

Global Accountability
Discussion Series, #2

OVERVIEW OF NGO – COMMUNITY COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Anna Wood
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Accountability Discussion Paper 2

Overview of NGO—Community Complaints Mechanisms

The Accountability Discussion Papers are a series of documents that describe World Vision’s current practice in accountability and encourage practitioners to take a step back and reflect on what works and why—with the objective being to elicit discussion and stimulate innovation relating to WV’s programmes.

This discussion presents “research-in-progress” undertaken by Global Accountability on complaints handling. It presents findings gathered from a combination of WV’s field programmes, through discussion with accountability staff and a review of published literature. The findings of the study do not represent an evaluation of WV’s programmes and are presented for discussion purposes only.

Comments and ideas for research and subjects to include in future Discussion Papers are welcome and should be e-mailed to the author.

Overview of Complaints Mechanisms

Introduction

This paper summarises the various tools that are being implemented by development and relief agencies to receive complaints. Although some of the tools are designed primarily to collect general feedback and information for programme monitoring, they are also used by community members to channel and raise complaints about more serious issues. This paper also describes some tools that are being used in the commercial sector and by governments, and which can be adapted to the NGO context.

No attempt has been made to recommend specific tools or to comment on their effectiveness—while there are a great number of examples and theoretical descriptions of complaint tools, there have been few evaluations and little structured investigation of how these tools contribute to specific outcomes. The tools presented in this review therefore represent ‘works-in-progress’ that need further trialing and verification in different contexts in order to ensure they are effective.

Why set up a complaints mechanism?

There are many reasons why an agency sets up complaints mechanisms. The wider and long-term objectives of a complaints mechanism in a development and relief context could include:

- A safer environment for the most vulnerable members of a community;
- An increase in community voice and power.

Some agency objectives for a community complaints mechanism may include:

- Demonstrating that the agency recognises, promotes and protects beneficiaries' rights, including the right to comment and complain;
- Acting as an 'early warning system' to prevent, mitigate, or resolve tensions and problems before they escalate into more serious issues that will require extra resources to address—For example, to rapidly identify and deal with any cases of corruption or abuse;
- To promote community empowerment and participation in agency decisions that affect them;
- To build and maintain good relations, trust, transparency and dialogue between the agency and the community;
- To support programme monitoring—specifically, to identify weaknesses and areas for improvement in programme activities and staff behaviour;
- To comply with external requirements for certification, application of standards and industry best practice;

Principles of Complaints Mechanisms

At the agency level, all the complaints mechanisms and procedures established should comply with a set of best practice principles. Most agency principles are variations on the following list.

Complaint mechanisms should be:

Legitimate: A mechanism must have clear, transparent, and sufficiently independent governance structures to ensure that there is no bias or interference and the process can be conducted fairly with respect to all parties;

Accessible: A mechanism must be publicised and provide adequate assistance to those who wish to access it, including specific groups such as children, women and the disabled—accessibility needs to take into consideration language, literacy, awareness, finance, distance, or fear of reprisal;

Predictable: A mechanism must provide a clear and known procedure, with timeframes for each stage, clarity on the types of processes and outcomes it can and cannot offer, and means of monitoring the implementation of any outcome;

Equitable: A mechanism must ensure that stakeholders have reasonable access to the necessary sources of information, advice and expertise to engage in the process on fair and equitable terms;

Rights-compatible: A mechanism's outcomes and remedies must accord with internationally recognised human rights standards; and

Transparent: A mechanism must provide sufficient transparency of process and outcome to meet the public interest concerns at stake, and should presume transparency wherever possible.

Complaints mechanisms need to match the community context

Establishing a complaints system that suits beneficiary needs and helps them exercise their right to complain is critical. It will not be possible to find one complaint mechanism that suits every community context. A mix of mechanisms should be used to ensure full coverage and access. Contextual information is essential to the design of appropriate community complaints mechanisms and to ensuring that the principles described above are grounded in reality (a complaints mechanism that is accessible to women in one context may not be accessible to women in another context, for example).

A recent review of the literature and information gathered from programme contacts within World Vision and other NGOs highlighted the following contextual information as being important to consider:

- The programme stakeholders—These may be direct beneficiaries, including men, women, children, youth, the elderly, the disabled, the whole community, specific groups within a community, families or individuals. Each individual stakeholder and group will have different levels of vulnerability, social inclusion, mobility, power and voice;
- The level of community engagement in civil society—expectations, trust, cultural factors such as obedience, compliance, loss of face and the influence of hierarchical, patriarchal and other traditional institutions;
- Culture, including level of formalisation and preference for verbal or written communication;
- Historical context and socio-political context—reprisals, conflict, fear, ethnicity, level of corruption;

- Geographic distribution of communities—dispersed or concentrated, urban or rural, access to roads and transport;
- The scale of the programme, including geographic spread and number of communities and beneficiaries;
- Availability and accessibility of communication systems—phones, Internet, postal services;
- Different interacting community groups with their own structures and mechanisms—CBOs, partners, other NGOs, contractors, the private sector and local authorities;
- Literacy and education levels;
- Length of NGO engagement—from several months up to 10 years continuously in some development programmes;
- Agency staff attitudes, workload, capacity and awareness;
- Available funds.

Considerations for monitoring and evaluating complaints mechanisms

Once a complaints mechanism has been established, there is a need to monitor it and determine whether it is actually functioning and effective. Various types of indicators can be used to assess this. At the output level, these can include indicators to demonstrate whether principles have been fulfilled (e.g., is the mechanism accessible to all beneficiaries?) and whether the agency's particular objectives for a complaints mechanism are being achieved (e.g., has it led to an increase in trust between the agency and the community and identified areas for programme improvement?).

Complaints mechanisms should also be assessed for:

Effectiveness: Has the use of the tool contributed to better, more accessible programme outputs?

