somali-language radio station is based out of Kenya and supported by the International Media Support and the Swedish Fojo Media Institute. The show provides information to help people make informed decisions. Radio Ergo streamed every day from 3 to 4 PM on shortwave radio in order to reach people in remote areas not served by FM radio. Some local FM stations re-broadcast the show, and it was also available on the station's website. The show was based on local reporting gathered by a network of correspondents. Themes include health, education, protection, agriculture and livestock, gender, youth and employment, environmental protection, culture and issues of governance.

Communications with online platforms

Dette et al. (2016: 98) highlight that where online communication platforms are popular, aid agencies can use them for their monitoring, feedback and accountability efforts. This includes social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as instant messaging applications like WhatsApp. Dette et al. (2016: 100) suggest that if used carefully, social media can fulfil effective complementary functions for:

- Complaints and suggestions channels: Instant messaging apps make it is easy to provide communities with a number for sending comments directly to organisations. Unlike SMS, sending instant messages over the internet is free and can be more practical and efficient than using complaints boxes or making calls.
- Outreach and accountability efforts: Where local communities already use online platforms, they offer practical channels for aid actors to report back to – for example, on feedback they received and acted on. This can happen via public social media platforms or bulk communications on instant messaging apps. Being visibly responsive can in turn make aid recipients more likely to submit feedback.

However, several limitations and challenges need to be considered. First, they still often introduce a bias toward those people who can afford internet access and are comfortable using them. Second, challenges around data privacy as well as security have not yet been sufficiently recognised and addressed. Third, analysing large volumes of data, especially in multiple languages, can be very time consuming and requires a great deal of skilled labour.

Dette et al. (2016: 113) use the example of WhatsApp online messaging by aid agencies in Syria and neighbouring countries for collecting feedback and facilitating daily communication among staff. National aid organisations have relied on WhatsApp since the early phases of the crisis. Their international peers followed more recently and integrated WhatsApp into their work. It is now used to create and run groups that connect agency staff outside Syria with monitoring teams in-country. Moreover, agencies announce WhatsApp numbers during distributions and publicise them in their outreach. Aid recipients and local actors can use these numbers to send their complaints or inquiries to aid organisations. As the app became more popular with communities, agencies realised the need for standards and guidelines on who is responsible for handling and responding to incoming messages and follow-up.

Lessons learned from the study:

- *Meet people where they are.* If channels like WhatsApp are already widely used and popular, it is advisable to tap into these information flows rather than setting up entirely new channels.

- *For specific information needs and feedback on quality, use targeted questions rather than open feedback channels.* Similar to phone hotlines, communications received via WhatsApp concerned mostly targeting and basic operational questions. If agencies have specific information needs or want to learn about corruption, additional channels and in-person consultations are necessary.
- *Make sure the capacity to react to feedback is in place before setting up new channels.* While easy to set up, a WhatsApp number needs systematic processes to handle incoming feedback in order not to disappoint expectations of those providing feedback

Humanitarian Technologies Project – Typhoon Haiyan

New communication technologies are celebrated for their potential to improve the accountability of humanitarian agencies and as tools for disaster recovery; however there is little evidence to assess their impact (Madianou et al., 2016: 961). The **Humanitarian Technologies Project** examines the optimistic account of communication technologies by providing empirical evidence on the uses of communication technologies by affected populations as well as stakeholders involved in the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan recovery in the Philippines.

The response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 represents the most systematic implementation of ‘accountability to affected people’ (AAP) initiatives by humanitarian agencies. Because of the existing technological infrastructure in the Philippines, Haiyan was widely seen as an ideal laboratory to pilot initiatives on accountability to affected communities (Madianou et al., 2016: 967). Madianou et al. (2016) (as part of the Humanitarian Technologies Project) draw on a year-long ethnography of the Haiyan recovery and 139 interviews with humanitarian workers and affected people to reveal a narrow interpretation of accountability as feedback that is increasingly captured through mobile phones. They observe that the digitised collection of feedback was not fed back to disaster-affected communities, but was directed to donors as evidence of ‘impact’. Rather than improving accountability to affected people, digitised feedback mechanisms sustained humanitarianism’s power asymmetries. Another study by Madianou et al. (2015), which draws on the same year-long ethnography assesses the potential of new communication technologies for voice. They also highlight a disconnect between assumptions about technology present in humanitarian policies and the actual uses of technology by affected populations. The article traces the factors that facilitate, or hinder, participation and finds that communication technologies enable voice only if other parameters, such as a strong civil society, are present. They conclude that, for their participants in the Haiyan recovery, the uses of communication technologies did not achieve a reversal of power asymmetries, as is often assumed in the humanitarian agencies’ reports and documents.

Lessons learned from Madianou et al. (2015 and 2016) include:

- The assumptions about technology present in humanitarian policies do not translate to actual uses of technology by affected populations. This disconnect was apparent when examining the participation of affected people in disaster recovery (2015).
- Communication technologies do not give people a ‘voice’. Technologies can facilitate voice but only as long as other factors, such as social capital and a strong civil society, are present. Further, we identify a divide among the better-off participants who are most likely to have a ‘voice’ in post-disaster contexts and the poorer participants for whom finding a voice is more challenging, if not impossible (2015: 3035).

- Middle class participants can exploit some of the potentials of digital technologies to make their voices heard and bring attention to their problems thus often improving their social positions. Conversely, those who are most in need are less likely to find such opportunities because they lack access to these technologies and the skills needed to use them (2015: 3034-35).
- Much of the participants' mediated communication resembled an 'echo chamber' and not a dialogue. Participants were likely to share their views with peers but not with aid or government agencies. As much as this mediated voice has value, it is limited in its capacity to correct any power asymmetries in humanitarian action (2015).
- Interactive digital technologies were often prioritised as feedback collection tools. Feedback mechanisms can have a distorting effect on accountability processes, where feedback gathered through technological means is more likely to be counted compared to feedback expressed in other settings, especially face-to-face contexts. It is also questionable whether complex problems and concerns can be conveyed in 160 characters, which raises questions about the representativeness of feedback collected (2016: 969).
- The project's data suggest that the main 'audience' for the feedback data was the donors – and not the affected people. Despite the good intentions, the intensification of feedback mechanisms and metrics through digital technologies do not necessarily improve humanitarian action nor do they automatically make humanitarian organisations more accountable to beneficiaries (2016: 961).
- The narrow interpretation of accountability as feedback has a number of consequences. Given the relationships of obligation and patronage that govern Philippine social life, affected people were reluctant to offer their views or air their grievances. Examining the feedback databases of several humanitarian agencies, a significant number of messages were 'thank you' notes expressing gratitude and indebtedness (2016: 976-77).
- Technology can only reveal or amplify the social and political structures already in place and structural changes would need to be made in order for more accountability—instead of audit—to take place (2016: 978).

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