



GOAL

LEARNING BRIEF

**DIGITAL COMMUNITY FEEDBACK
MECHANISMS FOR FASTER AND
BETTER RESPONSE AND LEARNING**

A REFLECTION FROM GOAL'S EXPERIENCE

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THEME

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GOAL has digitalised its community-facing feedback process utilising commonly used mobile apps for data collection and storage, as well as business analytics platforms.

This Learning Brief outlines lessons from adapting these technologies to GOAL's existing feedback mechanisms, their usage, and recommendations for future implementation. An integrated, digitalised system of feedback collection, management, and analysis has meant that GOAL has real-time community feedback data from every country programme, available at both local and global levels. This has enabled GOAL to do real-time case management with timelier responses to queries, complaints, and breaches, timelier investigation, as well as stronger data protection. All this is contributing to the improvement and greater impact of GOAL's programmes.

BACKGROUND

A key component of Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is ensuring safe and responsive community complaints and feedback mechanisms are available. GOAL has operated Community Feedback Mechanisms (CFM) since 2011, and a CFM is now operational in every country programme. GOAL is currently operational in 14 countries. Last year with an income of €212m, GOAL reached 14.6m people, receiving 325,000 communications via its CFMs.

Each country programme CFM is unique, designed and operated based on the preferences and needs of the communities it serves, and the programming it relates to. Additionally, as every context is different, each CFM is adapted to fit the needs of its context. However, GOAL maintains global policies, guidelines, and standards with which all CFMs align, ensuring quality and minimum standards are universal and guaranteed to every CFM user.

CFMs are advertised in communities, often through visual materials like posters, but also in community meetings and through radio and social media. CFMs have multiple channels for communication, ensuring that stakeholders with different needs can access the mechanism regardless of age, gender, location, ability status, or access to technology. GOAL CFMs are designed to receive and handle a range of communication types, including feedback, suggestions, questions, assistance requests, and complaints (including serious complaints). All such communications are referred to in this Brief as 'feedback'. While GOAL CFMs are robust and heavily utilised by stakeholders, the agency is constantly striving to improve the mechanisms, ensuring their ongoing accessibility, transparency, effectiveness, and timelines.

GOAL's mobile hotline, and CommCare app on tablet, Türkiye



The **Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM)** is the primary means by which stakeholders can communicate with GOAL. It allows for requests, feedback, and concerns to be raised with GOAL and ensures that those who communicate with the agency either receive an explanation or see it acted upon within a communicated timeframe.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

GOAL has adopted digital technologies to make its CFMs more efficient and responses timelier. For the sharing of information, this has been done using technologies like QR codes and WhatsApp. For receiving communications, this has been done by introducing technologies commonly used by communities, such as WhatsApp; Telegram; e-mail; and free telephone hotlines. Data entry and storage, including case management for responding to feedback and complaints, is now done within CommCare, a mobile data collection platform. Real-time analysis and reporting of CFM data are conducted through Power BI, and custom-built platforms described below.

COMMUNITY-FACING TECHNOLOGY

The technologies GOAL has applied to community-facing stages of CFM and lessons learned from doing so, include:

QR codes

QR codes are matrix barcodes that take users virtually anywhere online when scanned with a smartphone's camera. GOAL's Syria programme has begun utilising QR codes as a means of sharing information with communities beyond what is possible on CFM posters, banners, and cards. QR codes, a common feature of cafes and restaurants in northwest Syria, allow those interested to learn more about GOAL from their own devices, and instant linking to the CFM without having to write down a hotline phone number, for example. This has led to faster access to information for community members and easier access to the CFM.

QR codes are growing in popularity and usage, and global scans of these codes quadrupled between 2021 and 2022. Increasingly, members of the public are becoming familiar with seeing them and knowing what to do with them. This trend will continue over time. However, while they are popular in many societies, some communities have little to no familiarity with them. If interested in adapting QR codes to programme information sharing, it is important to consider how commonly they are used in that context, as introducing them in a community without experience of them could cause confusion.



Community member in Syria scanning QR code to reach GOAL

Hotlines

Telephones are not new, and neither are helplines or hotlines. However, since the advent of the mobile phone and, more recently, the smartphone, hotlines have become more accessible to a larger body of GOAL's CFM users.

The mobile phone is an example of a "leapfrog" technology - it has enabled people who never had a fixed-line phone, to skip and move straight to mobile technology. While a CFM hotline in the 1990s may have suited the few privileged community members with access to telephones, modern CFM hotlines can take advantage of the large and increasing level of smartphone penetration in low- and middle-income countries.