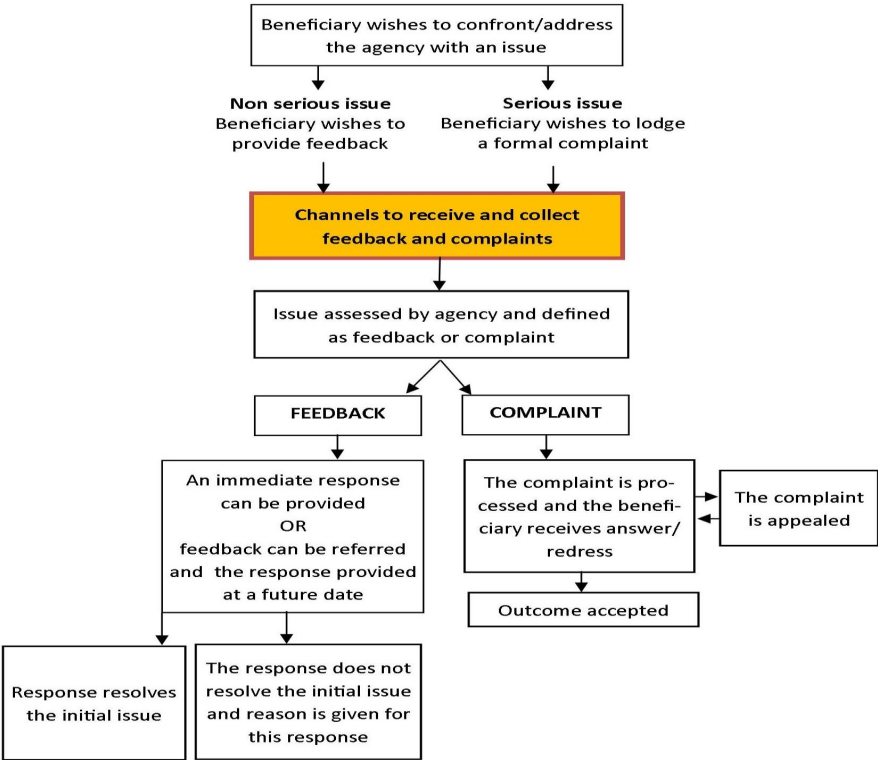
Efficiency: What are the costs of applying the tools (including non-monetary costs such as time inputs from beneficiaries) and how do they compare to the benefits?

Sustainability: How long have the tools been used? Is the approach ad-hoc (occurring once or a few times only) or can it be institutionalized?

What this review covers

This review looks specifically at the agency community interface – the points where complaints are received or intercepted by the agency (shaded box in Figure 1). It will not review agencies’ internal systems and procedures for addressing complaints.

Figure 1. Simplified agency complaint and response flowchart



This review identifies a range of complaints mechanisms that have been used in various contexts. Information has been gathered from a review of published literature on humanitarian and development programmes (implemented by NGOs and Government), as well as information from the private sector.

Types of complaint mechanisms

1. Complaint Committees

General guidelines

- Depending on the context, committees can be composed of representatives from government, community institutions (such as the church), village leaders, beneficiary household members, and other stakeholders.
- Committees can be responsible for receiving and responding to community complaints, ensuring that the community is aware of their right to complain, and providing avenues to channel their complaints on activities being implemented by the agency.
- In some instances the committee is also tasked with providing information to the community on project activities and beneficiary selection.
- The roles and responsibilities of the committee should be defined, the committee should follow a code of conduct, and the agency and committee should understand what they can expect from each other.
- The agency's obligation to the committee includes building capacity of the committee so they can perform better, meet expectations, and work better as a committee and with the community. The involvement and participation of women and groups with specific needs, such as people living with disabilities, the elderly and children, is encouraged.
- Committees established by NGOs should not replace or conflict with pre-existing and functioning democratic institutions and processes in the community.
- Essentially, community committees of all kinds represent intermediaries between the agency and the community. They should themselves be made accountable to beneficiaries as well as to the NGO.

Child Feedback Committees

Description

A committee of community children provides other children with a safe peer to peer forum to voice concerns and collect feedback, complaints and suggestions for programme improvements from a child's perspective. The committee is composed of elected child representatives who receive training through formal workshops and practical on-site visits—in information-gathering skills, the principles and practice behind food aid targeting and delivery, documentation and reporting skills, and learning how to be accountable—so that the views and opinions of other children are fairly and adequately represented. Each of these steps is preceded by detailed

discussion with parents and community leaders so as to solicit their permission for children to participate. The committees are useful for picking up information of a nature and quality not available from normal monitoring.

The complaints received by the children's committees can be forwarded and treated in a number of different ways—such as being presented directly to the agency, or dealt with by an independent body recruited or set up by the agency (an ombudsman or a special hearing committee). Save the Children UK in Zimbabwe has used Child Feedback Committees in association with an Ombudsman.

Committees can be linked to specific projects and community activities that address the needs of children and support children to raise complaints. One example is the World Vision Child Voice Out Programme.

Assessment

Children's committees are set up to allow NGOs to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children within communities. One of the risks associated with a child focused committee is that participating children on the committees may sometimes be victimised and branded as 'agency spies' by their communities who fear that complaints will cause the agency to withdraw support. Some parents and local officials also perceive children's committees as a challenge to their authority and are reluctant to allow children to participate.

These risks can be mitigated by raising awareness within the communities on the roles and responsibilities of the committees and regular monitoring.

'Child Voice Out' and Sexual Gender Based Violence Programme of World Vision Tanzania

Since 2004, WV has implemented the Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) programme to prevent and reduce the occurrence of SGBV in Lugufu camps. Linked to this is the 'Child Voice Out' programme that empowers children and provides them with a forum to break the silence on issues they would never have raised. Children 'voice' out about rape and other forms of sexual abuse as well as other issues of concern to them. Children meet in groups divided according to gender and age. Child committees, selected by the children, exist in all the villages in the camps to assist in coordinating meetings, organising campaigns and reporting cases. The 'Child Voice Out' programme enhances the Child Protection Programme, also implemented in the camps.

Source: Valarie Vat Kamatsiko (2006) Their Future in our Hands: Children Displaced by Conflict in Africa's Great Lakes Region. World Vision Africa.

Camp Relief Committees

Description

Relief committees are frequently used in a camp setting to act as the primary interface between NGOs and the wider camp population. Significant decision making power is often allocated to these committees, related, for example, to the type and distribution of aid, selection of beneficiaries, and assistance for more vulnerable groups.

Camp Committees in Haiti

Committees are a crucial component in camp management and in the level of quality and accountability of humanitarian aid in Haiti. Some committees are undoubtedly well functioning and enable effective participation and representation. In other cases, however, the roles and responsibilities of the committees and the expected code of conduct are often undefined and unknown to the wider camp population.

