Community feedback and complaints mechanisms: early lessons from Tearfund’s experience

David Bainbridge
A synthesis of experiences across four emergency programmes

- **DR Congo:** South Kivu
- **Sudan:** West and South Darfur
- **South Sudan:** Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal
- **Afghanistan:** Kapisa, Kandahar, Jawzjan
Types of Feedback Received: DR Congo

- Complaints from community members who had not received seed they were due to be given. This led to the dismissal of the agronomist.
- Feedback that some beneficiaries had sold animals they had received that day in an animal fair. It resulted in a rethink of how the fairs were organized, given the challenges of transporting the animals back to their villages.
- Complaints that a community committee president did not treat project participants with respect.
- Request not to use concrete blocks for school construction as they are not long lasting – prefer burnt bricks.
Types of Feedback Received: Darfur

• Requests for Tearfund to work in areas or to perform activities beyond its scope
• Complaint from one family that they had been marginalised by other families and not included in seed distribution
• Complaints regarding incentives and the discrepancies between what different groups are receiving for different activities.
• Complaints that committees were given money to pay technicians to dig latrine holes but instead kept the money for themselves and the beneficiaries had to dig their own holes.
• Feedback on staff members eg. staff using their position when it came to recruiting staff; disapproval of Tearfund staff evacuating; potential fraud by staff.
Types of Feedback Received: South Sudan

- Wanting to know why Tearfund is pulling out of the health sector in a location
- Complaint about lack of fencing around a Primary Health Care Unit and feeding centre
- Requests from youth for sports equipment
- Enquiries when a grinding mill will be repaired
- Request for help procuring office supplies for the Deputy Commissioner’s office
- Appreciation for the work carried out in health and nutrition
Types of Feedback Received: Afghanistan

- Thanks for provision of biosand water filters
- Request for more training on use of biosand filters, for more health and hygiene training
- Request for construction of water reservoirs, schools, mosques, wells
- Request for biosand filters to be provided in schools
- Complaint from a doctor “before your distribution of biosand filters I had 20 -30 patients, all had stomach and diarrhoea problems from bad quality water. I have to leave this area because I lost my income”
Challenges faced in developing feedback and complaints mechanisms
Challenges with Communities

• Expectations are raised when asked for feedback, communities then feeling disappointed or ignored if no action is taken.
• Majority of issues and requests have been beyond Tearfund’s control but expectations are that Tearfund will address them.
• In insecure locations, difficult for staff to visit regularly and follow up on feedback received, leading to disappointment.
• A fear of losing assistance if they make complaints against staff.
• Predominant verbal traditions and issues over confidentiality.
Complaints about community leadership

- Traditional dispute resolution systems often work through the traditional leaders
- Difficulties experienced gathering feedback through general meetings as leaders are often generally in attendance
Challenges with Staff

- Staff attitudes and values being at the heart of an effective complaints and response mechanism
- Complaints interpreted to be a poor reflection of staff performance, not something to be welcomed
- A tendency to focus on the hardware elements, resulting in an over emphasis on for example sign-boards rather than the underlying principles
- Staff not always asking different groups in the community what are their preferred ways of complaining and feeding back?
Challenges with Staff

• A lack of support from the Senior Management/Project Leaders having a big impact on the effectiveness of the accountability systems

• Is it better to have a dedicated role or to “mainstream” responsibilities with all staff?

• A danger of a dedicated role being perceived by the rest of the team as the “Accountability Police”

• Many projects cover wide geographic areas, making it impossible for one role to get round to all the villages regularly enough
Recommendations for Improvement
1. Develop comprehensive induction programmes for staff

• To include more detail and illustrations on the basics of accountability

• Attempt to address staff fears about the system

• Standardise refresher training with an injection of creativity and enthusiasm
2. Emphasise accountability within line management

- Line management to reinforce the importance of accountability systems alongside other priorities
- Introduce a checklist for managers to review levels of compliance
- Include in performance management and appraisals
3. Ensure adequate capacity to manage the feedback and complaints system

• Ensure roles and responsibilities are clear

• Ensure sufficient staff positions in place to support the mechanisms

• Develop the role of community reference groups
4. Ensure an equivalent feedback and complaints system exists for staff

- Matching the two commitments – to communities and to staff - and ensuring consistency
5. Ensure timely responses are provided to the feedback and complaints received

- The more responses are given, the more the system will be used

- Get the system in place from the start of the project

- Receiving no negative feedback does not mean the community is happy
6. Provide clarity on the scope of feedback and complaints

- Clarify that feedback is encouraged on public commitments (poor behaviour – conduct not followed, poor quality – standards not adhered to, poor delivery – objectives not met)
- Reinforce the fact that communities are free to give their honest opinions and that assistance will not be withheld as a result of negative feedback