



Feedback Mechanisms In International Assistance Organizations

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This report summarizes desk research and interviews with staff of international assistance agencies and researchers on the use of recipient/primary stakeholder feedback mechanisms in international aid efforts. It does not represent an exhaustive examination of all feedback mechanisms currently being developed or in use by international aid agencies and donors, and does not include an assessment of these mechanisms by those providing the feedback.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the many individuals and agencies involved in contributing their time, experience and insights for this report, and for their willingness to share their perspectives. Many of the views shared during the research for this report were made confidentially and we have cited organizational names where appropriate and agreed to by those interviewed. Therefore, most individuals' and some organizations' names have not been included.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing number of international donors and assistance agencies have made commitments to improve the quality and accountability of aid efforts by listening to the voices of recipients and affected populations. To this end, a number of international and local organizations are currently working to develop and improve their recipient feedback processes. In early 2011, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects conducted research on how recipient feedback is gathered and utilized to inform decision-making in international assistance efforts. This report presents the findings gathered through desk research and interviews with key informants in international humanitarian and development agencies.

Feedback systems and loops: a note on terminology

Feedback mechanisms provide organizations with data and perceptions from primary stakeholders about the quality and effectiveness of their efforts. An ideal feedback process involves the gathering of feedback and the communication of a response, which forms a ‘feedback loop.’ However, the language and terminology used to describe feedback systems in international assistance organizations varies, and few organizational reports and websites explicitly refer to feedback mechanisms or feedback loops. Likewise, in e-mail correspondence and phone conversations, many staff of aid organizations did not necessarily use this term. Instead, most reported on and described various processes and mechanisms that they utilize to solicit opinions and feedback from recipients of aid about their work, including: participatory methods and processes for assessments, program design, monitoring and evaluation; real-time evaluations; accountability frameworks and mechanisms; complaints and response mechanisms; listening exercises; perceptions studies; social audits; social performance management systems; community score cards; citizen report cards; constituency feedback, story-telling, and others.

Agencies also use different terms to describe those whom they are seeking feedback from, including: recipients, beneficiaries, participants, primary and/or affected stakeholders, affected populations, clients, constituents, partners, rights holders, customers, disaster-affected people, and primary change agents, among others. Our report uses some of these descriptions interchangeably reflecting the diversity of the examples we gathered.

Summary of Key Findings

- **Feedback from aid recipients is valued as essential to improving accountability.** The practitioners we interviewed expressed their unequivocal commitment to participatory and inclusive approaches to humanitarian and development work, and placed significant emphasis on accountability mechanisms. A growing number of organizations have signed on to international charters and standards to improve quality and accountability, particularly in the humanitarian sector—such as the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (SPHERE), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard in Accountability and Quality Management—and the INGO Accountability Charter for a wide array of civil society organizations (CSOs). Many humanitarian and development agencies are in

the midst of critically assessing and improving their existing systems for gathering feedback from aid recipients because they recognize it can improve the effectiveness of their efforts, strengthen their accountability, encourage meaningful participation, and establish stronger relationships. Many such efforts are motivated by organizational values, while others are driven by external pressures from donors and peers.

- **There are few continuous feedback loops.** Despite the growing attention to accountability and recipient feedback, there is a real dearth of information about genuine (continuous) feedback loops. Typically, information gathered from primary stakeholders flows through different parts of organizations, but decisions are rarely communicated back to communities. A few notable examples of feedback loops come from the humanitarian sector, where complaints and response mechanisms have been instituted to manage issues as they arise during emergency responses. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms varies across agencies. A few promising feedback loops utilized by development agencies are highlighted in this report.
- **There are few agency-wide feedback systems.** Many agencies do not have existing agency-wide mechanisms or systems for collecting, analyzing, utilizing and responding to recipient feedback. This is especially true in large aid agencies with multiple country offices where feedback mechanisms may be used only in certain country programs versus globally.
- **Most feedback processes are focused on project-level information,** not agency-wide policies, strategies or programs. In many agencies, field staff and partners gather feedback for use in their programs and operations, but these efforts are not generally systematized, reported to headquarters offices, or collated and analyzed at an agency-wide level.
- **Effective feedback processes require management buy-in.** Integrating feedback mechanisms and loops into programming cycles and organizational management systems requires a range of strategies at the headquarters and at the field levels. Managers who place emphasis on the importance of listening to recipient feedback are able to put in place effective systems for data collection and analysis. The information gathered through feedback mechanisms has to be reported in a timely manner and be accessible to managers in a format useful for making decisions. Several people highlighted the critical role that managers have played in creating incentives and requirements for field staff to regularly solicit and utilize feedback.
- **Investment in staff competencies is critical.** The way policies are implemented in the field greatly depends on the availability of financial and human resources, as well as the commitment and competence of field staff to convert organizational commitments into the practice of gathering and responding to feedback. Skills such as open-ended questioning, active listening, critical and analytical thinking, and facilitation are all important areas of investment both in field staff and with local partners who are often responsible for gathering and analyzing feedback from affected people and communities. Good communication skills are also critical to

synthesize and explain the importance of this feedback to senior managers and policy makers, and to respond effectively to those who have provided the feedback.

- **Frameworks and approaches to gathering and utilizing feedback are being developed.** Many agencies are in the process of revising or developing new frameworks to help systematize various feedback and accountability mechanisms. Among other organizational systems being developed, several people described performance and program management systems focused on improving program quality and effectiveness. Some of these new approaches have built-in mechanisms for integrating recipient voices into program strategies and operations.
- **New and innovative technologies are being tested.** There are a number of new and emerging approaches to gathering primary stakeholder feedback using digital technologies, mobile phones, text messaging, web-based software and other media. These are currently being tested by organizations in both emergency and development settings, and a number of people underscored the importance of supporting the development of innovative ways to gather, respond to and share information quickly using available technology.
- **Lessons learned and good practices in utilizing feedback mechanisms are not well documented.** There are few reviews and case studies of recipient feedback mechanisms and this remains an emerging area of research and practice. Nonetheless, there are experiences and lessons to draw on from the various types of feedback processes that have been tried and from those being piloted, and we present some of these in this report. Several practitioners noted that policies and practice will improve if there is a concerted effort to better document effective (and ineffective) practices and lessons. Being transparent and sharing these lessons can promote institutional and cross-organizational learning, foster internal receptiveness to the use of feedback processes, and establish credibility vis-à-vis recipients, local partners, donors, and other stakeholders.

Methodology

The literature review included over 40 documents such as NGO and donor reports, case studies, evaluation reports, scholarly articles, and independent research reviews. We reviewed many different websites and mined several databases for information, reports, evaluations and other relevant documents on recipient feedback mechanisms. A list of relevant resources is attached in Appendix I.

To supplement the desk research, CDA contacted over 100 individuals in 45 different international and national implementing organizations, funding agencies and international consortia and networks. In all, we conducted 34 key informant interviews between April 1st and May 6th. Most interviews took place over the phone or by Skype and a few were done by e-mail or in person. The respondents, representing 25 different organizations, shared critical insights on the design and utilization of feedback mechanisms within their organizations. These included prominent humanitarian and development agencies implementing programs in many countries focused on emergency response, recovery, and long-term

development efforts in health, education, livelihoods, micro-finance, capacity building and advocacy work. In addition, we held conversations with key people in several consortia and networks that have developed sector-wide standards, frameworks and tools to improve aid agencies' accountability, communication and responsiveness vis-à-vis local communities.