There are numerous risks associated with reliance upon the camp committee system in the absence of appropriate assessment or sufficient checks and balances. For example, aid may not be distributed impartially; corruption, exploitation and abuse may occur; the needs of diverse groups (including women, men, children, elderly, disabled, and other groups) may not be identified; and the collaboration between an agency and a particular committee may alter the local power structures that existed prior to the emergency in ways that are detrimental to some groups. An assessment of the use of committees in Haiti has shown that the risk of subversion can be high. Careful consideration needs to be placed on establishing, monitoring and enforcing committees to adhere to code of conduct.

Source: Camp Committees in Haiti: Un-Accountability Mechanisms? <http://www.hapinternational.org/news/story.aspx?id=175>

When working well, camp committees can help to ensure a high level of participation in camp management and ensure that aid reaches those who are most in need. An effective camp committee system will provide access to local knowledge, facilitate the collection of accurate data for the provision of aid, foster community ownership and empowerment, enable more efficient programme delivery, and ensure that programmes are tailored to local needs and circumstances.

Assessment

Working with camp committees is challenging. The general guidelines for committees presented above can be applied and will address many challenges, but specific concerns relating to camp committees are summarized in the box Camp Committees in Haiti.

A tool for assessing camp committees has been developed by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). This presents a series of questions to be answered during focus group discussions. The answers will help to: a) Map existing committees; b) Understand current roles and functions of the committees; c). Understand the extent to which the camp population feel the committees are able to represent their views and needs; d) Identify means by which the agency can improve ways of working with the committee and wider camp population.

Use of the tool highlighted the following action points:

- Define the roles, responsibilities and code of conduct of the committee—including what the agency expects from the camp committee and what the camp committee can expect from the agency;
- Ensure direct contact between the NGO and wider camp population, in addition to contact via the committee (for example, direct information-sharing about the project activities, beneficiary selection and right to complain);
- In addition to establishing complaints mechanisms by which camp populations can safely raise complaints with the agency about how aid is being distributed, ensure on-going monitoring of the use of aid and the role of committees in this—that means reviewing and adjusting the amount of decision-making power given to committees and having an agreed code of conduct for committee members;
- Build the capacity of the committee so that they can perform better, meet expectations, and work better as a committee and with the camp populations; and
- Give more attention to the involvement and participation of women, and groups with specific needs, such as people living with disabilities, the elderly, and children.

Complaints and Accountability Committees

Description

A complaint evaluation committee can be set up by an agency to increase the agency community link and to help it deal with complaints in a transparent manner. These committees can be established at various levels.

High level Programme Complaints Board/Complaints Hearing Committee

The high-level committee includes a representative of the programme implementing agency, one of the agency's principal donors, a government delegate and a representative from another humanitarian agency. This was used by Save the Children UK in Zimbabwe to respond to complaints originating from children's committees (see inset box under Third Party Complaints Mechanisms, below). The committee had mandate and authority to redirect food aid operations in response to feedback from the children.

Source: Source: Chris McIvor, Children's feedback committees in Zimbabwe: an experiment in accountability by Save the Children (UK), Harare, 2005 <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2640>

Committees for addressing complaints in CARE's Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation - Living Above the Floods project:

Through this mechanism, villagers could complain through the complaint box, the complaint committee, the telephone, or directly to project staff. To simplify problem solving, complaints were processed at different committee levels, depending on the issue. Three complaint committees were initiated: The Village Committee for Addressing Complaints (VCAC), a Special Committee to Address Complaints (SCAC) and the Project Committee for Addressing Complaints (PCAC).

The project established VCAC in each target village. Of the six committee members, two had to be beneficiary representatives from the village.

Source: Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Living above the Floods, Final Evaluation CARE Cambodia 2006 <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/care-cambodia-complaints-mechanism-case-study.pdf>

DanChurchAid's use of committees in Malawi

DanChurchAid established a committee of ten representatives, including a civil servant working in the programme area, a representative of a church, a representative of village heads and one representative from each village in the programme.

Committee members received training in how to carry out awareness and sensitisation meetings among community members in the respective villages. They also discussed how to channel community complaints on activities being implemented through the project.

A number of issues have already been handled, such as improving targeting of beneficiaries.

Source: Chikwawa Food security project implemented by the Eagles Relief and Development Programme - a DanChurch Aid Partner in Malawi. DCA Complaints

Beneficiary reference groups (committees), Tearfund, Kenya

Beneficiary Reference Groups were established in each project location to act as an independent group tasked with receiving and processing queries, complaints and feedback from their community. They also consulted with Tearfund staff to address concerns.

The committee membership depends on the context, but as an example, could include an agency employee who is not directly associated with any programme implementation in the community, a senior community leader and a local authority representative. The committee can be set up with a limited lifespan to deal with complaints over a fixed time period or on a specific theme, or throughout the project.

Committee members are responsible for receiving and evaluating complaints and conducting investigations. The committee can respond directly to complaints that do not require further investigation. It can also forward complaints that do require investigation, together with their recommendations, to senior management staff in the implementing agency. The committee can also investigate complaints raised against the implementing agency. Announcements and awareness-raising within the community is conducted to encourage the raising of complaints.

Assessment

Committees dealing with complaints need to have the authority and capacity to address the issue either by initiating disciplinary action or allocating resources.

Complaints Handling Procedures - Sungi's Accountability Framework (Sungi is a HAP member)

Sungi plans to develop accountability committees, at the village level and higher, which will be responsible for ensuring accountability in programmes implemented by Sungi and its partner organisations. The partner organisations will be encouraged to establish Community Accountability Committees (CACs) and complaints mechanisms for their own organisations.

The role of CAC is to listen, document, facilitate discussions and address complaints from the beneficiaries and other community members.

Members of the CAC will be nominated by beneficiaries themselves. They will include two members of the local committee who are also beneficiaries and one or two persons from the village or local community who are not direct beneficiaries. The committee will be headed by a local community member (one of the members selected by the other members) and Sungi's designated staff-facilitator. There shall be CACs for men and women and one joint CAC with equal representation of men and women.

Complainants can lodge a verbal or written complaint through a designated person or any other member of the CAC. The CAC will evaluate, investigate and address the complaint, and report back to the complainant and to Sungi's designated field office. This committee will be responsible for handling issues of exclusion, problems in assessment and provision of relief items. In the case of complicated or sensitive complaints including complaints against Sungi staff, the CAC will forward the complaint to a designated person or to a higher-level organisational accountability committee within Sungi appointed by the Executive Director.

