

Lessons from the beneficiary feedback pilot in Pakistan:

DFID Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilots Programme

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Background

This summary provides an outline of the key lessons on beneficiary feedback mechanisms (BFMs) drawn from an evaluation of the completed access and beneficiary feedback pilot funded by DFID in Pakistan, which was undertaken during October–November 2013.¹

This pilot was the first in a series of 10 that will be evaluated as part of DFID's Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilot Programme by ITAD in association with Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) to inform learning on how BFMs can strengthen programme effectiveness, impact and transparency. Pakistan is the only pilot focussing on emergency response, and was implemented in a shorter timeframe than the other pilots due to the fast-paced nature of the humanitarian programme cycle.

The Pakistan pilot was designed by HTSPE Pakistan and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Health and Nutrition Development Society (HANDS), both of which are supporting flood-affected communities in the Sindh region with shelter recovery programmes.

As the first pilot in DFID's Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilot Programme, it has provided a useful testing ground for DFID's engagement with implementing partners and generated key lessons about the methodology for designing, implementing and monitoring/evaluating BFMs. It is anticipated that the key lessons from the pilot outlined in this document will be used by DFID headquarters/country missions, implementing partners, other donors, the Research and Impact Evaluation Consortium (RIEC) and wider civil society to identify best practice and apply this to the design, delivery and evaluation of BFMs in other pilots and contexts.

¹ The evaluation was undertaken by ITAD and partner organization Semiotics, based in Islamabad.

Key lessons regarding the design of the feedback pilot

Initial set-up of the feedback pilot

It is vital to clarify and communicate the roles and division of responsibilities between different stakeholders in the initial set-up of the pilot. The perceived lack of communication about the division of responsibilities between the commissioning agency (DFID), the design agency (HTSPE) and implementing agencies (IOM and HANDS) in the inception and early implementation phases, led to confusion about the purpose and ownership of the pilot. As a result, implementing agencies did not feel a sense of ownership over the project until much later in the process. This meant that the inception phase was drawn out and the implementation phase shortened. This resulted in the feedback collection process being rushed, which undermined the possibility of testing the methodology to its full potential.

It is critical to consult with beneficiaries in the design of feedback collection processes: As a result of the rushed timeframe described above, beneficiaries were not widely consulted in the design of the feedback collection process for the pilot. Beneficiaries expressed disappointment in this. Beneficiary involvement in the design phase of a pilot is critical in terms of ensuring effectiveness, transparency and beneficiary ownership. Some beneficiaries were consulted during HTSPE's inception-phase field research, which positively informed the overall design and selection of specific methods for feedback collection.

DFID's sustained in-country presence is important: For a feedback pilot programme initiated from the UK, DFID's in-country presence is critical in terms of stakeholder identification, initial pilot set-up, clarifying questions around project ownership and purpose, and overseeing the pilot implementation process. This can help to reduce inherent power dynamics between the donor agency, implementing partners, and contractors. This is particularly relevant in fast-paced humanitarian settings given the high staff turnover and short timeframes.

Consider the timing and stage of the pilot project cycle: The timing of the Pakistan feedback pilot was reportedly not conducive to building a sustained feedback loop with the beneficiaries who were providing feedback. The programme sites selected for the pilot were in the completion phase when the pilot was run. This made it difficult for HANDS and IOM to establish sustained feedback loops using the pilot methodology, and to make improvements to ongoing project activities on the basis of feedback. Ideally projects in the design and early implementation phases should be selected as pilots.

Plan how beneficiary feedback will be integrated into monitoring tools and decision-making: It is important that implementing agencies consider and plan for how feedback will be used in ongoing monitoring processes, to inform decision-making, and ensure that the feedback loop is sustained. The evaluation found that HTSPE, HANDS and IOM focussed more on selecting and refining data collection methods in the design phase than on planning the uptake of beneficiary feedback into decision-making processes.

Undertaking situational and context analyses

Situational, informational and organisational analyses should be undertaken and inform the feedback pilot: The situational analysis should assess local power dynamics, socio-economic and cultural diversity and the outcomes of this analysis should be used to design the feedback pilot in a way that is sensitive to the local context. The situational analysis undertaken in the Pakistan pilot provided a clear assessment of the political economy and how local elites impact upon information-sharing in South Sindh. However, the informational and organisational needs

analyses were less detailed, with insufficient analysis of how feedback was currently analysed and used by both organisations. It is important that informational needs and organisational assessments are undertaken and used to inform the pilot design and that this is clearly documented in an inception report.

