

Effective feedback in humanitarian contexts

PRACTITIONER GUIDANCE

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ALNAP-CDA GUIDANCE

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Have you read the **main study** that accompanies this guidance?

www.alnap.org/ourwork/feedback-loop

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FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Which features in design and implementation are most important for success?

Under what circumstances should you establish a formalised feedback mechanism for crisis-affected populations?

This guidance is intended for people designing /or implementing feedback mechanisms in a humanitarian programme, and in particular in cases where such mechanisms are established to:

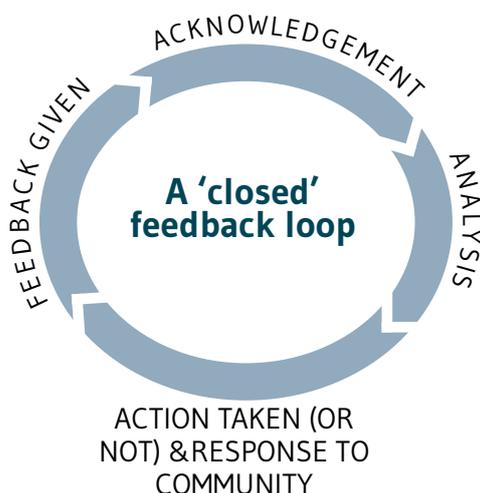
- **operate at the level of the individual programme or project**
- **operate in the context of ongoing humanitarian operations** or humanitarian programming (but not necessarily in the immediate phases of relief and response after a sudden-onset crisis)
- **provide usable information** for adjusting and improving some elements of the actions carried out and services delivered
- **deal with a broad caseload** of non-sensitive issues (feedback) in addition to sensitive ones (complaints). Mechanisms designed exclusively to address sexual exploitation and abuse allegations were excluded from this study and related guidance, on the assumption that they may require special design 'features' (such as mechanisms to allow for the collection of evidence that could be used in legal processes) and might address issues of acknowledgement of feedback, validation and anonymity/confidentiality in very specific ways.

ONLY GOT FIVE MINUTES?

Here's a digested read about feedback mechanisms.

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What do we mean by 'feedback mechanism'?



! A feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received, thus forming a closed feedback loop. Where the feedback loop is left open, the mechanism is not fully effective.

DESIGN

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1. Define purpose, expected uses and needs.

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2. Decide whether you will institute a formal feedback 'mechanism', or whether informal, unplanned approaches will generate the feedback you require.

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3. Choose the mechanism's location in your organisation.

SET-UP

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4. Identify which communication tools and channels are most appropriate for use in the feedback mechanism.

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5. Consider how sensitive information (for example, referring to sexual abuse or fraud) will be addressed.

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6. Ensure a mix of staff nationalities, genders and other factors to facilitate feedback collection and response to communities.

SORTING, VERIFYING, ANALYSING & SHARING

- 7. Plan ahead for feedback data entry, sorting and verification. page 18
- 8. Design a feedback mechanism that provides reliable information that programme staff actually need in order to make decisions and take actions. page 19
- 9. Pay attention to both solicited and unsolicited feedback. page 20

RESPONDING

- 10. Report feedback information to decision-makers, ensuring that they receive the right amount of detail. page 23
- 11. Provide feedback information to decision-makers regularly, and encourage them to ask for it. page 24

EXPECTATIONS

- 12. Provide clear and consistent messages on the purpose, expectation of use and support allocated to the feedback mechanism. page 25

STAFF & LEARNING

- 13. Involve colleagues across the organisation in the work of the feedback mechanism. page 26
- 14. Develop a 'feedback culture' within your organisation. page 27
- 15. Harness opportunities to learn about and improve the mechanism. page 27

You don't need all 15 guidance points for effectiveness, but each one alone is 'necessary but insufficient'.

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What do we mean by 'feedback mechanism'?

Figure 1: A 'closed' feedback loop



Source: Authors

For the purposes of this guidance, we propose the following definition of a formal humanitarian feedback mechanism:

"A feedback mechanism is a set of procedures and tools formally established and used to allow humanitarian aid recipients (and in some cases other crisis-affected populations) to provide information on their experience of a humanitarian agency or of the wider humanitarian system. Feedback mechanisms can function as part of broader monitoring practices and can generate information for decision-making purposes. Feedback mechanisms collect information for a variety of purposes, including taking corrective action in improving some elements of the humanitarian response, and strengthening accountability towards affected populations."

A feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received, thus forming a closed feedback loop (see Figure 1). Where the feedback loop is left open, the mechanism is not fully effective.

What's this guidance based on?

This guidance is based on the results of an action research project that looked at different agencies' experiences in setting up and using feedback mechanisms (FMs) in operational humanitarian contexts. Evidence was gathered through desk research and field visits conducted in Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti. The complete set of research products issued as part of this initiative is available on the ALNAP site at:

www.alnap.org/ourwork/feedback-loop.

What made this research distinctive was that it systematically asked for and sought to incorporate the views of the feedback mechanism users. The users are first and foremost crisis-affected people and affected populations as well as agency staff and implementing partners. The guidance reflects their aggregate views on whether and how feedback mechanisms work; which features contribute to FMs' effectiveness; and what could be done to improve them.

Designing a feedback mechanism

1 Define purpose, expected uses and needs.

This can be done by asking the following three questions:

- What needs will be met by establishing a feedback mechanism?
- How do you expect to use the feedback?
- Who would need to be able to access and use this information?

Evidence from the [case studies](#) shows that feedback mechanisms are often expected to meet a wide variety of needs. Table 1 presents some commonly cited reasons for establishing a formal feedback mechanism.