Source: Complaints Handling Procedures Sungi Development Foundation http://www.sungi.org/custom-5/Complaints_Handling_Procedures-sungi_03-02-2011.pdf

Members of the committee must be respected and seen to be fair and honest. A thorough vetting process is required and an early start in the programme timeframe essential. This system can be adapted to serve as an appeals process to deal with problems before they become complaints—responding to beneficiaries' requests to review the selection criteria for a programme, for example. Committees need to be work to very clear and specific guidelines to ensure consistency of the process.

Beneficiary User Committees (Water Committees, School Feeding Committees)

Description

User participation not only in project design but also in bearing the costs of service delivery is an attempt to change the balance of power between the service provider or agency and the beneficiary community.

User committees - Water utility in Haiti

CAMEP is the national state-owned utility providing services to Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince. New water supply services are provided to households through public taps managed by neighborhood committees that have a service delegation contract with CAMEP. These committees consisted of representatives of neighborhood organisations and prominent citizens. The committees set water tariffs, collected fees, maintained and operated the systems. They also channeled complaints from the community to the water supplier.

An indication of the newly built trust between users and the utility is that the collection rate from committees is nearly 100 per cent, while CAMEP's overall collection rate is 50 per cent.

Adapted from Botton et al, in Botton S., A. Brailowsky, and S. Matthieussent (2005). *The Real Obstacles to Universal Access to Drinking Water in Developing Countries*. Loughborough, UK: Water Engineering and Development Centre. Muller Water notes 2008

User committees are made up of groups of beneficiaries who are responsible for providing a service under agreement or contract within an NGO programme or for the service provider. Water committees are responsible for maintaining pumps and water courses, school feeding committee members give their time to prepare and serve food provided by the agency, etc. Although the original intent is to ensure that NGO activities benefit the beneficiary community, these committees also serve as a communication channel between the NGO and the community to receive feedback and complaints.

Assessment

Establishing a user committee needs to be deliberate and well-planned. As with other committees, their role as an intermediary between the beneficiaries

and the NGO means that they themselves need to be accountable to both parties.

There are both pros and cons to having beneficiary committees as service managers. One benefit is that the committees have first-hand information about the service, and any operational problems, and are able to pass this on to other

community members. A downside is that the multiple functions of community groups may lead to conflicts of interest.

Village development forums and village committees

Description

Village development forums or village development committees are composed of elected community representatives who take responsibility for sub-project implementation at the village level. They help agencies to:

- Disseminate information about the project to communities;
- Facilitate project activities;
- Act as a medium to voice the community's aspirations, complaints, and inputs to the agency; and
- Inform the agency, helping agency staff develop awareness about local culture, practices, and social development in the community.

These committees have similar functions to Camp Committees in humanitarian contexts.

Assessment

Many of the points associated with committees set up in relief camps will be equally valid to village committees. In some cases, even though committee members are elected by the community the power dynamics can later change. The committees and their associated decision-making roles can be seen as a threat to local leadership.

Election onto committees is usually biased towards literate or better educated community members, and this may favour particular groups within the community.

An elected committee does not automatically have the influence or legitimacy in the village structure and this will affect its ability to address complaints. Community committees do not need to be given responsibility for receiving and handling complaints directly, but their presence can be used in other ways. For example, they can be incorporated in other complaint mechanisms, act as witnesses to a complaint being received and addressed by the agency, translate on behalf of the agency or help log complaints raised in open meetings.

Cordaid's use of a village development forum (VDF) in the tsunami response

From the very beginning, Cordaid recognized the need to facilitate communication and feedback between its project and the community. Cordaid facilitated the formation of VDFs in five villages.

The establishment of the VDFs was supported and endorsed by the village chiefs of five villages and members were elected by the villagers through a democratic and transparent election process facilitated by Cordaid. During the elections, the village chiefs played active roles to contribute to their success. Although feedback or complaints about Cordaid's activities in the area were expected to be channeled through the VDFs, Cordaid's staff in the field were also receptive to listen to the community.

Several VDF communication-flow and feedback scenarios between the community and Cordaid:

- a) Community → VDF → solution → feedback to community
 - b) Community → VDF → community development officer → solution → VDF feedback to community
 - c) Community → VDF → community development officer → project manager → solution → VDF feedback to community
 - d) Community → VDF → community development officer → project manager/program coordinator in Medan office/ desk officer in Cordaid headquarters → solution → VDF feedback to community
- VDF = village development forum.

Over the course of the project, Cordaid incorporated some adjustments to its complaints-handling system. Although community members were still able to go directly the village development forum with their complaints, the role of the VDFs in receiving complaints was supplemented with community complaints log books where community members could register a complaint.

Monthly community meetings were held in which complaints were logged. Minutes of meetings and decisions on complaints were recorded and signed by Cordaid, by the village leadership, the village development forum and witnesses from the community.

Source: A Complaint and Grievance Handling Mechanism in Conflict-Affected and Isolated Villages: The Cordaid Seunuddon Experience by Saputra Liadi Cordaid Seunuddon's housing project funded under the Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) of the Asian Development Bank.

2. Third-party complaint mechanisms

Ombudsman

Description

An Ombudsman is an independent special office or person who offers a dispute-resolution service and to whom community members can go with their complaints and grievances about an agency. Ombudsmen can act either as a first point of complaint or as a secondary complaint mechanism, dealing with previously unsolved complaints or cases where the complainant is seeking to have their complaint verified by an independent party.

Ombudsman - Used by Save the Children

Concerns about potential bias in the collection of information led Save the Children to establish a more independent channel for communication between SC and the community. An ombudsperson system was set up to provide a point of contact. The Ombudsperson had several responsibilities, which included the continuing sensitization of adult community members around the progress of the project, the management of the selection and training of Children's Feedback Committee members, and the subsequent collection of information from the children through the committees that had been set up. Following the completion of the training the Ombudsperson conducted fortnightly visits to each of the seven committees in Mutorashanga, both to gather the feedback received and to offer continuous support to the children during this period.

The success of the ombudsman position depended on the personality and skills of the person assigned to the role, in particular their ability to establish a relationship of trust so that the children would feel comfortable in disclosing issues of considerable sensitivity. At the same time they have to inspire sufficient confidence among parents and community leaders to allay the concerns raised at the start of the programme.