Interviews were held with individuals occupying key decision-making, program management and advisory positions, most of whom were able to discuss the challenges and opportunities faced in developing and utilizing effective feedback processes and policies within their organizations. In order to gain an understanding of how feedback is gathered and utilized by people at various levels of organizations, we spoke with staff at the headquarters as well as field level. In addition, we interviewed two researchers who work on issues of participatory research methods and feedback systems. Unfortunately, no bilateral or multi-lateral donor representatives responded to our requests for information or interviews during this research period.

CDA recognizes that the time and scope of this research project were limited, but we believe we have gathered valuable insight into what is currently happening in regards to the development and utilization of feedback mechanisms in international assistance organizations. Further learning and evaluation of these mechanisms should include an assessment of their effectiveness by those utilizing them to provide feedback.

The following research questions guided the desk research and interviews with practitioners:

1. Why have organizations sought recipient feedback and how?
2. Where does the demand for feedback come from? Is it truly demand-driven or values driven? Does this matter in terms of how the information is used (or not)?
3. What has worked well and what has not in getting recipient feedback, and why?
4. What do organizations do with the information they collect and how does it affect their strategies, policies and/or practices?
5. Are there genuine feedback loops and what do they look like? Are they continuous or one-off? (i.e. concrete examples of how the data are used to adjust strategies, policies, operations, etc.)
6. What investments and incentives are needed to have effective recipient feedback processes?
7. What experience-based recommendations can be made on how to establish and maintain recipient feedback mechanisms so that they genuinely influence organizations' international assistance efforts? Particularly how and under what circumstances does the evidence gathered make it back into the organization that wants it and influences something in particular, such as policies, strategies, plans, approaches, partners, operations, etc.?

INTRODUCTION

International donors and aid agencies increasingly recognize that listening to the views and priorities of people in aid recipient societies is fundamental to improving the effectiveness of international assistance efforts. Many organizations have publicly stated their commitment to learning from and including the voices of recipients in an effort to improve the quality of programming and to engage them in decisions that directly affect their lives. This recognition has resulted in a great deal of rhetoric about effective participation and inclusion of recipients and some concerted efforts to put these commitments into practice.

During the last two decades, there has also been a new and important emphasis on improving accountability in international humanitarian and development efforts around the world. However, accountability to recipients has traditionally been weak compared to the meticulous accountability mechanisms that many organizations put in place to meet the requirements of their donors. The increased focus on forward accountability in recent years has been particularly noticeable in the humanitarian sector where it has been accompanied by the development of new standards, frameworks and practical tools. Within the development field, there is also a similar recognition that for international assistance to be effective, agencies have to do a better job of listening to the views of their primary stakeholders. It is notable that more and more development agencies have begun to design agency-wide accountability frameworks, although it is yet to be seen how effective these processes will be at soliciting, analyzing, utilizing and responding to recipient feedback on a consistent basis.

The conflation of the concepts of accountability and feedback mechanisms is noteworthy and was evident in virtually all of our conversations. Many organizations recognize that gathering feedback is just one step in being accountable and this is reflected in the existing accountability frameworks, such as those developed by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership and the INGO Accountability Charter, as well as in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Many practitioners described feedback processes as embedded within their participatory monitoring and evaluation systems where primary stakeholder input is collected as part of the project cycle. However, examples of closed feedback loops were rare and most feedback processes did not extend past the project or program level.

In this report we describe some of the current practices in gathering feedback and utilizing it within organizational decision-making processes, along with lessons learned and emerging approaches. With these findings, we aim to inform the on-going discussions and decision-making processes on how to better listen to and integrate recipient feedback within the organizational systems of international assistance agencies to improve the effectiveness of their efforts.

Section I: MOTIVATION FOR SEEKING RECIPIENT FEEDBACK

The reasons *why* international assistance organizations seek recipient feedback fall under four broad categories (in no particular order):

1. **Improving Accountability.** Most organizations recognize the importance of providing opportunities for those affected by aid efforts to ask questions and to voice concerns or complaints. Some organizations found that encouraging feedback and complaints from recipients gave their staff the necessary pressure to make changes in operations because they felt a sense of responsibility to those that voiced their input.
2. **Improving Effectiveness.** Those organizations that have maintained on-going primary stakeholder feedback mechanisms throughout the cycle of a project reported greater results and higher satisfaction compared to prior projects that did not include as much recipient feedback. Oftentimes, changes made to project operations based on feedback were not difficult to incorporate, and changes to some small details led to significant improvements in recipient satisfaction. The successes that have resulted from increased feedback have helped make recipient feedback mechanisms a greater priority in some organizations, but it still remains on the lower end of most organizational priority lists.
3. **Responding to donor requirements and/or media pressure.** Some organizations have sought recipient feedback due to pressure from donors to demonstrate recipient involvement. In many of these cases, organizational efforts to listen to local voices were described as having had less impact as in other organizations where gathering feedback was part of a larger organizational value with management and staff buy-in. Heightened media exposure and public pressure has helped prompt the development and use of recipient feedback mechanisms in the emergency humanitarian sector in particular.
4. **Increasing security for staff.** For several agencies, instances of violence against staff working in difficult environments were reduced after they improved their communication and feedback processes with affected communities. Through increased dialogue and better communication, organizations that had been experiencing violence or threats eventually found themselves on positive terms with local communities, and in some cases were even protected by the local community from armed groups.

Section II: DEMAND FOR RECIPIENT FEEDBACK AND ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

The pressure to demonstrate more accountability has been growing in recent years, as evidenced by the many new accountability measures and frameworks currently being designed and implemented by several large international NGOs. For many, the driver for improving accountability comes mainly from internal organizational values rather than donor requirements. For instance, Save the Children recently began an "Accountability to Children Breakthrough" that aims to improve accountability of programs to children and their care givers, including setting up feedback and complaints mechanisms in all of their operational countries over the next three years (2010-2013). This initiative began because of the increased momentum and focus on accountability and an organizational decision to allocate funding for this purpose. The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) is also in the process of developing a 'Stakeholder Complaints and Response Mechanism,' a 'Stakeholder Feedback Mechanism,' and a revised

Monitoring & Evaluation Guide in which part of the recommended reporting format includes stakeholder feedback mechanisms to gather information from both internal (i.e. staff/volunteers) and external (i.e. beneficiaries and partners) stakeholders, and a guidance on complaints mechanisms.

Collecting primary stakeholder feedback and sharing information with recipients has been a normal practice in many field-level offices for years. One development worker firmly placed these practices within the framework of broader participatory development processes such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory learning and action (PLA) methodologies which have been applied by many agencies. However, many field staff and partners have reduced the application of these methodologies to their most practical dimensions and as a result have often missed the richness of the feedback gathered in conversations which were held for other purposes. In effect, opportunities for gathering feedback and engaging community members in dialogue and joint reflection have been there, but the practices of systematically listening to, gathering and analyzing people's perspectives, recommendations and complaints have not become routine in many agencies.