Table 1: Establishing the overall purpose and considering the need for establishing a feedback mechanism

Possible questions about the purposes of, and need for, a feedback mechanism	Potential options or answers
What are the needs you are trying to meet?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding programme targeting and performance (as part of broader monitoring system). • Enhancing participatory process and affected population empowerment; giving programme participants more power over the programme. • Reducing monitoring of data gaps and/or substituting for broader monitoring in situations of limited access. • Identifying abuses. • Meeting commitments of accountability. • Ensuring participants have information • Aligning agency and participant expectations of the programme. • Improving acceptance and security of agency in the community. >>

 Possible questions about the purposes of, and need for, a feedback mechanism	Potential options or answers
What are the expected uses for such information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the quality of the day-to-day activities/processes used to provide assistance and deliver services. • Ensuring that aid is reaching the most marginalised. • Ensuring that targeting is fair and/or perceived as fair. • Improving targeting and selection of affected populations and programme participants. • Aligning expectations – clarifying programme objectives and features of programme and delivery to affected populations. • Improving relevance and responsiveness of assistance provided and service delivered. • Improving quality or quantity of assistance provided and service delivered. • Identifying and gathering information about diversions, misuses, mismanagement or abuses of assistance provided. • Advocating for needs of affected people. • Informing future programme design.
Who needs to access and use this information?	Depending on the feedback content and expectation of follow-up and use, this could include one or more of the following users/stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • field monitoring teams so that they can be alerted of implementation challenges, access and delivery issues, issues with quality of assistance provided, targeting of eligible population • programme managers based in the field and in capital offices • monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) coordinators and MEAL teams in the field • protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), gender-based violence (GBV) and protection advisers so that they can be made aware inter alia of situations of abuse, misconduct etc. that need verifying, confidential follow-up, or referral • cluster partner agencies, and/or agencies from other clusters • UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and/or other agencies with a cluster or inter-cluster coordination role • local implementing partners • local authorities (could include law enforcement officials) • field monitoring teams and field liaison officers from donor agencies • senior managers • heads of operations • donors' officials in capital and headquarter offices • affected population/those who submitted feedback.

Some less common uses of feedback information identified during the case studies included:

- **Using feedback to look for average trends** in how assistance is being provided, perceived, and used. (See examples from the [Sudan case study](#)).
- **Scanning feedback to look for ‘outliers’**, for indications of diverging uses, new emerging needs, affected populations’ priorities and preferences of different groups of users. For example, unsolicited feedback could concern the type of project inputs and assistance provided and what users perceive to be most appropriate for their context. (See examples from World Vision and Oxfam America in the [Sudan case study](#); and International Organization for Migration [IOM]/Shelter Cluster in the [Pakistan case study](#)).
- **Analysing feedback data to understand preferences**, uses and behaviours associated with certain actions (e.g. how a relocation programme in post-earthquake Haiti can contribute to supporting livelihood and income-generating opportunities among the programme participants. (See examples from International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, British Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services in the [Haiti case study](#)).
- **Extracting ‘stories of change’ from programme participants** that can be used to complement quantitative monitoring reports and progress reports for donors. (See example from IOM in the [Pakistan case study](#)).

Some less common uses of feedback

It is important to note that when establishing who needs to access and use the information generated through feedback mechanisms, you should consider how to ensure that relevant information is also shared with the affected population itself.

Data on whether, how and how often this happens in reality appears to be rare. In some contexts, new crowdsourcing and open-source platforms can allow affected populations to view the information gathered. Some agencies have designed feedback procedures whereby those submitting feedback – including feedback provided during face-to-face meetings with community liaison officers or monitoring, evaluation, accountability and Learning (MEAL) staff – are handed a carbon copy or a summary of the feedback they provided.

In addition to having access to the data provided, community members can engage in analysing it or making sense of the issues that are flagged through the feedback mechanism. The idea is that if community members are provided with access to this data and engaged in its initial analysis, they can use the data for their own, locally driven advocacy purposes with other agencies and their local authorities.

“Phone lines and technology are important but not a panacea. We need a change of mentality. Investing in listening to the people is critical.”

IOM programme staff, Pakistan

2

Decide whether you will institute a formal feedback 'mechanism', or whether informal, unplanned approaches will generate the feedback you require.

Once the overarching purpose and expected uses of a feedback mechanism have been identified, the next decision is whether to opt for a formal or informal approach. In the broadest sense, by informal approach, we mean that the practice of receiving and responding to feedback can be embedded in how programme and staff work on a day-to-day basis. By formal approach, we mean that the practice of collecting, receiving and responding to feedback is established as a dedicated function supported by some level of structure and procedures. Although the focus of this guidance is on feedback mechanisms understood in the more 'formal' sense, it is important to recognise that both approaches to feedback handling present advantages and disadvantages.

When weighing up formal and informal feedback approaches, the main question is: could the information that you expect the mechanism to generate be collected and channelled through other existing processes, such as monitoring and two-way communication practices?

Some feedback collection and feedback handling practices may already be embedded in how programme monitoring and MEAL teams work, and how the agency collaborates with its local counterparts, cluster members, or implementing partners. Feedback may be obtained through participatory assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation activities. Both 'formal' and 'informal' set-ups present advantages and disadvantages, which are highlighted on the following pages.

Feedback collection and feedback handling practices can already be embedded in how programmes work.