From GOAL's experience, hotlines for CFMs should always be local phone numbers, and preferably toll-free. If toll-free is not possible, then a 'call me back' service can be used instead. CFM hotlines should ideally be tied to smartphones so that they can be brought to field activities, utilise SMS and messaging apps, and store data. Also, from GOAL's experience, these smartphones should be dedicated CFM phones and never be personal telephone numbers of staff. Finally, CFM staff should rotate who manages the CFM phone, preferably between male and female staff.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is the world's most popular free messaging app. It allows users to send text, voice and video messages, make voice and video calls, and share images. With over a billion users worldwide, it is the most popular in Latin America, Western Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa. WhatsApp is used by GOAL as a means of receiving feedback from stakeholders in Colombia, Haiti, Honduras, Niger, Syria, Türkiye, and Zimbabwe.

WhatsApp's popularity and recognition in communities means that GOAL doesn't have to introduce the technology or sensitise communities to it. It also means community members are more likely to already have the app, be familiar with its interface, and feel comfortable using it. WhatsApp web and desktop also mean that GOAL staff can manage CFM communications on laptops, making it easier to type and text, make hands-free calls, and manage cases than if using a smartphone.

Telegram

Telegram is the world's third most popular instant messaging app, with an estimated 412 million users worldwide in 2023. While reliable data can be difficult to confirm, the app is the most popular in some Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq and Jordan. GOAL's Syria programme handles the largest amount of CFM traffic in the agency. The need to communicate back-and-forth from CFM users at scale requires the need for an app that allows them to do so.



GOALies using
Telegram, Türkiye

Telegram offers unique features that make it more suitable for handling a high volume of daily communications within a CFM system. This includes allowing multiple employees to engage in simultaneous conversations with multiple communicants using the same CFM number, a capability not present in WhatsApp.

Telegram is likely one of the most popular instant messaging apps in Syria, where there is a high penetration rate of smartphone usage. However, using Telegram may not be for every agency in every context. Therefore, organisations willing to use Telegram should consider its usage in the target communities before doing so. A Telegram channel that is not utilised is not worth the effort, cost, and time of implementing.

Email

GOAL CFMs have dedicated email addresses which are advertised to communities. While not often used, they offer an important means for persons to communicate discreetly and confidentially, as well as remotely, if they need to. Email accounts are easy to set up and often at no cost. It is important that more than one CFM staff member has access to this email account or receives the emails. This can ensure against one staff member deleting or manipulating emails, purposely or accidentally.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

When designing or re-designing a CFM or launching a CFM in a new geographic location, if an agency wishes to utilise digital data technologies for community-facing activities, there are several considerations that GOAL has experienced which need to be weighed:

- **Popularity:** How well-known are these digital technologies to the communities served?
- **Accessibility:** How accessible are these digital technologies to people with different needs?
- **Audience:** Who is the target audience who will be using these technologies?
- **Smartphone penetration:** What is the level of smartphone ownership or usage in the area? Low penetration may mean low take-up of QR codes, SMS, WhatsApp etc.
- **Staff:** How familiar are staff with these technologies? What level of sensitisation and training of staff will be required?
- **Cost:** What will be the cost of these technologies? Even if the technology itself is free, the hardware to use it, may not be. Budget may be needed.
- **Data Protection:** Are there data protection policies and procedures in place to cover these activities? Will these activities affect existing data protection policies?
- **Value-add:** Ultimately, will they add more value than existing systems?

CFM INFORMATION SYSTEM

The technologies GOAL has applied to the CFM information system and lessons learned from doing so, include:

CommCare

CommCare is a mobile data collection platform developed by Dimagi. GOAL uses CommCare to build applications for online and offline data entry, which includes case management to track records over time. All GOAL CFMs now use CommCare to log and edit CFM feedback. In the past, feedback was usually collected in the field on paper forms and logged into an Excel spreadsheet for case management and tracking. However, since 2022 GOAL has brought its entire CFM case management structure online. Through a custom-built CFM application, staff can log feedback as soon as they receive it to a secure platform within a predefined structure which they can access even when in the field.

CommCare incorporates a case management feature that empowers case owners to efficiently gather data and monitor case updates. In this context, CFM staff, serving as case owners, can initiate cases in response to communications from affected communities and meticulously track feedback until case resolution. This software enhances the concept of a feedback loop within the context of Accountability to Affected Persons (AAP).

CommCare's benefits over previous feedback logging and management tools include more data security as GOAL can control access to CommCare apps and data; cleaner data as the app can control input to correct mistakes and errors; more secure data as information on CommCare cannot be deleted as easily as in Excel or lost paper; remote logging as CommCare allows for feedback data to be entered in real-time (and automatically uploaded later if the user is not within internet coverage); and automated linkages with GOAL's CFM data analysis platforms (below).