As many NGOs now try to standardize their accountability practices, there are efforts to systematize the mechanisms that have already been in place on the ground and to spread effective techniques to other country offices. They recognize the value of recipient feedback and, as a result, are enthusiastically taking up these increased efforts to systematize their processes. Some large NGOs, such as Concern and Save the Children, are now seeking ways to support their local partners to improve their accountability to recipients, as well as strengthen accountability between the organization and the partner, and to develop mutual accountability. Several agencies note that their local partners are eager to receive more training and support in this area.

Although several NGO staff did not think that the main driver for improving feedback mechanisms came from donors, others outside of the NGO community feel that donor demand *is* the reason most organizations are investing more in gathering recipient feedback. Some independent researchers and consultants felt that efforts made solely to address this donor demand did not appreciate or effectively utilize the knowledge of local people. They said that many organizations listened only for comments related to what they were planning to do anyway, rather than truly trying to learn from local perspectives. Because donor requirements are not concretely defined, organizations can often fulfill the requirements superficially without ever allowing recipient feedback to influence programming strategies or policies. The idea of tracking influence was brought up as an important component in measuring the extent to which recipient feedback is affecting organizational actions, however methods for doing this are still being studied and have not been widely taken up by organizations.

In some cases, the driver for establishing a recipient feedback mechanism did come from the ground-up. For instance, in a Bangladeshi community affected by a natural disaster, Caritas-Bangladesh heard several complaints from local people who had wanted to give feedback but did not know how. The organization responded by putting in place a complaints and response system and by making staff phone numbers available for follow-up. Feedback is gathered on a regular basis now without an over reliance on the complaints mechanism.

Some feedback processes have been initiated to gather perceptions of international humanitarian action in general and to improve relations between agency staff and local communities. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders conducted a three-year research project in ten countries to understand how the patients, national and international staff, local population, authorities, partners, other development or humanitarian actors, and the UN bodies, perceived MSF and its operations. The research project was motivated by the acknowledgement that acceptance in local contexts becomes increasingly essential for reasons of safety, proximity and effectiveness.¹ As part of this project, the MSF-Switzerland mission in the Middle East carried out a perceptions study to gain insight into how local people understood MSF's mandate and principles and to understand why their operations and staff were sometimes experiencing hostility from the local community. The study revealed a lot of confusion and unmet expectations regarding the responsibilities and actions of MSF-Switzerland. To respond to this feedback, MSF increased their communication outreach efforts and made attempts to increase avenues for feedback from community members. The importance of understanding community perceptions in order to improve the agency's aid efforts is now communicated through trainings for all mission directors and others who will be managing MSFs' operations in the field.

In terms of truly utilizing recipient feedback, organizational values seem to be an accurate indicator of how well recipient feedback is gathered and used. However, buy-in from senior management and an organizational willingness to learn also appeared to be important aspects in maintaining feedback mechanisms and utilizing the feedback effectively. There must be support from both the headquarters level and operational level managers and field staff for feedback mechanisms to be established and utilized effectively. Once the value of gathering feedback and the appropriate procedural and reporting requirements are adopted by staff at all levels, then the organization will be able to engage with communities more effectively and will be better poised to make meaningful changes based on the feedback they hear. Even in cases where the demand for feedback was driven from the bottom-up, as in the Caritas-Bangladesh example, if the organizations' staff value gathering and using primary stakeholder feedback, the process is more likely to yield beneficial results. Alternatively, if demand for collecting feedback is initiated as an outside requirement without organizational values supporting the feedback mechanism, the process is usually weak and often does not result in organizational learning.

Section III: LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECIPIENT FEEDBACK PROCESSES

Discussions about what has worked and what has not in gathering primary stakeholder feedback reveal a wide array of mechanisms that have been tested and put into practice. People described a number of different methods their organizations have used to gather feedback including:

¹ Khurshida Mambetova. "Perceptions of MSF in the Eastern Chad (Abéché project)." Paper presented at the World Conference on Humanitarian Studies at Tufts University (June 2-5, 2011).

- focus groups
- personal interviews
- open community or partner meetings
- going “door-to-door”
- listening exercises
- telephone hotlines
- giving out staff telephone numbers
- complaints boxes
- public monitoring visits
- community liaisons
- weekly coordination meetings
- surveys/questionnaires (or additional questions on standard ones)
- score cards / report cards
- recipient committees
- emails and SMS
- websites
- story-telling
- games and drawing cards (especially for gathering feedback from children)

Additional methods for providing information or responding to feedback included:

- bulletin/information boards for reports, budgets, and/or organizational information
- brochures and banners
- using megaphones to read information printed on fliers, brochures or reports
- emails, SMS, websites
- grievance procedures (specifically linked to complaints mechanisms)

Most organizations that were successful in gathering feedback from people in local communities, and in distributing information back (closing the feedback loop), found it necessary to have more than one mechanism in place. In fact, some organizations used several different methods in order to provide options for all of the different groups within the local community to provide feedback and to get information.

In particular, practitioners highlighted the following mechanisms and methods that have worked well:

- **Community-based assessments and score-cards:** Several organizations are successfully utilizing community-based assessments to let them know how well their operations are functioning and where they can make improvements. For instance, a local partner of Action Aid in Pakistan organized an “open accountability forum” in which they encouraged local men, women and representatives of local government and other civil society organizations to reflect, analyze and critique their organizational practices. Similarly, CARE Malawi uses scorecards for community members to evaluate the quality of public sector services, CARE’s programs, and the work of local village committees. Staff then incorporate this feedback into performance management processes and initiate a participatory action planning process with community members. In another example, Caritas Bangladesh includes a set of questions in their standard monitoring and evaluation procedures to ask recipients whether or not they were able to give feedback. If people report that they wanted to give feedback, but that they did not know how, the staff are made aware that they need to increase their communication and make appropriate changes.

- **Complaints and Response Mechanisms (CRMs):** These are primarily used in the humanitarian sector and many have been established with the support of HAP. For example, Concern Worldwide is currently piloting a CRM in eight of its country offices. Among the lessons gathered already is the need to design the CRM system with recipients' input. When they decide the most appropriate ways to lodge complaints, the result is a feedback mechanism that works for many different people. These mechanisms must also be appropriate to the specific contexts where they are intended to operate, and agencies have to consider the most appropriate name for the CRM, channels and methods for raising complaints, and culturally appropriate ways of responding.
- **Self-Assessments:** Organizations that voluntarily choose to commit to the principles and standards outlined in HAP or the INGO Accountability Charter (or other accountability frameworks) must submit reports demonstrating their accountability to local community members. Action Aid, a founding member of the INGO Accountability Charter, carried out an additional self-assessment, asking its 254 local programs around the world to report on how well the country offices have been able to comply with Action Aid's own accountability and human rights standards and principles. Each program was asked to fill out a self-assessment form answering the question, "What evidence is there that rights holders have effectively influenced our programs?" In answering this question, the organization was able to see how, and to what extent, local feedback has been integrated into decision-making. Some organizations noted that while self-imposed reporting pressures can be effective in incentivizing the gathering of feedback, overly time-consuming or complicated reporting requirements can have the reverse effect (see section below).
- **Using multiple methods and communication mediums:** Most organizations have found that multiple methods and means for communication are needed to ensure that all primary stakeholders can have their voices heard. This is especially crucial for ensuring marginalized or minority groups are provided an opportunity to share their feedback and to receive information. For instance, in Save the Children's Pakistan office, the feedback hotline was very actively used, but staff eventually realized that men were the primary callers. Due to cultural constraints and educational barriers, it can be more difficult for women to call or send written feedback, so they utilized other methods to gather their feedback. Similarly, in order to include the voices of women and children, CRS gathers feedback during community visits and when people visit CRS offices or help desks, in addition to feedback boxes and accepting calls to program managers' cell phones.
- **Building Trust:** Most organizations noted that having good relations with the local community based on mutual understanding and trust is a key first step in getting meaningful feedback. Providing information about the goals and expectations of the organization is the first step in building trust and should be clearly explained to community members through several different mediums. Evidence from the Listening Project suggests agencies can also show respect by following through and responding to feedback, which helps them build trust and credibility.