“ If we had enough staff and were closer to the ground regularly in the camps, and implementing our programmes in a more participatory manner, we wouldn't need a Beneficiary Accountability Officer. ”

Country Director in Khartoum, Sudan

Formal



Table 2: Formal mechanisms: advantages and disadvantages

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<p>Organisational learning. Can help support the creation of institutional memory and learning by recording and codifying feedback.</p>	<p>Organisational learning. May fragment the feedback collection and response functions by making it the purview of only a group of specialised staff, operating in their own 'silo' and disconnected from the operational teams, or from the relevant decision-makers who could act on feedback promptly.</p>
<p>Volume. Can often handle greater volume of feedback data by, for instance, making greater use of higher-tech communication tools and channels such as SMS-based systems or dedicated call centres.</p>	<p>Organisational learning. May convey the perception that, by creating a separate team dedicated to feedback collection and response (or to accountability in general), listening and responding to the affected population becomes the job of a particular team, and not everyone's responsibility.</p>
<p>Funding. May attract funding relatively easily because the feedback handling process is presented as a discrete project. This means that dedicated budget lines can be allocated to carry out feedback handling functions such as feedback data entry, database management, data reporting and call centre management.</p>	<p>Funding. Can be more susceptible to funding fluctuations because of higher dependency on discrete budget lines that risk coming to a halt when the scale of operations decreases.</p>
<p>Remoteness. Can reach affected people in situations where in-person access may be difficult, and thus level of communication with crisis-affected communities is maintained.</p>	

Source: Authors

Table 3: Informal mechanisms: advantages and disadvantages

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<p>Responsiveness. Can be more responsive to changes in the programme and in the operational context, because they tend to be embedded in the inner workings of a programme (most often within monitoring functions) and to rely heavily on regular in-person communication with local implementing partners, community representatives and affected populations.</p>	<p>Collecting, tracking, verifying. It can be harder to collect, document and verify feedback without formal procedures. This, in turn, impinges on the possibility of tracking responses, analysing trends and reporting on them over time.</p>
<p>Relationship building. Can strengthen the quality and nature of the relationships between agency and affected populations by, for instance, increasing trust and collaboration between agencies and communities.</p>	<p>Organisational learning. May rely excessively on the know-how of individual team leaders and team members (e.g. monitoring and MEAL teams) with facilitation, conflict resolution, and listening and communication skills. This can make these systems hard to sustain and to scale up across teams, programmes and operations.</p> <p>Predictability. Can make feedback handling processes less predictable because they are often hitched to the relationship of trust built with specific individuals, and not to institutional systems. Staff leaving or rotating from their positions risks loss of feedback channels and two-way communication because of the lack of more predictable procedures.</p> <p>Volume and remoteness. Can rely mainly on in-person communication, which can make it difficult to handle large volumes of data and to gather data in situations of constrained access.</p> <p>Innovation. May arguably be less receptive to innovations in humanitarian information communication technology and affected populations' communication, which can limit the scale of these informal systems and their ability to reach communities that are in situations of constrained access or supported by large-scale operations across a broad geographical area.</p>

Informal



Inconclusive whether certain contexts call for informal or formal set up.

One of the aspects on which there doesn't (yet) seem to be enough or conclusive evidence is whether certain types of programme and operation contexts call for one set-up or the other. Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight some features that seem to characterise those agencies and programmes that, the research team could observe, rely more on informal feedback handling approaches than on formal mechanisms. If your team, programme or operation decides to opt for an informal feedback handling approach, it is useful to highlight that successful informal systems are built and rely on:

- strong trust and solid relationship of collaboration with implementing partners (local and international) on information-sharing and monitoring of programmes and services delivered
- regular, unimpeded access to the population either by INGO or local partner
- strong cohesion and clarity of objectives, roles and responsibilities within the monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams
- availability of resources (financial and staffing) to support monitoring teams within which informal feedback handling often occurs
- high levels of information exchange within the monitoring and M&E teams, and between these teams and senior programme management
- high levels of empowerment of monitoring teams to respond to and address feedback received on the spot and on the ground as much as possible
- the aspiration and desire to monitor not only the use of aid and resources provided, but also related behaviour changes in the affected populations and programme participants, in a continuous manner over longer periods of time.

3 Choose the mechanism's location in your organisation.

Should the mechanism be located centrally, or with the day-to-day programme deliverers?

Once an agency has decided to establish a new feedback mechanism, or formalise existing feedback handling practices, the overarching purpose and expected uses of the mechanism will influence other key aspects such as the mechanism's location within programme and organisational structures.

This is another area in which there isn't (yet) sufficient or conclusive evidence concerning where in the organisation the mechanism should be located for different programmes and contexts. Nevertheless, from existing and limited evidence, it is possible to highlight two broad options.

Locate the mechanism in a central unit or department which is not involved in the day-to-day programme delivery, such as a unit dealing with MEAL and quality assurance for the whole operation, or country office, or central communication and advocacy department. This allows staff to share and report on feedback received across functions and programmes, and allows better capture and sharing of feedback on cross-cutting issues. The main drawback is insularity and detachment from programme managers and the realities and changes of day-to-day implementation. Moreover, locating responsibility for the mechanisms outside the programme function makes it harder to ensure that feedback reporting is timely, so that programme managers and field teams receive relevant and actionable

feedback reports frequently enough to be in synch with the fast pace characterising many humanitarian operations.

Locate the mechanism within a team, unit or department involved in day-to-day programme delivery and operations. This can compensate for some of the drawbacks outlined for the first design option. Nonetheless, this design can also create another kind of insularity: over-specialisation. If the feedback handling is in one programme rather than others in the same area or sector of operation (for example, food assistance), this may reduce attentiveness to capturing and analysing feedback data that may be relevant for cross-cutting issues.

SETTING UP A FEEDBACK MECHANISM

4 Identify which communication tools and channels are most appropriate for use in the feedback mechanism.

Feedback mechanisms (FMs) usually rely on a mix of tools ranging from in-person visits to more technological, digital, or SMS-based systems. Ideally, you will wish to build the feedback mechanism around tools which are commonly used, preferred, and well understood in a given context by the people expected to give feedback (including women and other marginalised groups). It is useful to distinguish between two types of communication tools and channels and highlight the possible advantages and disadvantage of each set:

There are costs and benefits involved when using pre-existing feedback channels and also when establishing new ones.

Communication tools and channels already established as part of the programme or service delivery within which the FM is anchored. These often rely on periodic in-person visits and on the use of monitoring, assessment and survey tools such as household questionnaires, or post-distribution monitoring forms, logbooks and community meetings.