Power BI

GOAL uses Power BI, a self-service business intelligence platform developed by Microsoft, to analyse and visualise CFM data within interactive reports. Country-specific reports, accessible only to a restricted team of CFM staff, pull CFM data automatically and directly from each respective country CommCare CFM app. These reports then visualise all the CFM data for that country, filterable by grant, location, team member, and category of communication. This allows CFM team members to manage the feedback cases in their portfolios and CFM managers to oversee the CFM communications and performance of their team.

Utilising Power BI for CFM case management allows GOAL teams to monitor feedback activity more effectively, have stronger oversight of the tool, develop reports, and ensure against lapsed cases staying open too long.

SCORE

SCORE is GOAL's System for COsolidating & REporting MEAL Information. It is a web-based, dual-platform system with data collection in CommCare and analysis and reporting in Power BI. It was developed by GOAL's Management Information Systems (MIS) unit for all staff to view and interact with programmatic and strategic results. Pulling automatically and directly from the CommCare CFM apps, it visualises counts of communications submitted to GOAL through the CFM with anonymised demographic data on the communicants; data on communication channels; languages used; and timelines for resolution.

GOAL has built SCORE to demonstrate real-time CFM communication data from all 14 countries. This allows results to be reviewed and decisions made almost instantaneously, for example, with a communication entered in the field in Sierra Leone, reviewed the next day at HQ in Ireland.

TECHNOLOGY

CommCare is a mobile data collection platform developed by Dimagi. GOAL uses CommCare to build applications for online and offline data entry, which includes case management to track records over time.

Power BI is a business intelligence platform developed by Microsoft. GOAL uses Power BI to analyse and visualise data within interactive reports.

SharePoint is Microsoft's content management and information sharing platform. GOAL uses SharePoint for its intranet, and specifically as its storage of LOT records.

Power Apps is Microsoft's app building platform for automated workflows. GOAL uses Power Apps to generate visually appealing, easy to use, data entry and viewing online solutions for organisation-wide knowledge sharing such as the LOT.

Learning Outcome Tracker (LOT)

GOAL's Learning Outcome Tracker (LOT) is another custom-built platform developed by the agency's MIS unit. It enables GOAL staff to record and update lessons learnt and learning outcomes arising from community feedback. GOAL defines a 'learning outcome' as programmatic changes that happened because of an action taken or decision made based off community feedback. These changes can be positive or negative outcomes as either is important to learn from and evidence of adaptive management.

The LOT is a centralised database with a front-end Microsoft Power App (open to all GOAL staff) for data entry and editing, which is connected to back-end data stored in a SharePoint list. LOT information is further visualised on Power BI, as with CFM data (above).

The LOT meets the increasing demand from donors to demonstrate how the agency is adapting programming based on community feedback and allows for critical learning to be shared across the organisation to further develop best practices.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

When designing or re-designing a CFM or launching a CFM in a new geographic location, if an agency wishes to utilise digital data technologies for its information system, there are several more considerations, in GOAL's experience, which need to be weighed:

- **Need:** Why is this new technology needed, and what purpose will it serve, or what gap will it fill?
- **Users:** Who will the users of these technologies be? Will there be different front-end and back-end users?
- **Audience:** How will you engage front-end users and ensure they engage with data that your teams have put effort into developing?
- **Staff:** How familiar are staff with these technologies? What level of sensitisation and training of staff will be required? Think about developing training modules and guidelines.
- **Cost:** What will be the cost of these technologies? Even if the technology itself is free, the hardware to use it may not be. Budget may be needed.
- **Data Protection:** Are there data protection policies and procedures in place to cover these activities? Will these activities affect existing data protection policies?
- **Value-add:** Ultimately, will they add more value than existing systems?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct Accountability Assessments of the target population to ascertain what data technologies are preferred and build the CFM based on the community's responses. Remember that communities are diverse in terms of their preferences, and therefore multiple technologies should be pursued.
- New technologies often require new skills. Consider what training staff and volunteers might need to effectively manage a CFM with new technology.
- When adopting the use of new technologies for CFMs, focus in the first stage should be on advertising them extensively using traditional means of sharing information.
- Digital data technology is not for everyone. Traditional information sharing and feedback channels (posters, community meetings, suggestion boxes, helpdesks) will always be needed.
- Consider the staffing of CFM teams. Even when using technology for communication (such as messaging apps) and when anonymous, many people still prefer the employee on the other end of the line to be of the same gender or background as them.
- When designing or re-designing CFM systems to incorporate digital data technology, put people (especially CFM users) at the centre of design. Thinking about CFM users from the outset will better ensure usage of the technology.
- Conduct an impact assessment on the protection of personal and sensitive data for any new technology applied to CFMs.
- Future Accountability Assessments should also focus on community members' experience of using the technologies made available through the CFM. Reflection of the CFM's effectiveness should also be undertaken with partners where they have a role in providing information to, and receiving feedback, from communities.

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