Feedback on the food-aid programme and other issues of concern was collected by the ombudsman through home visits, informal discussions with children at school or during play, written reports received from their peers as well as the CFC members' own observations regarding their experience of the food-aid programme.

Through these committees children raised issues around Complaints received by Save the children (UK) included:

- the marginalisation of orphans by caregivers who prioritise their own children at mealtimes;
- guardians selling a portion of the rations to meet needs not related to family welfare; and
- child abuse of children under the care of step-parents or other guardians.

Source: Children's Feedback Committees in Zimbabwe An Experiment in Humanitarian Accountability
Chris McIvor with Karen Mylennen Save the Children UK

Assessment

The Ombudsmen system offers a lower-cost and less formal alternative to legal procedures. As with other complaint mechanisms, it needs to be accessible to all beneficiaries. But as the ombudsman is a third party it must also have the power to make the implementing agency respond to the complaint. The complainant must also be pro-active in seeking the support of an ombudsman service. Ombudsman systems have been used infrequently in the humanitarian and development sector, mainly because they are seen as being less effective in societies which lack well-established public services and effective and accessible judicial system. Ombudsman systems have been used by Save the Children, UK in Zimbabwe to directly receive feedback and complaints concerning the project from a community children's committee and forwarded them to a complaints board/hearing committee. In this way the ombudsman acted as an unbiased intermediary between the children's committee and a hearing committee.

Advisory Boards

Description

Advisory bodies can be composed of a range of representatives, including persons independent of the programme and the NGO, as well as beneficiaries and wider stakeholders. The board can be attached to an NGO programme or be independent. Boards are regularly consulted and provide guidance and advice, including feedback to managers. It is important to define the scope and mandate of an advisory body based on the mandate of the organization it advises. The role of the advisory body, and its interaction with the management of the organization it advises, should be clearly spelled out, including what information, training, and support services are to be provided to the advisory body, how advice is to be presented (e.g. in writing, in periodic meetings), and the procedures for management to react to this advice. Advisory bodies convene regularly, and can either be time-bound or standing bodies, but are likely only to run for the time line of the program and are not sustainable.

Assessment

It is necessary to ensure that the board reflects the full range of interests in a given issue and have enough expertise on the issue at hand. The benefit of the advice the board is able to give relies on the willingness of the agency to accept it. In some cases, skilled moderation and facilitation can also be required.

3. Other complaint mechanisms

Community Feedback Log

Description

A team of community volunteers is recruited with the duty to record all verbal comments, feedback and complaints they hear from beneficiaries during routine daily visits to field sites. This information is written in a note book and then summarized on a one-page feedback form (the feedback log). This is shared with project managers. The benefit of collecting feedback daily is that immediate action can be taken to improve programmes and resolve problems as they arise and before they escalate.

Volunteers are provided with guidelines on the type of information they should collect, including beneficiary perceptions of the assistance they receive and staff behaviour.

Inappropriate conduct by any agency staff member, visitor or volunteer is recorded in detail and should be reported immediately to programme supervisor.

Assessment

This system is useful for highlighting common problems (if the same feedback is repeated by several different sources). It is also useful for collecting verbal feedback in an informal way, but does rely on degree of trust between the beneficiary and the volunteer. Feedback logs have been used by WV in Haiti (for an example of the feedback form, see: <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/summary-of-observations-english.pdf>).

Open Meetings and Public Hearings

Description

A public hearing is a formally advertised and convened meeting in which any person interested in or affected by a programme can have their voice heard. Hearings are mostly consultative and the agency is not bound to accept or agree with the participants' viewpoints or issues raised.

In many cases the agency will conduct open deliberations to share decisions reached, to identify all alternatives considered, specify the best alternative, identify all factors that it used to make its decision (including comments received), and state how those factors affected the decision.

Open meetings help the marginalised

Shreemati Nathibhai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) is a university-based NGO in Maharashtra India that works with the most marginalized *dalit* women, 'rag-pickers'—whose livelihood involves scavenging waste from the streets of Pune City.

SNDT held monthly meetings with its staff and two representatives from each slum area where they were working (100 in all). All programme and organisational issues were discussed in this forum. The open process allowed tensions from conflicts of interests relating to different values and priorities between SNDT and the rag-pickers to be managed. The benefit of the open meetings was that the rag-pickers and the NGOs perceived one another as equals. SNDT still had the power to reject recommendations made by the community representatives, particularly on matters of values (such as when communities supported child marriages). SNDT's approach enabled the women, over a ten-year period, to become unionised and gain legitimacy in the process of municipal waste management.

Source: Civil Society Governance: NGO Values and Accountability for Empowerment Dr. Patrick Kilby, Australian National University based on Kilby, P. (2006) 'Accountability for empowerment: dilemmas facing non-governmental organizations', *World Development*, 34(6):951-963.

<http://www.istr.org/conferences/bangkok/WPVolume/Kilby.Patrick.pdf>

Public hearings organised by the Rajasthan Women's Association

This is a forum for girls and women to raise their problems and grievances related to all types of violence (domestic and public service delivery issues) and gender disparity. It allows them to seek redress on the spot from government officials. Conceptualised by UNICEF, the Public Hearings are held by the Rajasthan State Women's Commission (RSWC) an autonomous body set up by the Government of Rajasthan and include the Chairperson of the RSWC, the District Collector of Sawai Madhopur district, the Superintendent of Police, and other senior officers of the social sector department. The department has the status of a civil court, and has the power to investigate complaints brought before it by women—recommending that the government take action should the inquiry reveal a woman to indeed be the aggrieved party.

Source: Public Hearings in Rajasthan - An Initiative for an effective public accountability mechanism. Rajasthan women's state commission http://www.unicef.org/india/media_3825.htm

Assessment

Open meetings and public hearings are useful for planning and raising awareness of major institutional changes. They help make the process and outcomes widely accessible. They are not passive systems and require action from community members wishing to participate—and attending hearings or submitting written testimony can require considerable resources of beneficiaries.

Organisers need to ensure that attendees reflect the full range of interests in a given issue and include representatives who interact with the wider constituencies they represent. As with other systems, the open forum will only work if the agency is willing to take comments into account.

Perception Surveys and Report Cards

Description

Perception surveys and report cards can be used to gather data from a specific group of beneficiaries on a specific issue concerning an agency's programme and performance. They can provide insights into what beneficiaries want and can act as a tool to draw attention to problems. Surveys can be carried out by the programme NGO or an independent group and are useful for tracking change in the agency's programmes in response to previous complaints.