Communication tools and channels that are specifically established as a new addition to the options given (complementing the first set of tools) to affected populations and programme participants to get in touch with the agencies to provide unsolicited comments, feedback, pass on information, ask questions or thank the agencies. These tools and channels often rely on platforms (e.g. mobile and digital services) and support tools (suggestion boxes, radio, SMS messaging) that allow the handling of greater volumes of communication and feedback data without requiring face-to-face communication.

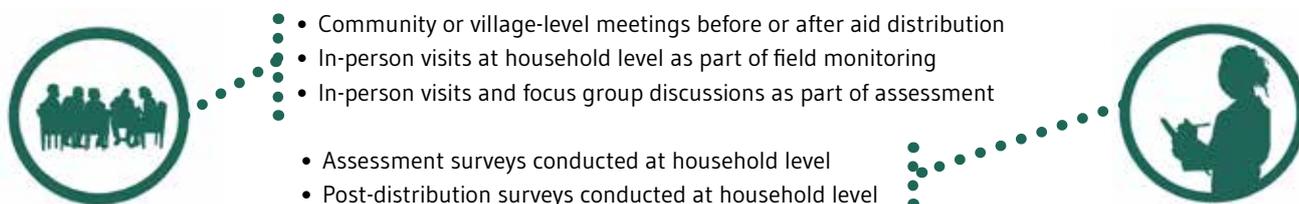
Box 1 takes a comparative look at the two sets of communication tools and channels from a feedback handling perspective.

“For any intervention, you should be able to design an accountability system. In every community, there is a way. It needs to be explored and built on. This is incremental work and it takes time.”

World Vision M&E specialist

Box 1: Consider the appropriate mix of communication tools and channels

COMMUNICATION TOOLS ALREADY PART OF PROGRAMME DELIVERY



Potential advantages from a feedback-handling perspective	Potential disadvantages from a feedback-handling perspective
Channels and tools are already known and maintained as an integral part of how activities are carried out and monitored.	Often requires more regular presence and access to the population.
Affected populations and local implementing partners may already be familiar with the tools.	High staffing requirements.
Depth of the qualitative information provided.	Requires interviewing and listening skills to collect information and answers given to open-ended questions (as opposed to numeric survey questionnaires).
Provides information helpful to track change over time with greater details and focus on individual stories of change.	Requires specific data analysis skills adequate to the type of data gathered.

OTHER TOOLS AND CHANNELS ESTABLISHED SPECIFICALLY TO SUPPORT FEEDBACK MECHANISM



Potential advantages from a feedback-handling perspective	Potential disadvantages from a feedback-handling perspective
Some tools can handle a large volume of information.	Affected populations and local implementing partners may not be familiar with the tools and require continuous briefing and sensitisation to their use.
They can integrate and support the work done through in-person visits and monitoring visits.	'Atomisation' / 'fragmentation' of feedback across different tools which produce raw data in 'incomparable formats' (e.g. suggestion box logbook, digital communication via SMS).
Can be helpful in situations where access is constrained.	Some tools require dedicated capacity with technical know-how not always available (e.g. database management).
Can be the preferred channel if they offer anonymity in cases of sensitive feedback (about staff / partner misconduct or corruption, or sexual abuse and exploitation).	<p>If not used to integrate with in-person communication, digital technology tools can potentially replace face-to-face communication or displace informal channels.</p> <p>Requires specific data analysis skills not only to manage feedback data entry and database management, but also to 'make sense of the data'.</p>

Source: Authors

What to consider when selecting feedback channels

In selecting feedback channels, you should:

- Consider whether and how different population groups (men, women, children, the elderly, marginalised and vulnerable groups and individuals) have the opportunity to access at least some of the communication tools established or used by the agencies to support two-way communication with affected populations.
- Ensure that you have thought through how information from these various sources will be validated and analysed (see guidance point 7 on page 18).
- Ensure that you have the resources (financial, staffing and skills) for collecting and analysing information from the sources (see guidance point 6 on page 17)
- Identify other channels which may have been established by other agencies or bodies, and consider how these can be integrated with the programme, to prevent duplication and confusion.

Concretely, this calls for ensuring, for instance, that:

- **Literacy levels are taken into account** when establishing communication channels.
- **Communication tools are safe to access** for different groups (including the marginalised people in the community).
- **Confidentiality of communication is guaranteed** as appropriate (e.g. suggestion boxes are only opened by agency staff; in urban contexts where distances between agencies' offices and programme sites are generally shorter, there are drop-in hours established for community members to talk in person and privately with agency staff).
- **There are dedicated in-person channels at the disposal of women and other marginalised or vulnerable groups** in contexts where they are not allowed to have access to mobile communication. Or they are able to sit in on community and village meetings, to voice their requests, unsolicited comments, concerns and feedback. This often calls for female staff in agencies' monitoring teams to be tasked with reaching out to these groups and individuals separately from other more powerful individuals and gatekeepers in the community.

5 Consider how sensitive information (for example, referring to sexual abuse or fraud) will be addressed.

Even if the feedback mechanism is not primarily designed to collect sensitive information of this type, it is possible that people in crisis affected communities will use the mechanism to make agencies aware of fraud, misappropriation or abuse. As a result, it is important to develop a procedure that addresses this type of feedback. A useful starting point would be to make sure that agency staff working on a protection, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and gender mainstreaming portfolio are, at minimum, made aware of how the feedback mechanism works.

Even more usefully, they should be asked for advice on communication, follow-up and referral procedures in case more sensitive feedback content is brought to agencies' attention. Another source of advice and support for referral and follow-up of SEA

allegations may also come from the Protection Cluster staff. Internal auditors and inspectors may be able to advise on how the mechanism should address issues of fraud or misappropriation.