- **Consulting with Communities:** Before determining which types of feedback mechanisms to establish, a few organizations have discussed the importance of consulting with the community for input on the feedback process itself. Community members know what systems are in place or which systems are likely to be effective for their context. Gaining insight into this knowledge can be crucial for organizations seeking to establish an effective and successful feedback mechanism. For example, a Save the Children office in Gaza realized that people would not use complaints boxes because the government had ineffectively used them in past attempts to gather feedback.
- **Responding to Feedback:** Organizations have found that if recipients do not think that their feedback or complaints are being taken seriously or do not see changes made, they will lose faith in the feedback mechanism and will stop using it. In order for any feedback process to be effective, organizations need to establish systematic procedures for reviewing, investigating and responding to feedback or complaints. All this needs to occur in a consistent, timely manner for people to believe in the system and use it.

Systems for processing and responding to feedback are crucial regardless of what feedback mechanisms are used. For instance, Concern Worldwide and their local partners developed procedures for responding to anonymous feedback submitted through complaints boxes. Most non-sensitive issues, such as suggestions for changing delivery times or basic changes to project operations are handled locally. The resulting changes that occur due to this feedback are announced publically—via information boards or public announcements—and anyone that still has a complaint is encouraged to resubmit their feedback. For sensitive complaints, such as allegations of corruption, Caritas-Bangladesh has an independent team carry out an investigation on the feedback received and then communicates the information and decisions back to community members. The process is set up to channel these issues up the organizational chain or to the headquarters level if necessary. The decision is then channeled back down the chain and changes are made by the local management.

Concern Worldwide uses a process for setting up a complaints and response procedure which includes the following questions and considerations:

- To whom should the complaint be forwarded? Guidance on distinguishing and sorting of sensitive complaints versus non-sensitive complaints, e.g. ‘sensitive’ could include sexual exploitation and abuse. ‘Non-sensitive’ could include late delivery of non-food items.
- Which level of management needs to be informed and when? When will HQ need to be informed?
- What is the timeframe for responding to complaints?
- Who will communicate the response to the complainant and how?

The procedure also includes an appeals process in the event that the need arises for this. Concern suggested that international agencies and their partners should be clear—with their own staff and with recipients—about what types of feedback they are able to deal with or influence. For instance, if

someone complains about an issue outside the agency's jurisdiction (i.e. areas not in an agency's control or location of operations, or about services or actions that are beyond the agency's capacity and mandate), the organization should refer the feedback to the appropriate authority or structure that can respond or help in dealing with it. By deciding ahead of time how to handle feedback, staff should be able to respond more efficiently and effectively. Many organizations are in the process of creating these systems and do not yet have much experience to share.

People also described a number of challenges in gathering and responding to recipient feedback:

- **Unsystematic processes:** Many organizations express an interest in listening to and gathering feedback from recipients, but many efforts are still done in a “clipboard” fashion and do not lead to changes in actions or policies. As a result, many local people feel that even though they have provided feedback, they still have not been heard. To systematically improve and learn, organizations need to analyze the feedback and complaints received and make program and institutional changes where appropriate. Otherwise, feedback processes will remain largely ad-hoc or one-off initiatives. Even organizations that value recipient feedback will likely be unable to continually gather and respond to feedback without an effective system in place.
- **Insufficient resources:** When creating a feedback system, organizations need to decide early on how much funding and staff time to commit to gathering and responding to recipient feedback. During the post earthquake response in Haiti, “blast” texting was used to send information to multiple subscribers via SMS. However, these services became inundated with reply messages from people asking questions or offering critiques and agencies did not have the capacity to respond or really utilize the information being shared. The result was that people on the ground felt a disconnection with aid providers and increased dissatisfaction.
- **Lack of senior management buy-in:** Unless feedback systems are clearly prioritized, especially by senior management, the processes may fall to the bottom of the pile when staff are overwhelmed by other commitments. For this reason, some organizations have begun to include recipient feedback mechanisms into other systems, such as for monitoring and evaluation, rather than establishing an entirely separate tool or reporting requirement. For example, monitoring and evaluation teams are often able to solicit feedback from primary stakeholders by asking some additional questions during their routine visits, including assessing how easily people feel they are able to provide feedback to the agency.
- **Some voices are marginalized:** Many organizations rely on community groups or key representatives to provide information or facilitate communication directly with communities. However, in many cases, the community/village group or designated representative do not reflect the wider constituency being served by an organization or do not communicate effectively with the community. In response to complaints from other communities, Caritas Bangladesh helped to restructure the community groups they worked with to have a more representative group of individuals. Save the Children similarly formed a children's committee,

rather than have one single children’s representative in a larger group.

- **Time consuming reporting policies:** Due to the increased pressures for reporting and improving accountability by some donors, many organizations and their staff feel overwhelmed and exhausted by all of the reporting requirements. When the demands are overly time-consuming and complicated, field staff may not be convinced of the value of more participatory approaches and additional feedback processes.

Section IV: DOCUMENTING, COMMUNICATING AND DECISION-MAKING

How is feedback synthesized and presented?

Practitioners suggest that there is a real need for practical tools to gather and document feedback in a format that lends itself to easy reporting and use by managers and other decision-makers at various levels in organizations. The few existing tools were seen as complicated and inflexible. Particularly for large organizations with multiple field offices, people emphasize that there needs to be some shared understanding of what the feedback process is trying to assess and improve so that the information is gathered and presented in useful ways for agency-wide analysis.

Several people we interviewed argued that quantitative data should always supplement the qualitative data typically gathered during the feedback process. “No numbers without a story, no story without numbers” was a refrain used by one respondent who also added that “If you want to influence management decisions, you have to generate numbers, otherwise data is not accessible to decision makers.” One such example was the Keystone Accountability Partner Survey² that surveyed partner organizations of several prominent international aid agencies and provided quantitative and qualitative data about the quality of their relationships with partners, which was benchmarked against their peers. This approach makes critical feedback visible to managers who want to understand how they rate compared with others and to improve how they manage their relationships.