Report cards tend to be used by independent groups, often covering a number of sectors.

Assessment

Perception surveys are normally only conducted with existing beneficiaries. Surveys require considerable financial and human resources as well as experience with statistical techniques, and are only efficient if their results are used to create change. Given the complexity and cost of doing surveys, agencies with little prior experience and limited resources may prefer to carry out preliminary studies using simple qualitative techniques, before embarking on full surveys.

Community Score Cards

Description

The Community Score Card (CSC) is a participatory, community-based monitoring and evaluation tool that is used to inform community members about available services and their entitlements. It invites them to give their opinion on the accessibility and quality of services, such as health centres, schools, public transport, water and waste disposal systems. By providing an opportunity for direct dialogue between service providers and the community, the CSC process empowers the public to voice their opinion and demand improved service delivery.

There are five main steps to implementing a score card. These are:

1. Preparatory groundwork, including identifying the subject and scope of the assessment, preliminary research regarding current project community entitlements, an awareness campaign to inform the community about the community score card process and training of facilitators;

2. Work with community focus groups to generate a scorecard and identify performance indicators, scoring the indicators and developing suggestions for improvement;
3. Helping agencies generate a self-evaluation score card;
4. Convening a meeting between the community and service provider; and
5. Advocacy and follow-up, including an awareness-raising campaign to publicise results and ensure the implementation of solutions.

CARE Malawi's Experience with Score Cards

CARE Malawi is starting to use the score- card process in situations when it is itself the service provider. In the case of a CARE seed-bank project communities are asked to assess amongst other things, the quality of the seeds provided, the timeliness of the supply and the process of implementation. Currently there is no third party 'broker' between CARE and the community as there would be between communities and government service providers. The main points relating to the score cards are:

- Information is collected via focus group interactions
- It involves no explicit sampling. Instead the aim is to ensure maximum participation of the local community in the gathering.
- Emphasis is less on the actual scorecard and more on achieving immediate response and joint decision-making
- It relies on grass-roots mobilization to create awareness and encourage participation
- It is conducted at a micro/local level (village cluster, and set of facilities) and is more useful in rural settings
- Time horizon for implementation is short (about 3-6 weeks)
- Feedback to the service providers (Care in this case) is almost immediate and changes are arrived at through mutual dialogue during the interface meeting

Source: CARE Malawi <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPCENG/1143333-1116505690049/20509286/comscorecardsnote.pdf>

Assessment

The Score Card approach is relatively easy to use. The value is that it promotes dialogue and consensus-building and can strengthen citizen voice and community empowerment. As well as being a means for agencies and communities to give direct feedback to one another, it can also boost confidence—particularly when agencies receive a high score from the community or when the community sees that solutions to identified problems are implemented effectively.

Some of the challenges are that the agency can feel threatened by the possibility of receiving complaints and negative feedback. It will be necessary to highlight both strengths and weaknesses emerging from score card findings and to effectively facilitate meetings and exchanges to ensure they are constructive and focus on solutions as well as problems. It is important to help community members develop an understanding of the constraints faced by agencies, so as to avoid creating unrealistically high expectations.

Community Score Card being applied by WaterAid's partner in Ghana



Photo: A resident scores water services in Shukura. Credit: WaterAid / Lamisi Dabire

The community scorecard project was conducted by the Community Network Initiative (COMNET), a member of CONIWAS and partner of WaterAid, to give residents the opportunity to assess water services in the Shukura Community. This method is one of the citizen engagement tools championed by WaterAid in Ghana and its partners to promote water governance.

Following passionate discussions, the residents set the following indicators for evaluating the water service delivery: water flow, billing, quality, taste, maintenance and communication.

The community's overall score was very low. They cited irregular water supply, water rationing and billing not commensurate with service delivery. They also indicated that the water is sometimes contaminated. The residents were not happy about the water company response speed to resolve burst pipes but observed that they have been informed of shut-down for major maintenance exercises.

Following this, COMNET organised a self-assessment meeting with local area staff of Ghana Water Company and AVRIL. They admitted the level of service to the Shukura area required some improvement. After meetings and deliberations, the community members and water companies agreed on a reform agenda.

Muhammed Yacubu Bingle, Coordinator of COMNET, said that the exercise has been successful in facilitating engagement between the community and service providers.

Source: <http://www.wateraid.org/ghana/news/8169.asp>

In order to be effective, the community needs to have access to information on the agency's performance and information about the beneficiaries (as a group) experiences and entitlements. The community must also be able to either directly or indirectly sanction the service provider in case of poor performance (or reward good performance).

Suggestion and Complaints Boxes

Description

Suggestion or complaints boxes are locked wooden or metal boxes located within the community and into which community members can place a written note or letter. They are a common way for agencies to receive complaints. The box is opened and emptied only by the specific person who holds the key. The box, which is available to project beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, can be used for sensitive and anonymous complaints where the complainant does not wish to face a person.

World Vision's complaints boxes help Georgia's displaced voice concerns

In February 2009, World Vision piloted an accountability project in four Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) settlements in Georgia and set up 10 complaints boxes for residents to communicate their needs and problems.

Boxes are now being placed at the Social Community Centres established by World Vision in nine of the IDP settlements, as well as on electricity poles with clear, visible, and prominent markings. More intensive door-to-door campaigns, as well as community meetings, will take place with all residents to carefully explain the purpose of these boxes and how they work. Additionally, rather than simply relying on written complaints in boxes, World Vision will also hold focus group discussions in the settlements to record the residents' complaints and comments

By November 2009, World Vision had received 40 complaints on various issues, including dietary needs and hygiene products. One complaint served as a community complaint with 79 signatures.

Based on an article by Dwayne Mamo, World Vision MEER. <http://meero.worldvision.org/>

Assessment

If suggestion boxes are used, they are best implemented throughout the entire duration of the programme. Ideally, they should be placed in an area where those who wish to access it can do so as confidentially or privately as possible – they should be placed away from the centre of attention (e.g. away from the distribution, or at the back of a meeting). The box must also be visible and accessible. In the case of mobile suggestion boxes, they should be available for as long a period as possible to the communities. An information campaign should be implemented before the box is put in place to explain the purpose of the box and the process for making a complaint. People's confidence in the suggestion box will be determined partly by who is responsible for opening it and whether or not they trust this person to handle their complaint in a confidential manner. Other NGOs that have used suggestions boxes include CARE Cambodia and Tearfund in Kenya.