A related consideration is about the need to ensure a minimum level of confidentiality and options for anonymity in cases where feedback touches on sensitive issues. A concrete measure could be to work with the feedback, monitoring and MEAL teams to establish a process for receiving and documenting confidential feedback and, if possible, to make sure that follow-up visits (e.g. for verification purposes) are also conducted with discretion and preserve anonymity of the complainant as needed. Where information is provided anonymously, other forms of verification will need to be considered. Responding to anonymous entries and closing the feedback loops is often impossible to do in an individualised manner but, where appropriate, communal meetings or announcement boards can be used to respond to questions and criticisms that have been submitted anonymously.

Consider options to guarantee a minimum of anonymity and confidentiality as needed

6 Ensure a mix of staff nationalities, genders and other factors to facilitate feedback collection and response to communities.

Concretely, this may call for:

- **Gender mix.** Considering how mixed teams of male and female, and national and international staff can facilitate collecting feedback and relaying information and feedback response back to programme participants, relevant gatekeepers and other local actors.
- **Capacity.** Ensuring that the capacities and skills of agencies' and implementing partners' staff match the requirements of different communication tools and channels. For instance, staff may require:
 - on-the-job training in interviewing skills and group discussion facilitation, communication and dispute resolution skills
 - shadowing by more experienced staff on how to lead focus group discussions
 - interviewing and listening skills practised with the support and shadowing of more experienced monitoring staff
 - data entry and data analysis skills may call for dedicated training (e.g. in statistical product and service solutions and Microsoft Access packages).
- **Reporting skills.** These could be supported by teaming up international and national staff, junior and more senior staff when compiling feedback summaries and other reports customised for different internal and external audiences.

“ If there are issues with assistance we would just keep quiet. ”

Woman living in Sindh Province, Pakistan

SORTING, ANALYSING, VERIFYING AND SHARING FEEDBACK

7 Plan ahead for feedback data entry, sorting and verification.

Consider the following issues when sorting feedback.

Table 4: Potential components to build into feedback collection and sorting process



8 Design a feedback mechanism that provides *reliable* information that programme staff actually need in order to make decisions and take actions.

As part of the design of the feedback mechanism, it is important to consult with the potential users of information within your organisation to identify the type of information which they need in order to make decisions about changes or improvements to a programme.

Once you have agreed on the types of information that you want to collect (while recognising that people in affected communities will also give you information that is important to them, and which may not fit neatly into these categories), you will also need to consider how feedback data will be checked and verified in order to design a feedback mechanism that provides reliable information. Concretely, some of the actions that support feedback verification are:

Actions that support feedback verification

- **Triangulation.** Making sure that data collected is triangulated across different sources. For instance, feedback collected through surveys, suggestion box sheets, or logbook entries is considered in conjunction with feedback collected during community meetings and open-ended questions during household monitoring visits. This requires strong data synthesis skills
- **Sporadic issues.** Making sure that even issues that are raised only sporadically – but repeatedly over time – are recorded and verified and looked into as appropriate as they may also be useful for trend analysis
- **Job roles.** Being clear in the design of the mechanism whose job it is to verify feedback and what the procedure and verification window is (for instance, this may be 48 hours for sensitive complaints and SEA allegations)
- **Cluster verification.** Considering the use of inter-agency cluster mechanisms (if present) to verify issues raised. This may mean establishing some level of information-sharing and reporting from field-based cluster focal points and cluster coordinators to the capital-level inter-cluster coordination group or even Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) as appropriate
- **Using other information.** Considering how other sources of data can be used to better understand the feedback received, and the patterns of behaviour, preferences, choices and use of assistance received (e.g. using market surveys). Concretely, verification and validation will also often occur through comparison of feedback with other information sources, with qualitative and quantitative data often coming from assessment and monitoring. (See also guidance point 13 on page 26)
- **Resource allocation.** Allocating time and resources to follow up or investigate feedback, particularly sensitive issues, SEA allegations, misconduct and other abuses which require more confidential follow-up. Concretely, this may call for repeated monitoring and follow-up visits by community liaison officers, community agents and MEAL staff who can spend more time in communities to facilitate group, HH and individual interactions to better understand the nature and potential implications of the issues raised.

Once you have sorted and verified feedback, the information needs to be compiled and reported on. In preparing reports, consider the information needs of different user groups.

The appropriate course of action can entail including feedback in periodic reporting shared with senior managers to alert them about emerging issues arising from affected populations and communities (e.g. changes in their status, their preferences, their use of assistance and services).

9 Pay attention to both solicited and unsolicited feedback.

An important consideration that applies to both verification and analysis of feedback data is ensuring that feedback captured through in-person visits, community meetings, focus group discussions, or answers to open-ended assessment, monitoring and household survey forms gets recorded and agency staff are able to analyse it even if it is presented in a discursive format. Unsolicited feedback can be difficult to record for the following reasons.

- **Comments and concerns received in discursive forms often risk being lost** because they are more difficult and time-consuming to record, summarise, verify and triangulate, and because it may be necessary to 'reformat' the data to fit the FM data entry format. The FM team require strong qualitative data analysis skills and synthesis skills for working with feedback that is largely qualitative.
- **It can be 'dispersed' across groups and individuals**, making it difficult to aggregate it across programme location and time for verification, follow-up and analysis.
- **It may touch on issues that go beyond the remit and scope of work** of a programme, or of an organisation, or may touch on programme coverage and relevance which an organisation may feel ill-equipped to address and follow up. At the same time, unsolicited feedback can be an important source of information about the perceptions of the affected population. Agencies are taking different approaches on how to deal with these dual data sets. Some agencies have been setting up feedback mechanisms that only handle what falls within the remit of their work and their programmes. For instance, they would often use feedback collection tools that rely on a specific set of questions covering only their areas of interventions and assistance. Others are working with the aspiration of listening broadly to both solicited and unsolicited feedback on issues that may go beyond their specific area of work, or even expertise. In this case, they would then try to use that feedback to support their advocacy efforts with local partners, local authorities and donors.

