

Listening to communities in insecure environments

LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS IN AFGHANISTAN, SOMALIA AND SYRIA

In insecure environments, where humanitarian staff have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction with communities, achieving accountability to affected populations is more complex and often requires a mix of approaches. Community feedback mechanisms can be a valuable tool to strengthen community engagement and to improve the quality of humanitarian programming. This briefing note summarises SAVE findings on the effectiveness and appropriateness of community feedback systems in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria. The research involved consultations with crisis-affected communities, aid agencies and donors, as well as a review of relevant documentation and literature.

MAIN FINDINGS

Existing feedback processes are remarkably different in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria, despite similarly high levels of risk to aid operations and access constraints. Aid agencies use different media to collect and respond to feedback, and the number and density of formal feedback channels varies. In Afghanistan, most agencies rely on informal conversations with local community representatives. In South Central Somalia, formal phone-based mechanisms such as hotlines are much more prevalent. In Syria, communication with communities mostly happens through local NGOs and local councils – both face-to-face and through online platforms such as Whatsapp. These distinct feedback landscapes reflect different sociocultural contexts, as well as different expectations from donors.

Despite the differences in available feedback mechanisms between the three contexts, the views from communities consulted are remarkably similar and skeptical. Affected people criticised agencies for relying too much on local community representatives, for not involving them when planning projects and for a lack of follow-up after giving feedback. Instead, they would like to have regular face-to-face communication with not only field staff, but also with independent actors that are not directly associated with programme implementation in order to talk freely about sensitive issues such as corruption.

A large-scale SAVE survey with affected communities found that the majority have never been asked for their opinion about the aid they received. The share of affected people that said they were consulted was highest in Afghanistan (35 per cent). In Somalia, the country with most formalised feedback systems, only four per cent of the Somali respondents said they were consulted. This indicates that a higher number of formal feedback mechanisms does not automatically lead to better communication with communities – especially when systems are not properly publicised and maintained.

Most humanitarian staff also expressed dissatisfaction, including that their mechanisms do not deliver the type and volume of feedback that the agency expected. Many aim to find out about corruption by partners or local representatives, but such complaints remain rare. Agencies report that they do regularly receive useful feedback about programme quality – another key objective of feedback mechanisms – but mainly through their face-to-face channels. Most incoming feedback concerns day-to-day operational matters.

KEY LESSONS

The research concludes that setting up functioning feedback systems in insecure contexts does not require new or radically different approaches. Rather, agencies should make use of existing guidance material and adhere to documented good practice.

1. **Make communication more inclusive.**

Instead of only consulting 'key informants', agencies should actively seek the views of those without power and inform them about their rights and entitlements. Targeted community outreach with field staff or, where access is constrained, through carefully selected third parties can help gather perspectives of a more representative sample.

2. **Face-to-face feedback channels are most valuable, but require formal procedures to ensure follow-up and learning.**

Agencies that are close to the ground are best positioned to lead communication efforts. A more systematic approach with sufficient capacities and procedures is needed, however, to ensure that feedback is recorded, analysed and responded to.

3. **Inclusive communication involves multiple, different feedback channels.**

Face-to-face contact by local field staff or implementing partners needs to be complemented with other communication channels in order to connect crisis-affected people with international agencies and donors without field presence. Agencies need to involve affected communities when choosing and designing these mechanism(s).

4. **Enable two-way communication instead of only extracting information.**

To receive meaningful feedback, agencies need to invest in making communities aware of available feedback channels, and inform them about their rights and entitlements.

5. **Where multiple agencies are present, more collaborative communication with communities is required.**

From a community perspective, joint or inter-agency feedback mechanisms are less confusing and more user-friendly. Still, such systems remain rare since agencies are often not willing to share (sensitive) information with others and because of the initial costs involved. While a comprehensive common feedback project may not always be realistic or desirable in all contexts, agencies should take steps towards greater collaboration, for instance through joint standards on feedback mechanisms.

6. **Donors should shape feedback practice more actively.**

To avoid duplication and to promote wider utilisation of feedback, donors should provide incentives for agencies to meet good practice standards and to participate in joint initiatives. Moreover, demanding feedback is only effective if donors create an atmosphere in which agencies feel comfortable to also share the negative feedback they receive. Donors should also make sure that their compliance requirements do not hinder responsive programming; rather, they should provide flexible funding so that agencies are able to make changes to their programmes based on input from communities.

FULL REPORT

For more information and to cite this work, please refer to the full report: Ruppert, L., Sagmeister, E. and Steets, J. (2016) Listening to Communities in Insecure Environments: Lessons from Community Feedback Mechanisms in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria (SAVEresearch.net).

USEFUL GUIDANCE AND LITERATURE ON COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

- **ALNAP – CDA** (2014) [Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts](#)
- **CHS Alliance** (2015) [Humanitarian Accountability Report](#)
- **IASC Task Team on AAP-PSEA** (2016) [Best Practices Guide for Community-Based Complaints Mechanisms](#)
- **Jean et al. / CCVRI Helpdesk** (2013) [Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict Affected States](#)
- **ODI / HPN** (2011) [Humanitarian Exchange Special Feature: Humanitarian Accountability](#)