During the pilot test for the Listen First³ methodology, operational managers were given a graph synthesizing the rankings and feedback on their programs/projects and staff gathered during conversations with local participants. Many managers reported that these visual reports with quantified data were useful and provided a good baseline from which to improve, but there is little evidence that this information was in fact used to change policies and improve accountability as there are currently no plans to continue using the methodology within the organizations that participated in the pilot.

Where does the feedback go?

Many organizations reported that much of the recipient feedback does not make its way up the organizational chain to effectively influence the overall strategies and policies. In the development

² Keystone Accountability. “Keystone Performance Surveys: NGO Partner Survey 2010.” (January 2011)

³ “Listen First Methodology and Framework.” www.listenfirst.org

sector, especially in large agencies with multiple country offices, feedback mechanisms may be used only in certain country programs rather than globally. Agencies report that their field staff often gather feedback for use in their programming and operations, but these efforts are not generally systematically reported to headquarters offices. In addition, most feedback processes we heard about are focused on project-level information as opposed to organizational strategies.

Where feedback has been utilized, changes have often been made at the local level reflecting the recipients' input about their immediate or recent experiences with assistance programs. For example, the audience for most of the real-time evaluation (RTE) reports is field staff and not the HQ. RTE reports summarize feedback from affected stakeholders on how the efforts have gone to date and offer suggestions for immediate and short-term changes. Most people agreed however that this feedback can be applicable and useful for larger scale adjustments of programs and strategies, but that organizations struggle to integrate the myriad of findings and local input into higher level policies and decisions.

Examples of Feedback Influencing Organizational Policies and Strategies

- The World Bank states on one of its websites that “While global policy networks are increasingly multi-sectoral - public, private and civic - poor people still lack access and voice during macro-level policy debates. There are no mechanisms for poor or disenfranchised people to participate and inform global programs and policies.”⁴ The World Bank’s “Voices of the Poor,” a participatory research initiative which collected the voices of more than 60,000 poor women and men from 60 countries, was an unprecedented effort to gather the perspectives of the poor about poverty and development and to integrate these perspectives into its global policy and strategy development. The 2000-2001 World Development Report on Attacking Poverty featured many of the experiences, priorities, and recommendations that were voiced by the people during the study. As a result of the findings, the World Bank committed to scale-up its portfolios of community-driven development (CDD) programs that would more directly benefit the poor. In addition, the “Voices of the Poor” initiative led to the creation of “Global Coalitions for Voices of the Poor” to address the disconnect between global priorities, macro policies, and local people's priorities, though clearly there is a long way to go to ensure that the voices of the poor are heard in policy debates.
- A network of microfinance organizations in Honduras has recently outsourced a joint client feedback effort to a local research consultant who developed a common survey instrument and carried out the field work. Survey teams spoke to hundreds of borrowers, representing the customers of twenty-five different microfinance institutions within the network. According to the CEO of Prizma Microfinance, “This is an effort to learn what our clients are saying about the loans, how useful they have been, what they have been able to do with them and what we can do better. It is a joint effort to learn from our common constituency without overwhelming them with multiple surveys and visitors.” Analysis of the data has been shared with all participating organizations and used to inform

⁴ World Bank. “Global Coalitions for Voices of the Poor.”

management decisions and customer relations.

- For the last two years, Save the Children UK's "Children's Panel" brings two children from each region where the organization implements its programs to London once a year to engage in direct dialogue with Board members and heads of policy teams within various program areas at the Headquarters. The children serve as representatives of a broad youth constituency in their home countries and regions. Last year the Children's Panel raised the critical importance to their well-being of their parents being employed, which led to policy discussions at Save UK within the livelihoods team and the implications of focusing on adult livelihoods. Similarly, children raised the issue of alcohol and drug abuse, and the policy team will be following up with country programs to assess the need for relevant programming. In addition, as a result feedback gathered from children, several Save UK country teams are currently exploring approaches to disaster risk reduction work that directly engages children.

Examples of Feedback Influencing Program and Project Level Decisions

- ACDI/VOCA in the Philippines uses primary stakeholder feedback as a basis for improving their agricultural programs by engaging local implementing partners in analysis and discussion of the feedback and action steps necessary to improve their efforts. According to program staff, "[Feedback data] has helped us see the real situation on the ground and helped us in re-strategizing, coming up with new policies and guidelines." Recently, an external evaluator integrated key feedback data into a midterm review and into the final impact study to inform the overall recommendations on program improvement and future directions. In addition, the M&E staff included lessons learned from the previous primary stakeholder feedback reports into the recently revised and enhanced M&E system which is being implemented now.
- Catholic Relief Services/Caritas staff in Bangladesh discussed how they have used the Emergency Capacity Building Project's *Good Enough Guide* to inform their feedback processes during emergency responses. Based on the feedback received from local people who visited the specially designated community demonstration house centers, they introduced some changes in the design of the houses, such as including verandas. CRS/Caritas also uses community-based committees on an ongoing-basis as a mechanism to gather and address immediate issues at the local level (i.e. recipient selection criteria).
- CARE USA has established an effective practice for consultative processes with community members and partners, but the commitment to regularly solicit and utilize feedback varies greatly between country programs. Many country programs carry out "customer satisfaction surveys" on a regular basis, asking for feedback on specific projects and programs, such as health and education. The level and scope of feedback solicited differs based on the length of the project. CARE staff reported different experiences with how much of the feedback was analyzed by country program teams and used to influence program decisions, noting that this often depended on leadership and principled commitments to integrate people's feedback.

- Health GAP staff and volunteers gather recipient feedback and report their findings through emails, reports, and bi-weekly staff phone calls. Staff noted that their campaign strategies are highly responsive to changes in context and to stakeholder feedback. For example, when Ugandans began to report that PEPFAR-funded programs were creating waiting lists for treatment, Health GAP quickly created a coalition campaign to secure more funding and a promise to expand treatment slots.
- The MSF-Switzerland Perceptions Study triggered a number of organizational changes including some that relate to the medical practice (e.g. training on medical ethical issues has been set up and better mechanisms are in place now for feedback on medical errors as well as other aspects of their operations).
- Partners in Health and Management Sciences for Health (MSH), recognize the importance of gathering and sharing feedback, particularly when working within national health systems. Staff at MSH pointed out that it is important to “make sure that the data we collect is not just used to strengthen our project and organizational systems, but to strengthen the national health system – to make sure managers at the provincial level and facility level are able to use the information that they are gathering to make informed management decisions. We are trying to make sure we are not just setting up a system that generates lots of reports but also one that allows for feedback between each level that would foster better use of information in decision making. In countries with weak or dysfunctional health systems, it takes up to two years to take data and information from communities and facilities to the central level and with no feedback at all in between, which is unacceptable for any health information system. Even in those areas where the information flow is faster, we still see low levels of feedback. We need to work to strengthen health systems’ capacities to [gather feedback] well and sustain the commitment beyond the project level.”
- Management Sciences for Health’s program in Peru works with local municipalities to increase the adoption of health practices in local communities and during regular community assessments, people are provided space and opportunity to give feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the interventions. Based on the analysis of the information gathered on the nutritional status of children and the feedback from their families, MSH was able to make management decisions to prioritize certain resources and devise different strategies for the most vulnerable regions, both at the community and district level. Feedback from communities is gathered during systematic assessments, mostly at baseline, mid-point and towards the end of the project, as well as through various implementation activities throughout the life of the project.
- Catholic Relief Services’ office in the SWAT valley in Pakistan received many complaints through complaint boxes about CRS’s transitional shelters not being connected to a water source. Based on this feedback, the SWAT Valley team investigated and altered programming to be able to connect the shelters to a water source through drinking water supply schemes. In Besham (Pakistan), CRS adjusted the coverage area as they learned through community feedback that the other NGOs that

had agreed to cover that area, were not, in fact, doing so. In the south, the contents of the non-food item kits were adjusted and additional hygiene promotion sessions were added based on feedback received that indicated that beneficiaries did not correctly understand how to use the items included in the kit. Additionally, based on feedback from recipients, tarps and brick-making molds were included in transitional shelters to allow beneficiaries to “winterize” their shelter.