Difficulties with unsolicited feedback

In addition to paying attention to both solicited and unsolicited feedback, it is important to distinguish between different types of feedback that may be brought to agencies' attention.

Box 2: Distinguishing between 'big picture' and 'day-to-day' feedback



DAY-TO-DAY FEEDBACK

Day-to-day activities

Often concerning the quality, type of assistance and users' preferences about the assistance provided

Usually calls for project- and/or programme-level adjustments, mid-course modification or 'tweaking' of existing assistance modalities (e.g. adjustment in targeting criteria, scheduling of distributions, or type of design options available for a shelter programme).



'BIG PICTURE' FEEDBACK

Often strategic issues at the broader level of the humanitarian response and strategies taken to support people's and national government's relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts.

May challenge the very premise of a programme or its relevance and context appropriateness

Often such feedback is provided about intended and unintended impacts of the programme (i.e. 'your assistance is undermining local capacity', 'assistance is causing tensions in the community' [aka 'doing harm'], 'we need livelihoods not hand-outs')

Risk of overlooking the 'big picture' feedback, because it often touches on issues beyond the scope of work or remit of a single agency, or of a single cluster.

Source: Authors

Day-to-day feedback is the main focus of this guidance (and the research it was based on) as this is the area in which it was evident that ALNAP Members have accrued more experience and to which they have dedicated more reflection and learning.

Operational agencies receiving 'big picture feedback' through their formal or informal channels often struggle with handling this type of feedback and there is often no concrete process for documenting, referring, analysing and responding to such feedback through established coordination mechanisms, cluster-level mechanisms, or policy and strategy-level discussions between the Humanitarian Country Team and the host government.

Two recommendations for big picture feedback capture

1. You could record and analyse big picture feedback separately and share it at inter-agency level, or with local partners and other actors who may already be working to address some of the issues raised.
2. Big picture feedback can also be used to inform advocacy and public communication efforts by aid agencies at the national and global level.

Many people would suggest that the systematic failure to capture and use 'big picture' feedback indicates broader failures within the aid response system in general, and its often low responsiveness to the perceptions of the affected populations. Documentation and evidence of the procedures agencies have in place to follow up and respond to big picture feedback which touches on broader, strategic issues, beyond day-to-day implementation of programmes, remains very limited. This is an area that calls for more research and analysis.

Examples of agencies dealing with 'big picture' feedback

Recent work spearheaded by the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) through the Transformative Agenda and related Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) Commitments is seen as a notable step in that direction. Work conducted to develop the present guidance could only take a cursory look at this area of agencies' practice. The research team only came across a few examples where agencies mentioned their efforts to capture feedback on big picture issues (see **Pakistan case study**, 'Feedback use – advocating on land issues at the cluster and national level'). In some cases agencies proceeded to record those issues to use them to support their advocacy efforts – including at inter-agency and humanitarian country team levels – to more forcefully bring the issues to the attention of donors and decision-makers.

RESPONDING TO, AND USING, FEEDBACK

10

Report feedback information to decision-makers, ensuring that they receive the right amount of detail.

Closely related to the previous points on verification and analysis of feedback is the call for making participants' feedback usable and actionable for decision-making and response purposes. There are two basic points that are considered below.

1. **The level of detail of feedback analysis (and subsequent reporting) needs to be customised to different users.** There is generally a trade-off between the level of detail required and the level of involvement of a programme manager, head of programme, head of operation or other decision-makers in the day-to-day management of the programme, or delivery of the service from which feedback was collected. Senior decision-makers do not need to hear minute details of feedback entries. They want to see a concise summary of issues they need to act on.
2. **For feedback to be a source of compelling evidence that informs decisions, it needs to be recognised and used as part of a broader evidence bundle** used by programme managers and decision-makers. Concretely, this means that taking actions based on affected populations' feedback depends on whether and how this type of information enters and is featured in other sets of qualitative and quantitative data (or evidence bundles) coming from various sources (e.g. monitoring, assessment), channels (e.g. implementing partners, local authorities) and reporting lines (MEAL teams, communication teams). Such data sets are then used for different purposes including monitoring, assessment, communication, advocacy, coordination and decision-making etc. The more far-reaching the expected change is (for instance, a shift in programming from food hand-outs to cash-based intervention, or a change in focus from provision of transitional shelter to a rent and relocation programme), the greater the need is to validate affected populations' feedback and make sure it is featured in relevant reports and data sets looked at by more senior decision-makers and even donors.

Senior managers do not need to hear minute details of feedback entries.

Below are some examples of how affected populations' feedback was looked at as part of an evidence bundle to inform decision-making:

- Affected populations' feedback summaries are prepared and circulated prior to coordination and other operational meetings in which programme managers and heads of operations look at different data coming from assessment, cluster reports, reports on access and security (see [Pakistan case study](#)).
- Affected populations' feedback which has been documented, tracked over time, and analysed for trending purposes can be a powerful addition to other streams

of more quantitative information and evidence generated from assessment and monitoring data. It can be used to change the course of an operation, adjust a programme focus, change type of assistance provided or advocate for a change in donors' funding allocation (see [Haiti](#), [Sudan](#) and [Pakistan case studies](#)).

- Summaries or mini case studies in local languages presenting the feedback, which actions have been taken and which responses given can be used as powerful tools to communicate with affected communities, partners, and donors about programme quality, transparency and accountability (see [Haiti case study](#)).

11

Provide feedback information to decision-makers regularly, and encourage them to ask for it.

If managers don't ask for feedback summaries, provide them anyway.