Happy Sad letter box designed for children by Plan International, Sri Lanka

Many children do not feel comfortable expressing difficult issues or complaints directly, so when the tsunami ploughed upon their shores, Plan in Sri Lanka decided to encourage children to instead write out their feelings, problems, needs and ideas and drop them inside the Happy/Sad Letterbox.



These bright blue boxes, decorated with cartoons of children placing their own letters into the slot, were placed in 64 schools in Hambantota, one of the hardest hit districts on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. The box invites children to send in their concerns with a message that simply says, "Tell us why you are happy or sad." Although children at first submitted many requests for material items, gradually they began expressing needs that were closer to their hearts. Teachers and counsellors, who received training on how to respond discreetly and appropriately to the letters, also helped children with communicating their feelings.

Source: Happy sad Letterbox, Tsunami 5 Years After, Plan International. <http://plan-international.org/tsunamirecovery/sri-lanka/happy-sad-letterbox.php>

Community Help (and complaint) Desks

Description

The Community Help Desk has been implemented by World Vision and other agencies during relief operations. The help desk is a committee of responsible community members that are available during distributions and meetings to receive, record and respond to community members' complaints and feedback about an agency's programs, commitments or conduct. It is also a source of information for both the community and agency on beneficiary selection, distribution programme, and other services being provided. During registration the help desk may need to be manned by staff and stakeholders who are not beneficiaries.

The help desk committee is formed of elected community representatives, including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (although not compulsory), and must include people who can read and write so complaints can be recorded in a log. All committee members on the help desk follow a set of guidelines covering their roles, responsibilities and conduct and complaints are handled according to strict protocol. Training is provided to committee members, and an awareness

programme within the community informs beneficiaries of the aim of the desk and the process for making a complaint.

Although the help desk committee is capable of resolving most issues and complaints locally, all complaints are recorded for verification by the agency. Sensitive complaints are immediately addressed to the agency for follow-up, and/or taken directly to the police.

Assessment

The help desk is a transparent process that protects all involved from false accusations. It empowers the communities with a sense of ownership. Recording of issues raised enables programme managers to track feedback and complaints, and respond to them in a timely manner.

Daily Complaint Hour

Description

One specific hour each day is dedicated to complaints handling in each project location. During this hour, the complainant can raise their concerns directly with programme agency staff—either an Administrator or, if necessary, the Office Manager. The complainants make a verbal or written complaint, which is recorded by the agency for follow-up and verification. Information describing the complaints process is made available to the community in advance. This mechanism has been used by Medair in Pakistan and led to the identification and inclusion of 290 wrongly excluded families to the distribution list.

Assessment

The daily complaint hour is the only time and place that agency staff would receive complaints. This may affect access to the system for some beneficiaries. As well as being recorded and addressed on a daily basis, complaints are also tracked over time and used as a monitoring tool to support programme management decisions.

Direct Face to face– Beneficiary Accountability Officer

Although many agencies have staff in the field that are in daily contact with beneficiaries, some have established specific staff positions for accountability which includes receiving feedback and complaints. Tearfund, for example, recruited a Beneficiary Accountability Officer for its emergency response programmes in North Kenya as part of its overall efforts to share information, engage communities in decisions and provide channels for feedback and complaints. The officer was responsible for Tearfund's local accountability. The project was part of Tearfund's accountability system in Northern Kenya, which included Notice Boards, Beneficiary Reference Groups and Suggestion Boxes.

Information Centres

Information centres manned by agency staff are used to provide programme information and allow community members to send feedback directly to an agency with questions, complaints and suggestions. Feedback is collected, recorded and analysed, ready to inform decision-making and feed into proposals and reports. Computerising the feedback will also, alongside regular field visits from the staff, ensure that the agency is able to more effectively check the quality of the system (through monitoring the kind of responses given and the timeframe a response is given in), recognise weaknesses and make improvements.

Hotlines and Helplines

Description

Hotlines are free phone numbers or e-mail addresses available all day, every day, allowing complainants to make direct contact with trained personnel employed by an independent third party not affiliated with the Company. Call-takers create a record of all calls and report them promptly to a designated person within the agency for further review and handling, as appropriate. In many cases the complaint can be made in a range of languages and can be made anonymously.

OXFAM GB's experience of using a hotline in Haiti

The aim of Oxfam's hotline was to:

- gauge aid recipients' perceptions (negative or positive);
- receive "quick feedback" information about problems and shortcomings on the ground;
- provide fast, appropriate solutions;
- respond to questions about Oxfam GB's actions and strategies in its emergency response;
- provide another way of recording complaints and grievances;
- act as a learning experience; and
- indirectly, to test the relevance of Oxfam's actions and uncover any other needs that have not yet been identified.

Lessons learned from the hotline were:

- The hotline is not an appropriate means of detecting cases of exploitation and sexual abuse. It should be used in conjunction with other sources of information;
- There are negative perceptions of the hotline by staff and this requires continual internal awareness-raising regarding principles of accountability;
- There need to be improvements in recording calls and data so as to make analysis and report production simpler; and
- The hotline is the main channel of communication with aid recipients, which means that the subjects of the calls vary greatly and do not really involve "feedback" on the programme.

Source <http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/oxfam-haiti-phone-hotline-en.pdf>

World Vision's Integrity and Protection Hotline

This line is accessible 24 hours a day, confidential, available in 180 languages and operated by a neutral third party.

World Vision operates a confidential hotline in partnership with EthicsPoint, a leading provider of ethics reporting services. This hotline is available to everyone involved in the organisation to report unethical or illegal conduct. WV expects all individuals in the organisation to act with integrity and for the good of the partnership. Therefore, any misconduct must be reported.

WV recognises that discovering misconduct may place personnel in an uncomfortable situation, and to ensure the privacy and safety of each party the World Vision Integrity & Protection Hotline maintains complete confidentiality.

Source: https://secure.ethicspoint.com/domain/media/en/gui/24325/brochure_en.pdf

Assessment

Because hotlines are intended for anonymous callers, it is sometimes very difficult to verify the information received. The number of people who call is still very small as a percentage of the aid-recipient population. The line provides direct access to a responsible agent, but may be of some cost to the complainant if it is not a toll free number.