- Oxfam America’s (OA) Community Finance Program is using a management information system to collect and analyze feedback from their micro-finance projects around the world. The data, gathered by field workers and partner agency staff, goes to the regional office level for an initial review and is analyzed at the headquarters to inform overall program strategies. Most recently, input gathered at the community level has been used to shape the on-going program offerings and additional services, including a focus on entrepreneurial skills, leadership skills and health and literacy modules. In addition, OA shares the data with four other INGOs implementing similar micro-finance projects.
- ECOWEB, an NGO based in the Philippines that participated in a Listening Exercise organized by CDA, described how they now listen to and gather feedback regularly from their partners when designing programs. For instance, when designing their livelihood programs, they asked local communities and their partners for ideas on what kind of livelihood projects would be helpful and how to make them sustainable instead of the traditional approach of providing prepared "menus" of potential livelihood projects. They conduct one or two listening activities every year and hold workshops to gather feedback and lessons learned with their partners. By regularly listening to feedback from those affected by their programs or policies, they say they have been able to design better programs and to implement them with less external support.

Section V: WHAT DO GENUINE FEEDBACK LOOPS LOOK LIKE?

There are few examples of effective feedback mechanisms which “close the loop,” though experience varies across sectors. In the humanitarian sector, complaints and response mechanisms (CRMs) are now regularly used by a growing number of agencies during emergency responses. These have been described as examples of micro feedback loops in which recipients’ voice their dissatisfaction with a particular issue and agencies are required to respond and follow-up.

- OFADEC, a national humanitarian agency in Senegal and a HAP member, chose not to call theirs a “complaints mechanism” given that most people were afraid to lodge complaints for fear of reprisals. Instead, they called the process “SINFOR” which stands for “Suggestions, Information, Reclamation,” and placed emphasis on gathering and responding to recipient suggestions. OFADEC asked primary stakeholders how the feedback system should be structured before establishing the various procedures. In addition to this formal solicitation of feedback and complaints, field staff periodically use random questionnaires during sites visits. These questionnaires do not target a specific group of recipients, but are given to whoever is at the

community site or at the meeting that day. During the next visit, different people are surveyed which provides the organization with a variety and diversity of feedback. Focus groups are also used to gather feedback and explain decisions, particularly to people who are illiterate.

- In one example from CRS Pakistan, the staff recognized the need for formal feedback mechanisms to help them manage the scale of the humanitarian response. They provided suggestion boxes, a dedicated phone number and an email address to receive feedback, and a “help desk” was staffed during distributions so that people could give feedback and get answers to questions about the project. Recipients provided feedback and if they left their contact information, they received a response within two weeks. When staff received repeated or surprising feedback related to problems with the projects, they investigated whether programming changes were necessary and if so, what they should be.
- HAP members in Haiti reported using different approaches to handle complaints, including a free telephone number for recipients to call with feedback and complaints, and providing beneficiaries with a tape recorder to lodge complaints. They also held community meetings with recipients to hear their complaints, opinions and suggestions and to discuss the steps that they took to resolve the issues.⁵

The following two examples are drawn from the development sector. Action Aid’s current strategy development process, driven by an internal commitment to engage rights holders in decision-making, is one of the few examples of feedback loops that we heard about during our interviews. CARE Malawi’s Community Scorecard mechanism is another example that merits close attention. These two examples are described in more detail below.

Including Rights Holders in Action Aid’s Strategy Setting Process

Action Aid has undertaken a number of reviews and adjustments to the way feedback is gathered and integrated into its organizational decision-making as part of the Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS), which was instituted in 2000. ALPS was developed when the organization was primarily locally driven and the projects were often determined in a “bottom up” fashion. As Action Aid began to focus more on influencing international policies set in Western capitals, the organization sought to strengthen the feedback loops between its local affiliates, national offices and the international Secretariat. For example, when Action Aid’s Brussels office lobbied the EU on sugar subsidies, Action Aid wanted to make sure its strategies and policies were discussed and vetted in a timely manner with key local stakeholders. This is challenging not just due to logistics and time pressures, but because there is not a single community opinion since sugar subsidies benefit some poor people, but not others. So, Action Aid made a concerted effort to gather a wide range of feedback and to balance the different interests when they took the feedback to EU policymakers.

⁵ Humanitarian Accountability Partnership. "After Action Review of the HAP Roving Team deployment to Haiti." (Oct. 15, 2010).

In their most recent international strategy development process (during 2010 -2011) Action Aid held two “strategy days” in each country where it operates. Staff members were asked to discuss the proposed directions and strategies with local partners, government stakeholders, and local rights holders/affected population. Each country office then submitted the feedback to the Secretariat (80 submissions were received from across the federation into the strategy process). In January 2011, Action Aid brought 120 people - one staff person and one person from a governance body (set up to oversee each country program and made up of partners and rights holders) for further strategy development. The strategy was revised and sent out again to all the country programs with a month to provide additional feedback gathered from community members. This revised organizational strategy did not reach all local communities in each country, but staff and Assembly members made a concerted effort to share it widely and solicit feedback. The process is highly participatory but the task of balancing different viewpoints is a veritable challenge. In addition, Action Aid took the draft strategy to the World Social Forum for feedback from peer organizations and global partners.

CARE Community Scorecard Mechanism

CARE uses community scorecards to allow community members to give feedback on the work of public service providers, including CARE. The scorecards have been used to interpret monitoring and evaluation data and to affect changes in program strategies and tactics. In Malawi, this method has been used to improve the quality of public services by engaging the local government and communities in discussions about expectations, service gaps and responsibilities. Service users and providers jointly define the indicators for regular assessments and CARE staff carries out follow-up reviews on the success or failure against these defined indicators. The Community Scorecard Mechanism has five steps:⁶

1. Planning and preparation. This includes meeting key stakeholders; training facilitators; identifying service and input entitlements.
2. Community scoring. This starts with a participatory appraisal to identify indicators for assessment. Community groups use the indicators to score service delivery on quantitative scales, disaggregated by wealth and gender.
3. Service provider scoring. Step 2 is repeated with local service provider staff.
4. Interface meeting. Service users and providers discuss the scoring results. They develop a joint action plan for improvements.
5. Follow up. The action plan is monitored. The process is written up and repeated.