Ideally, programme managers and senior managers will request feedback summaries to be prepared for them ahead of operational meetings, or meetings with donor representatives. If managers do not ask for this information, staff managing the feedback mechanism should consider providing it anyway (in an appropriate concise and usable format) as an additional source of information, until this practice becomes more engrained (see [Haiti case study](#)).

Organisations should provide incentives for managers to use feedback and for feedback staff, programme staff, monitoring, communication and MEAL staff to analyse and report feedback and pass it on. Incentives may include peer pressure; managerial pressure; requirements to comply with internal commitments related to accountability and transparency (some agencies, for instance, have included these rubrics in their staff performance review forms); and positive role modelling by senior staff and managers who are seen as concretely using feedback collected to improve programmes (see [Pakistan](#) and [Sudan case studies](#)).

“Some information is never shared with the senior management because it is only relevant at the district and provincial level and is addressed locally with no need to refer it up the chain or to report on it in detail.”

District-based cluster focal point in Sudan ”

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE FEEDBACK MECHANISM

12

Provide clear and consistent messages on the purpose, expectation of use and support allocated to the feedback mechanism.

It is important to communicate the purpose and expected use(s) of the feedback mechanism in a clear and consistent way, both internally with agency staff, and externally with aid recipients, local actors and implementing partners. This will help to achieve greater clarity on and alignment of the expectations and perceptions of the value and practical use of feedback mechanisms. Some of the actions that will help you achieve this, within your agency, are listed below.

- **Include an introduction to feedback work and how feedback can be used by different staff and teams in different roles** (from monitoring, to advocacy, to communication) as part of staff induction and orientation sessions (see [Haiti case study](#)).
- **Communicate to agency staff how a highly functional feedback mechanism is one of the components of an effective accountability framework for the whole organisation.**
- **Make sure that questions on feedback mechanism functioning, support and the ways feedback is used are included in exit interviews** and debriefing before staff rotate or leave their positions (see [Sudan](#) and [Haiti case studies](#)).
- **Minimise any mismatch** between the commitment to programme quality, accountability to affected populations and transparency – as presented in an agency’s statement and public documents – and the actual level of resources allocated to supporting the work to sustain it, including through functioning feedback and complaints systems (see [Pakistan](#) and [Haiti case studies](#)).

Here are some of the actions that will help you achieve this externally, when engaging with aid recipients.

- **Make sure that you communicate objectives, scope and expectations** of the programme itself. This is critical: programme participants need to be clear on what the agency is trying to achieve before they can provide informed and useful feedback on it. This is also a core principle of accountability to affected populations, spelled out in the HAP Standard.
- **Take opportunities to present** (and periodically repeat and refresh) the purpose and concrete functioning of the feedback mechanism including how to access feedback and other communication channels, how confidentiality is guaranteed as appropriate and how responses to feedback are communicated. This can be done by taking advantage of community and village-level gatherings, such as during registrations or distributions (see [Sudan](#), [Pakistan](#) and [Haiti case studies](#)).
- **Make sure that women, or marginalised groups and individuals** who in certain contexts may not be in a position to participate in community-level activities, meetings, or aid registration and distribution, **are also targeted by dedicated communication and monitoring activities** (e.g. as part of field assessment and monitoring visits). They should also hear, and have a chance to ask questions about, how to access the feedback channels and what they can expect from the mechanism (see [Pakistan](#) and [Haiti case studies](#)).

STAFFING, SUPPORT AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

13 Involve colleagues across the organisation in the work of the feedback mechanism.

In order to ensure that feedback collection, response and use do not become sporadic exercises, but are sustained over time and become part of how an organisation carries out its activities, feedback mechanism functions need to be supported by staff at different levels, grades and roles in the organisation. Below are a few suggestions that can help achieve this.

Box 3: Suggestions for increasing involvement in the work of the feedback mechanism

SKILLS BUILDING

Skills and competencies required for data collection, data sorting, verification and analysis need to be adequate to the tasks to be completed (e.g. computer literacy, Excel, SPSS, Microsoft Access database management).



SUGGESTED SOLUTION

Training and on-the-job skills development opportunities.

If possible, establish on-the-job induction and coaching from more senior with more junior staff (See **Sudan case study**).

PEER LEARNING

Horizontal learning breaks down silos and enables individuals and teams to draw on a range of different approaches and styles.



SUGGESTED SOLUTION

Identify peer learning opportunities and opportunities for resource sharing within your own broader organisation. For example, for World Vision Sudan this meant connecting with the broader Food Programming Management Group and World Vision International (see **Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti case studies** for more examples).

SPREADING SPECIALISMS

Staff in charge of synthesising, summarising and reporting on feedback possess the skills and competencies required to perform their functions effectively.



SUGGESTED SOLUTION

Institute internal staff rotation to expose team members to different tasks related to feedback handling and reporting. For instance, data entry specialists may rotate to accompany field monitors in their work to collect feedback during in-person interviews, or may periodically rotate in functions where they can be 'mentored' during the report drafting stage for feedback summaries (see **Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti case studies** for more examples).

14 Develop a 'feedback culture' within your organisation.

The role of organisational culture in sustaining feedback work should not be overlooked – individuals and teams need to perceive the agencies' culture and environment they work in as a place where:

- **giving and receiving feedback is valued by staff** at different levels of seniority and across functions
- **giving and receiving feedback is practised as part of communication approaches** and staff performance management systems (e.g. part of 360-degree performance feedback discussions).

Some concrete steps that can be taken to support this include:

- **implementing an open-door policy** as far as possible – especially for programme managers and senior management teams
- **ensuring that management is approachable** for their staff and implementing partners, as appropriate (see **Pakistan** and **Haiti case studies**)
- **providing colleagues with feedback** on their performance.

15 Harness opportunities to learn about and improve the mechanism.

It is important that opportunities for learning about how feedback collection, feedback handling and use are harnessed as part of both formal and informal assessment, learning, evaluation and reviews.