Short Text Messaging—SMS

By the year 2000, almost 40 per cent of the world's population lived within range of a cellular network, whereas today this number is close to 80 per cent and continues to increase daily. Mobile phone use in

Africa is growing faster than anywhere else in the world (although still a small percentage of the population). In addition, despite high costs and poor connectivity, the number of Africans accessing the Internet and exploring the world of social media via mobile phones is also on the increase.

Community members and beneficiaries are on the front line of aid and are the ones who have most at stake if programmes fail to achieve their objectives. Being able to use a free SMS service provides a rapid and direct link between beneficiaries and agency staff or intermediaries, and allows cases of abuse, corruption and malpractice to be reported.

SMS complaints about the Watan ATM card

For the redress of complaints, a text message containing two national identity card numbers pertaining to the same area (i.e., the card number of a beneficiary and of the complainant), are sent on the designated short code. A complaint is then launched.

"We have received complaints from people living in the same area that though one of them is included in the list of beneficiaries, the other is not and we are looking to resolve such issues with the help of the SMS service," said the Chairman.

Published in The Express Tribune, September 28th, 2010.

SMS to report abuse in camps in Haiti

Ayiti SMS SOS is an SMS-based system for reporting gender-based violence in the internally displaced person's camps of Haiti following the devastating earthquake. The project is the result of collaboration between *Survivor Connect* and *Fondation Espoir* and others using the *FrontlineSMS* platform. Instances of violence or exploitation including rape, sexual assault or child abuse, can be reported via text message to an easy-to-remember number. Depending on the nature of the report, an immediate response via text or a voice call will be made by *Fondation Espoir* back to the reporting individual. Incident reports will be forwarded to other partnering organisations for additional follow-up if needed.

Source: <http://www.mobileactive.org/case-studies/sms-sos-reporting-gender-based-violence>

Complaints via public media - Public Radio and Newspaper

Although media is more often used by community members and consumers to give feedback and complain in relation to utility and service providers, they are also used by NGOs and other agencies to receive feedback and information from the communities. Newspaper and radio give voice to individuals and communities who might otherwise be voiceless. Media can also be used to disseminate information, improve transparency, and receive complaints and feedback.

Radio Active Community Radio

Radio Active is a Community Radio station that uses technology to support its partners' social programmes. The live radio program called *Mukha Mukhi- Face Off* is run in partnership with Auto Drivers in Bangalore. The host of the programme moderates the discussion between the general public and concerned authorities around issues such as power cuts, water shortage, garbage issues, street dog management, transport, and general civic and social issues. The aim of the programme is to find solutions to common problems faced by the community members.

The Star Newspaper

In Johannesburg, South Africa, the "Metro Watch" column of a local daily newspaper, *The Star*, publicises and follows-up on individual complaints about local utilities with a high degree of success. Dealing with 70 complaints in an average week, of which 20 relate to general billing and 21 to water specifically, it is an effective mechanism for those who can read, afford a newspaper, and have access to email or a telephone to contact the newspaper.

Source: Muller (2008) Water Notes

Social Media

In recent months, Facebook—the major social media platform worldwide and currently the most visited website in most of Africa—has seen massive growth on the continent. The number of African Facebook users now stands at over 17 million, up from 10 million in 2009. More than 15 per cent of people online in Africa are currently using the platform, compared to 11 per cent in Asia. Two other social networking websites, Twitter and YouTube, rank among the most visited websites in most African countries.

The potential of these new technologies—particularly Facebook and Twitter—to provide channels for alternative ‘voices’ is great. From an accountability perspective, these tools offer the potential for those with least power in the ‘aid chain’ to tell their story and potentially, perhaps for the first time, to sanction poorly-performing aid agencies in a public arena. Agencies can to some extent limit complaints on their general public sites by setting up separate accounts where people can specifically post their complaints.

The culture of social media demands that the complaint is responded to immediately and it is essential to comment on the original stream where the complaint was initially raised. Care should be taken not to disclose sensitive information in the public arena. The complainant can also be encouraged to use other options to continue discussions—by e-mail for example. Responding immediately to complaints via social media requires that the sites are constantly monitored and agencies have resources in place to respond.

On-line complaints

No information is available on the use of on-line complaints by NGOs at community level, but examples and lessons from the commercial and government sector are available. They offer a useful insight into some alternative complaint mechanisms that NGOs can replicate.

On-line complaints – the Watan experience in Pakistan

About 65000 flood affected families have so far been provided Watan Cards, an ATM facility to ensure transparent disbursement of 20,000 Rupees to each flood affected family as announced by the Federal Government. The process is accompanied by an on-line complaints system where beneficiaries can post their complaints.

A separate consumer site is also available for non-beneficiaries to launch a complaint about the Watan card process.

Source: <http://nadrawatancard.blogspot.com/>

On-line complaints

The Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) encourages complainants to first make contact with the relevant organisation they wish to complain to. When this fails they are offered the option of filling in an on-line complaint form, available in two languages. The complainant is required to complete specified fields including their name, contact details, the nature of their complaint and the organisation they are directing the complaint to. The complaint is then followed up by the DCA.

Source: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dca/html/resources/forms.shtml>

Complaint sheets

Feedback sheets are distributed by some companies with their products. If the product purchased is faulty or the service provided by company personnel is poor, then the purchaser can complete the feedback and complaint form and send it to the company. A similar system has been used by the NGO Medair to provide its beneficiaries with one more mechanism for feedback and complaints. When Medair distributed latrines they included a feedback sheet on which beneficiaries could make their comments.

Medair's complaint sheets

Medair's work following the devastation of Cyclone Ivan in Madagascar also illustrates accountable WASH programming. From the beginning, beneficiaries were encouraged to provide feedback to Medair's village representatives. Comments on three aspects of the SanPlat latrine were obtained. Community members provided feedback on the ease of cleaning, the method of urine separation, and the ease of use for women. As a result, WASH teams made significant improvements to the design of the latrines. Input from beneficiaries did not stop there. When a household bought one of these subsidised latrines, they signed a certificate of installation where they could provide feedback about it.

Source: www.medair.org/en/infochanel/news/detail/article/being_accountable_to_the_people_of_madagascar/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=0&cHash=765cf71895

Other types of mechanisms for receiving complaints:

Letters

Visits to the programme office

E-mails

Phone calls

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