This tool has been applied in health service delivery, education, agriculture, water, infrastructure development and to assess the overall processes of decentralization and local government performance. At the national level, a pilot project using the scorecard mechanisms is currently being evaluated, the results of which will inform development stakeholders, including government ministries, on the effectiveness of this tool as a mechanism for review and feedback on public services.

⁶ Alex Jacobs. “Creating the Missing Feedback Loop.” Draft (June 17, 2010).

Section VI: INVESTMENTS IN AND INCENTIVES FOR RECIPIENT FEEDBACK PROCESSES

In reports and interviews, practitioners highlighted a number of investments that agencies need to make to have effective feedback mechanisms, as well as the need to address organizational incentives to ensure that feedback is both gathered and utilized.

- **Frontline staff need to be trained and supported.** Active listening skills and skilled facilitation are critical to effective and meaningful feedback processes. Staff members must be able to ask probing questions to elicit feedback and engage people in critical analysis and reflection. They need to be inquisitive and ask questions even if they think they know the answers since different individuals or groups may have different views. The nature and quality of the dialogue is important and as one person said, “log frames don’t empower frontline staff and they don’t emphasize reflection. People need space for reflection and their agencies need to support this. There is no point collecting information that will not lead to learning and utilization.”
- **Staff members need to recognize the value of feedback to their own work.** Several people pointed out that the conscientiousness and commitment of the frontline staff are key factors in effective feedback processes. Some staff may feel threatened by the feedback mechanisms set up by their agencies. For instance, when CARE International set up complaints mechanisms during its Peru earthquake response, local staff were reluctant to support it, fearing they might lose their jobs if recipients complained about them or their projects.⁷
- **The local population needs to trust the agencies and be willing to provide feedback.** For feedback processes to be effective, primary stakeholders need to trust the process and be willing to honestly share their concerns and suggestions. This requires both an understanding of the purposes that the feedback process serves and the ability to give timely and constructive feedback in a safe (and sometimes confidential) way. In contexts where people have been historically marginalized and disempowered, local people may need more support to voice their opinions about assistance efforts without fear. For instance, staff of several organizations said that they had found that community members in Latin America – where there is a vibrant civil society – often voice their opinions and demand responses and/or action with more confidence than a typical community member in the DRC where people’s experience has been “you raise your voice and bad things happen.” Some suggested that long-term relationships and on the ground presence are important and that a community development approach that focuses on raising awareness of rights and education may be needed to help those whose feedback is sought be comfortable with the process.
- **Agencies need to dedicate adequate resources.** Effective feedback mechanisms require staff time and resources. Because of limited funding, gathering recipient feedback is often tied to

⁷ IRIN. “Beneficiary feedback: ‘Thanks but no thanks?’” (June 2008).

formal evaluation processes which are better resourced, but which may not be continuous. Some individual staff members and country offices have prioritized gathering feedback and improving accountability as part of their strategic planning processes, but it is not an easy task to champion this with senior management and donors. One reason for this is that there are yet to be established benchmarks or standards for what proportion of the overall budget should be set aside or earmarked for feedback mechanisms and to improve accountability. Most organizations have included monitoring and evaluation efforts in their overall budgets, but there is not a common practice yet for feedback and accountability mechanisms.

- **Reporting mechanisms need to be more robust.** What feedback is gathered and how it is reported counts when trying to affect decision-making processes. CARE USA recently instituted a new organizational performance and learning system called Uhora, the Swahili word for excellence. Uhora provides a common framework for the ongoing measurement of quality and performance across the agency with indicators for various aspects of performance. One of the indicators is consultation and accountability processes with program participants. The data is self-reported, but staff noted that at least this question is asked and that the data is published across the organization.
- **Incentives may be needed for managers to prioritize accountability to recipients.** Several people pointed out the need to address the tensions between the commitment to forward accountability and other management priorities. Organizational incentives may be needed to ensure that managers are consistently held accountable for the level of accountability to recipients, not just to donors, that they are able to demonstrate. For instance, in most organizations, program and staff performance reviews do not include measuring how well they listened to or incorporated recipient feedback in their strategies and decisions.
- **Donors need to invest in recipient feedback mechanisms.** While donors are increasingly incorporating accountability principles in their guidelines and assessments, many do not provide funding for feedback mechanisms.⁸ For instance, the European Commission's humanitarian funding arm, ECHO, now includes recipient accountability in its risk assessment guidelines to auditors. Accountability also features in the 2007 NGO humanitarian funding guidelines of DFID, the UK development agency. As a CARE International staff commented, "Donors are starting to learn from experience that unless you put in good accountability systems, you're wasting their money. Yes, it costs, but my question is not, 'What is the cost?' but, 'What is the cost-benefit?' My sense is: if you invest adequately in quality and accountability, then you'll always get a good return."⁹ In addition, several practitioners suggested that the development and use of standards for gathering, using, and responding to feedback by donors would have a significant

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

influence on the development and use of primary stakeholder feedback mechanisms by other donors, governments and aid agencies.

Section VII: EMERGING APPROACHES

Members of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) network have described promising examples of the use of SMS and social media for gathering feedback from and responding to “aid customers.” Several organizations have designed software for humanitarian agencies to use in order to include feedback from a wider audience. With mobile phones becoming ubiquitous in many countries, many organizations have already begun using them to gather and share information with recipients. In interviews, several people acknowledged the need to harness the potential of widely used digital technologies so long as it does not impede efforts to continue gathering and providing feedback in person, particularly in places where relationships and trust are essential for confidence in the feedback process. Some examples of emerging approaches and technologies include:

SMS Text Messaging: SMS texting as a means of information sharing has been spearheaded by initiatives such as Ushahidi and Frontline SMS. Many organizations are beginning to utilize texting as a means for information sharing and increasingly for gathering feedback, and they highlight some important issues to consider:

- **Information provision:** SMS can be used to send mass text messages to inform people about food distributions, vaccine drives, clinic locations, etc. This method has been used effectively in emergency disaster settings, such as in Haiti, but can also be used in non-emergency settings.
- **Gathering and responding to feedback:** Many people are willing to use SMS to offer their thoughts and feedback. During the emergency response in Haiti, many people responded to the mass informational texts from aid agencies with questions, critiques, or other feedback, but the agencies had not incorporated a way to monitor the replies and feedback. This resulted in some frustrations and a lost opportunity for a feedback loop between recipient and aid agencies. Practitioners suggested that data collected through SMS services should be processed in the same way as other feedback and that it should be regarded as equally important. Organizations should anticipate the volume and types of feedback they may receive and have mechanisms in place for responding to this feedback.
- **Costs.** While SMS is relatively cheap and affordable in some places, many people try to find ways of using their phones for free by “flashing” or “beeping” a number (ringing and hanging up) to indicate they want to be called back. One agency suggests that organizations should consider ways for reimbursing people for their outgoing texts or catering to “flashing/beeping” when people are trying to provide feedback.