Selecting beneficiary feedback tools and communicating the reasons for their selection

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) are effective tools for gathering beneficiary feedback: Staff in both agencies, as well as beneficiaries, were positive about the use of these tools as a method for collecting beneficiary feedback. Staff felt that these tools enabled them to collect beneficiary feedback in an informed and relevant way. Beneficiaries felt that these tools enabled face-to-face interactions which assisted in the development of shared communal understanding and greater transparency. 71% of beneficiaries were satisfied with FGDs as a two-way communication process.

It is important to clearly explain the methodology and selection of beneficiary feedback tools to the commissioning agency, implementing agencies, civil society and beneficiaries: Although interviews with HTPSE indicated that there have been careful considerations regarding the methodology for the pilot, the reasons why FGDs and KIIs were selected as methods for capturing beneficiary feedback was not clearly articulated in the inception report. Interviews with HTPSE revealed that FGDs and KIIs had been selected to complement existing feedback mechanisms and because staff and communities were already familiar with these tools. Communicating this is important in terms of accountability and building trust with the beneficiaries.

Key lessons regarding implementation of the feedback pilot

It is important to communicate to beneficiaries the purpose of the feedback pilot: This ensures greater transparency and beneficiary ownership. Communication regarding the purpose of feedback activities (e.g. FGDs) was limited to an announcement about the dates and times of the field teams' visits and very little about the purpose of the pilot itself. This was partly due to a tight timeframe, and partly an intentional IOM strategy to avoid "preparation of beneficiaries". Despite this 61% of survey respondents understood the purpose of the meetings to be an opportunity for them to provide some form of feedback – positive and negative – as well as to suggest areas for improvement.

Ensure that the timeframe for the implementation phase is adequate: As described above, the timeframe for the implementation of the pilot was tight as a result of the drawn-out inception phase, which undermined the ability to establish and sustain feedback loops. Generating beneficiary feedback requires trust, and this takes time to build.

Training for implementing agency staff should focus on the practise of facilitation skills and data analysis: Training workshops for HANDS and IOM staff focussed on data collection methodologies, including FGDs, KIIs and sampling. IOM staff felt that more emphasis should have been placed on the demonstration and practising the application of facilitation skills in the initial training. In addition, staff emphasised the need for further training on data analysis, particularly on analysing large quantities of qualitative data generated through FGDs and KIIs. The training sessions were seen as largely inadequate by most staff at HANDS whereas IOM staff found the training satisfactory overall. Follow-up training on data collection methods and practical application of facilitation skills would help to strengthen and sustain staff capacity.

Importance of developing appropriate and standardised tools for capturing data and communicating effectively to staff: The development of guidelines and tools for capturing beneficiary feedback data was ad hoc, as was the communication to staff about the requirements to use these tools. As a result, there were variations in how feedback was recorded, which made the analysis more difficult. To ensure that staff are able to collect and record relevant data, it is critical that they are appropriately trained and that templates for recording information are adequately developed and customised based on the strengths and weaknesses of staff capacity across delivery agencies.

It is essential to adapt tools for the pilot on the basis of realities on the ground: The processes and tools developed for the pilot were on occasion adapted mid-course during the brief implementation phase in order to respond to realities on the ground. For example, HANDS and IOM adapted the guidelines for FDGs during the implementation phase to ensure that the questions asked in FDGs were relevant to the local context and the shelter relief programme, sensitive to cultural expectations, and supported the collection of relevant data. This is important in terms of ensuring that feedback mechanisms don't undermine local structures and practices, or exacerbate any existing unequal power dynamics.

It is critical to close the feedback loop: Delivery agencies must take time to respond to queries and concerns put forward by beneficiaries during FDGs and KIIs. Failure to do this can undermine beneficiary trust in the approach and the pilot, weakening its impact. 33% of beneficiaries stated that they had not received a response to their queries from implementing agencies.

It is important to engage field staff in internal discussions about feedback loops: Field staff responsible for conducting FDGs and KIIs were not adequately involved in agency pilot-planning meetings. To ensure that discussions around feedback loops result in effective outcomes, it is critical to involve the staff members who engage directly with beneficiaries and understand beneficiary needs and concerns. Staff members who engage with beneficiaries need to understand and buy into the purpose of the pilot in order for the feedback process to work effectively.

Attention needs to be given to establishing the systems and developing capacity to handle and analyse large quantities of feedback data: Collection and analysis of data on feedback was carried out at the programme level by the programme implementation and programme management teams. Full text transcripts and spreadsheets were used to record and analyse the data. However, as described above, staff struggled to analyse and synthesise large volumes of qualitative data into a summary form that could be used by management to draw learning and make decisions about the future direction of the pilot. It is therefore critical that systems for collecting and analysing data are manageable and staff have the adequate skills and training to use these systems efficiently and effectively.