

Inclusive Feedback and Reporting Mechanisms

**Lessons learned from
around the globe**



Introduction

There are increasing efforts in the humanitarian sector to ensure that affected communities have a greater voice and no one is left behind in humanitarian action. This is reflected in the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), the participation workstream of the Grand Bargain, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) commitments on Accountability to Affected People (AAP) and the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

As humanitarian actors, we are committed to 'placing people first' and ensuring that the voice of the most marginalised in the society is heard and humanitarian aid reaches those who are most at-risk. While many humanitarian organisations have implemented feedback mechanisms within their programmes and are receptive to receiving feedback and complaints from persons involved in the project, there remains a crucial imperative for further enhancement. This entails ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all segments of the community, facilitating their meaningful participation across all stages of our work. The feedback and complaints handling mechanisms must be widely accessible, with clear explanations provided to communities. This should include the integration of specific timelines for complaints management and procedures to safeguard complainants against potential retaliation.

Inclusive community feedback and reporting mechanisms represent a vital avenue through which we can tap into the diverse array of experiences, capacities, and perspectives within communities impacted by natural or human-induced disasters. By actively listening and responding to the needs, concerns, and priorities of the affected population, we ensure a more comprehensive and effective approach to humanitarian assistance.

This can help us to:

- Facilitate greater accountability to communities and people affected by crisis and ensure that all groups are meaningfully and continuously involved in decisions that directly affect them.
- Respect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities, elderly persons and other higher-at-risk groups.
- Foster empowerment of communities through participation and dialogue.
- Enhance the quality of our programme design and implementation by actively addressing concerns and issues raised by all relevant stakeholders, thereby ensuring our work is more effective, relevant, and appropriate.
- Build trust and ensure transparency by listening and being responsive, as well as creating acceptance, helping us to move towards working in partnership with the affected communities.
- Reduce the risk of harm to the community members that might be caused by the behaviour of our own staff, partners' staff, volunteers, and other representatives, or by the design of our activities and respond swiftly to any concerns raised, i.e. adhere to the do-no-harm principle.
- Demonstrate to our back-end donors and partners that we deliver on quality processes, such as accountability in programme design and implementation.

Background and Methodology

The publication was produced under the project "**Putting Persons with Disabilities at the Centre of Humanitarian Preparedness and Response: building and strengthening capacity in inclusive humanitarian action and inclusive disaster preparedness through the active inclusion of persons with disabilities**" which was a consortium of Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), Malteser International (MI), Christoffel Blindenmission (CBM), and Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) as well as the International Disability Alliance (IDA). The project duration was 32 months (May 2021 until December 2023). The project had a total budget of € 3,174,425.06 and was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

The project was implemented in eight countries across Asia, Africa, and Central & South America namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Niger, Nicaragua, and Colombia. It was complemented by global advocacy efforts.

To improve our understanding of the barriers of feedback and reporting mechanisms and to improve our respective systems, a dedicated activity on establishing inclusive feedback and reporting mechanisms was included for six out of the eight countries of the consortium project, namely Zimbabwe, Colombia, Nicaragua, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Myanmar. The following chapters provide an overview of lessons learned from this process and will also highlight innovative practices that have been identified.

This study mainly builds on reports, meeting notes and surveys produced by the country teams as part of their activities on establishing inclusive feedback and reporting mechanisms. It has been completed by remote Key Informant Interviews with involved staff from the country teams in those six countries.



Learning 1: Understand the Barriers

While the efforts under the consortium project had a strong focus on disability inclusion, it was also assessed which other common barriers exist that hinder the full participation of community members in feedback and reporting mechanisms. This learning highlights the importance for a strong community dialogue and for analysing barriers within feedback and reporting mechanisms that might already exist in the community. It will not help anyone in the community if we make the same mistakes that others have already done and build up feedback and reporting mechanisms that cannot be adequately accessed. Most prominently barriers towards effective feedback and reporting mechanisms that were highlighted are:

Lack of Knowledge: A lack of knowledge poses a challenge in ensuring that affected individuals can effectively engage within feedback and reporting mechanisms. Findings underscore the importance of targeted awareness campaigns to bridge this informational gap. Efforts should focus not only on informing communities about their rights, but also on providing clear, accessible guidance on the procedures for documenting complaints and offering feedback.