Story gathering with qualitative analysis software: A database called Sensemaker that allows for qualitative analysis of thousands of stories is being piloted by Action Aid in Uganda and Global Giving in

East Africa. Action Aid's process is part of a pilot initiative exploring how qualitative information can be analyzed and aggregated globally. Local people across the organization can record, input and auto-code their stories. Signifiers or "tags" of priority issues are put in by local people themselves. This method uses cell phones, digital tabs, oral recording and transcription, and local literate volunteers who help to collect and record the stories. Global Giving has also established incentives for those gathering good stories that help donors to better understand the contexts in which projects are being proposed.

Telephone Helplines/Hotlines: Organizations have begun using calling centers or hotlines as a mechanism to connect service providers and users. In countries like Pakistan, hotlines are already widely used, but there is more room to expand this method. In one example, using cell phones to communicate with community health workers regarding questions about medication and dosage for HIV/AIDS patients influenced the way the organizations embraced the use of ICT for gathering feedback. Some suggested that phone lines and calling centers could be used as a direct line for recipients to speak to someone who can answer questions, advise them and take complaints. As with SMS mechanisms, there needs to be a process for responding to the feedback as there is no point setting up the system if the organization is unable to provide an effective response.

Section VIII: RECOMMENDATIONS

The increased focus on improving donors' and aid agencies' ability to listen and respond to primary stakeholder feedback is evident and encouraging. Many organizations are investing in the creation and testing of feedback mechanisms that can improve practice and increase impact by providing useful information and data for decision-makers and better communication with recipients. The following are some experience-based recommendations for organizations to consider when determining how to establish and maintain an effective feedback system:

Ensure that senior leaders in the organization are committed to the feedback process:

- Support from the **leadership and top managers** is crucial to secure appropriate funding and support for the effective use of feedback mechanisms across the organization. They determine incentives and how the performance (of staff, programs, partners, etc.) will be evaluated, so their buy-in is critical to establishing, using and maintaining feedback systems.
- There need to be champions for effective feedback mechanisms at **various levels** of the organization who can make the business case for how paying attention to primary stakeholder feedback will improve the quality, effectiveness and accountability of their programs. Frontline staff are often gathering feedback, but they may lose commitment if their efforts are not supported by others or if they are burdened by too many other obligations.
- It is important to get **different departments** within the organization on board, otherwise the feedback can remain isolated within particular teams.

- **Headquarters and country-level managers** need to take the feedback seriously and meaningfully incorporate the information into staff and partner performance management processes and systems, not just programming decisions.

Pay attention to the details when establishing the feedback system and procedures:

- **Start small.** Agencies cannot set up an effective and systematic feedback process in a short time, especially within large organizations. Some practitioners suggest starting with a specific sector or project, to experiment and learn lessons, and then to scale up across the organization. The head of OFADEC suggested that the commitment should be there for an organization to say that “we systematically will gather beneficiary feedback and see it as a way forward,” and that it is important to think about how to do it in a realistic way that will become common practice rather than a one-off project or effort.
- **Adapt and utilize existing frameworks and guidelines.** Staff from the humanitarian departments of international aid organizations said that some of the feedback mechanisms used and lessons gathered from their humanitarian accountability systems can be utilized in their agency’s development work. Many felt that organizational frameworks and standards that have already been developed by some agencies could be useful to those who wish to establish similar standards and mechanisms. Since it is often difficult to share knowledge internally, some organizations have used newsletters, websites, webinars and other means to share information on their efforts to gather and use feedback within their organizations.
- **Build feedback mechanisms into other institutional systems** (i.e. M&E, institutional learning, staff and partner performance management, etc.). Simple and cost efficient tools and feedback methods can often be used alongside or integrated into an existing process or system. The feedback mechanisms do not need to be the same across country programs and staff can be encouraged to use a range of approaches dependent on the context. But it is important to think upfront about how to process the information gathered and to anticipate the amount of data so as not to overwhelm the staff and organizational systems and to ensure that useful information can be produced and compared for decision-makers.
- **Ensure the competence of your staff and partners.** Effective feedback mechanisms often require special skill sets, and agencies may need to focus on strengthening the questioning, active listening, analytical, and communication skills, particularly of front line staff engaging with primary stakeholders. Those involved with the Listening Project and in other efforts to gather feedback note that the ability to ask “why do you think that...” and to home in on issues in conversations is not something that most agencies have typically invested in, but are critical when trying to gather and analyze feedback from recipients.

- **Establish protocols on who is responsible for dealing with and responding to the feedback.** Those asked to give feedback often want to know how the information will be used and who will respond to it before giving their input. Agencies need to anticipate and determine who will be responsible for communicating responses in a timely manner to those who provided the feedback so that the feedback loop can be “closed.”
- **Set clear guidelines on what can and what cannot be changed** based on the feedback and complaints received. Some issues may be outside the boundaries of the organization’s mandate or control, and the complaints or feedback should be referred elsewhere, but this needs to be communicated to those providing the feedback. Organizations also need to determine how issues and trends identified through the feedback processes will be tracked within the organization to ensure that they affect policies as well as operations when necessary.
- **Consider the ethics of how agencies gather and provide feedback.** Feedback mechanisms must be developed in consultation with those whom organizations seek to gather feedback from to ensure that the methods are appropriate and will be supported by them. Agencies need to establish trust and confidence among community members for their feedback mechanisms to work, and this often requires time and consistent dialogue. This is particularly important when seeking feedback from those who are marginalized or who may not feel empowered. Agencies may also need to consider how best to ensure confidentiality within the feedback process.
- **Managers should model what the feedback system should look like** in the way they interact with staff and partners. For example, having an “open door” policy to feedback and ideas, focusing on learning and improvement, and acknowledging that it is fine to make mistakes so long as you learn from them helps to infuse the idea, approach and methods into the organizational culture.

Share the feedback:

- Organizations should share the feedback they gather and the responses **with their colleagues and local partners** to **build their capacity** and commitment to gathering, analyzing and responding to feedback systematically.
- Organizations should share the feedback data they gather **with other organizations working in the same sector and/or area** to **improve joint learning, program effectiveness and coordination.**
- **Close the feedback loop.** Organizations should share the analysis of the feedback they receive and how they will respond to it with those providing the feedback.
- **Invest in the documentation of feedback mechanisms and lessons learned**—and share it. It is important to demonstrate how complaints and feedback mechanisms can improve policies and

programs. This is a fairly new area of practice and with so many methods being tested, it is important for agencies to share information on what works and what does not.

Section IX: CONCLUSIONS

This report provides an overview of the current use of recipient feedback mechanisms by international assistance agencies. It is apparent that more research and reflection is needed to evaluate the existing and emerging feedback mechanisms, to identify good practices, and to provide more guidance to those seeking to improve or establish feedback systems. It is particularly important to evaluate the effectiveness of these mechanisms from the perspective of those providing feedback.

We hope that this report will prompt international donor and operational agencies to invest more in mechanisms, processes, and systems to continuously gather, use and respond to feedback from those whom they seek to support. The enthusiasm and interest in this emerging area of practice by donors and aid agencies also suggests a fruitful area for further development and collaborative learning in the future.

APPENDIX 1: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LIST OF RELEVANT RESOURCES

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