Whenever possible, look for the opportunities for collaboration and joint work with partners, such as including cluster partners. For example, using common feedback collection channels, or communication channels with other partners, or conducting joint assessment and monitoring visits (see **Pakistan** and **Haiti case studies**).

Programme managers and field-based teams should consider the use of internal email lists and mailing groups across teams, departments and staff levels to make sure that there is a channel for questions on how to address feedback, respond to queries, and pass on complaints, for instance those received during monitoring visits (see **Pakistan case study**).

Programme managers and field-based teams may also want to use these internal email lists and mailing groups to ensure that staff in more junior positions, and/or in field-based positions, can see how the whole of the organisation, including more senior managers, takes a direct interest in hearing about and trying to respond to feedback, questions and complaints (see **Pakistan case study**).

Try and use common feedback channels with partners, or conduct joint monitoring visits.

Internal mailing lists can help staff see how feedback is dealt with across your organisation.

Whenever possible, include feedback work and use of feedback from affected populations as one of the Terms of Reference (ToR) elements in evaluation of programmes and operations. This can help to generate some evidence on whether and how such mechanisms can contribute to programme improvement, ownership, transparency and improved two-way communication, for instance (see **Haiti** and **Sudan case studies**).

“ [The feedback mechanism] is for your own benefit, to really know and understand how to improve your programmes. ”

Management and M&E team, World Vision Sudan

DO YOU NEED ALL 15 GUIDANCE POINTS FOR AN EFFECTIVE MECHANISM?

The case studies from Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti provided:

- many strong examples of well-functioning portions of feedback mechanisms for affected populations, for example two-way communication in Haiti, information- and feedback-information-sharing across Shelter Cluster staff and partners in Pakistan
- a growing set of examples of feedback mechanism designs and plans currently being finalised by several agencies, so as to formally establish and use these mechanisms as part of their programmes. This is, for instance, the case for the American Red Cross and Spanish Red Cross in Haiti and World Food Program in Sudan. As part of this process, many have for the first time allocated human and financial resources to support feedback mechanism work
- examples of a considerable number of agencies who have more recently experienced or been exposed to feedback mechanisms and who show a desire to learn how to improve their feedback practices from peer agencies with longer experience in this area of work (e.g. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' Provincial Assessment Working Group in Haiti).

The research on which this guidance is based tested seven propositions, on the assumption that each of the seven contributed to an effective humanitarian feedback mechanism. These propositions were:

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

The data analysis indicated, however, that these seven propositions (and therefore the 15 pointers set out in this guidance) were not equal contributors to the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. Bearing in mind that by design and in practice the propositions overlapped, it seems that an effective feedback mechanism can be established without the presence of all the seven propositions. This is because one proposition may compensate for another. It appears that if one area (for instance, staff skills and organisational support) is particularly strong, then others (such as periodic reassessment and review of the mechanism) may not be required.

At the same time, most of the interesting features of a feedback mechanism that the research team studied seem to be 'necessary but not sufficient' to ensure the overall high functionality of a feedback mechanism. They would argue that this is because several of them (e.g. on cultural/context appropriateness, expectation-

setting and knowledge, and organisational support) are complementary and provide 'continuous' support to the mechanism, while other features (e.g. those related to feedback collection, verification and analysis of feedback data) provide more discrete support to the mechanism during the feedback handling cycle. While most feedback mechanism features studied appear to contribute to more effective mechanisms, no single factor is enough to guarantee success.

Those designing feedback mechanisms should attempt to ensure that a majority of these factors are in place. Nevertheless, some features and characteristics of feedback mechanisms seem to contribute more decisively to their overall functioning. From the analysis conducted, these key factors include:

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

Finally, it should be stressed that this study attempted to show how it is possible to make feedback mechanisms work for both affected populations and aid agencies. It aimed to document concrete examples of what agencies in different contexts have done to strengthen some of the communication and programme design features that they saw as crucial to improving feedback practices with the communities they work with.

The study also sheds light on how nuanced and articulated affected populations' views and perceptions of feedback mechanisms are; whether and how they think they are useful for them; and why they think such systems are established by the aid agencies in the first place. Strikingly, in many of the contexts visited, affected communities showed a keen interest in experimenting with more channels and more diverse ways to contact and communicate with agencies, and receive responses from them. This indicates not only the strong complementarity between communication and feedback support work, but also that investments in these areas are generally welcomed by the affected populations.

This study should not be seen as revolving around and attempting to consider only the more mechanistic features of feedback systems. Projectisation and over-specialisation of tasks and functions relating to feedback are by no means suggested as the ideal (or the only) way forward.

Indeed, this study shows that when it comes to making feedback mechanisms work, there are a number of functions – including communication, information-sharing, monitoring, reporting, community engagement and coordination with local actors

– that are already carried out by agency staff and their partners on the ground. The study shows that many of these functions are also integral components of a feedback mechanism. Therefore, one of the overarching messages coming from this research is that it is possible to start making feedback practices work better by making them more intentional, and supporting the feedback handling work that is already carried out by agencies and their partners – even if they are not operating under the formal label of ‘feedback mechanisms’.

Finally, the research team concludes by highlighting some areas that emerged during this work as calling for more research and closer examination in the future. Two topics stand out: the first involves zooming in on internal decision-making processes that make response and follow-up possible for both day-to-day and big picture feedback. The second concerns looking at feasibility, options and at existing (arguably still limited) practices in inter-agency feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Other publications on feedback mechanisms

Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance (2014)

Methodology summary for a joint ALNAP and CDA action research of effective feedback mechanism (2013)

“We are committed to listening to you”: World Vision’s experience of feedback mechanisms in Sudan (2013)

“Investing in listening”: International Organization for Migration’s experience of feedback mechanisms in Pakistan (2014)

Communication and feedback with affected populations: experience of IFRC Haiti (2014)

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