Cultural Barriers: Navigating cultural barriers to obtaining feedback in humanitarian work can be challenging, particularly for individuals facing heightened risks. Diverse cultural backgrounds may influence communication styles, with some fearing reprisal for speaking out. Moreover, power differentials can deter community members from voicing their opinions. It's vital for humanitarian organisations to forge close ties with local communities (that includes local staffing), grasp their customs, and adapt feedback collection methods to respect cultural norms. This fosters inclusivity and ensures everyone feels valued and heard.

Illiteracy: Many feedback and reporting systems require the ability to read the necessary instructions or the ability to write for sharing (written) feedback. Thus, illiteracy can be a strong barrier towards participation in feedback and reporting mechanisms. Channelling feedback through a literate proxy (e.g., relatives or community members) could be a solution but will still require that potential sensitive feedback has to be openly revealed to at least one person and is not aligned with a survivor-centred approach.

Fear: Not knowing how feedback will be handled exactly and who will have access to the complaints, crisis affected populations have concerns about potential negative consequences. For instance, in one country covered by this project, the affected population involved, expressed concerns about potential exclusion from further project support if they shared any negative feedback. Building trust in the organisation's work is crucial to overcoming this barrier. Additionally, providing transparent and clear information about how feedback is handled and processed will help understand the feedback and reporting systems, thereby reducing concerns.

Learning 2: Listen to the Community

Organisations often enter communities with predefined solutions, yet effective problem-solving requires understanding local perspectives. In Myanmar and Bangladesh, the establishment of inclusive feedback and reporting mechanisms commenced with extensive dialogues within communities. This involved focus group discussions and key informant interviews, extracting qualitative data on existing practices and experiences related to feedback mechanisms. This qualitative data informed and cross-checked quantitative data collection.

Community dialogues proved instrumental in addressing specific accessibility concerns for persons with disabilities. Learning from and about the community is central for establishing inclusive Feedback and Reporting Mechanisms (iFRM). Community consultations are pivotal, allowing exploration of preferences in feedback channels and fostering community decision-making in mechanism setup. Analysis of study results informs the setup of community feedback complaint mechanisms through individual surveys.

Learning 3: Do Not Re-invent the Wheel When Addressing Barriers

As already highlighted, listening to the communities will help to understand which feedback and reporting mechanisms already exists, how practical and accessible they are, to which extend these systems are being used and the reasons why they might not be used effectively. The project has shown that in most communities, there were already some forms of existing feedback and reporting mechanisms – some of those being more effective than others. Hence, it's possible that a particular community may not need entirely new feedback and reporting systems; instead, it can enhance and tailor existing pathways to better suit its needs.

As part of the solution, a very low-cost and simple step is to train communities. E.g., the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) in Bangladesh provided a number of awareness sessions to communities (including self-help groups of persons with disabilities) on existing feedback and response mechanisms to make community members aware of the existing structures. Moreover, CDD collaborated with other humanitarian actors operating in the same region and provided training to the staff of these organisations on establishing similar setups. The trainings helped to increase the understanding of these organisations for disability-inclusive feedback and response mechanisms and to support them in adapting their existing systems to become more accessible.

Learning 4: Make Use of Technology - But Do Not Expect It Will Remove All Barriers

The integration of new technologies presents a valuable avenue for overcoming certain barriers in feedback mechanisms. Mobile phones offer promising opportunities for accessibility, with features like text-to-speech applications catering to the needs of individuals with visual impairments by making sure that they can easily receive and submit text messages.

While we should be open to the use of new technologies, we should also keep in mind that usually it will not be an all-in-one solution: Several partners involved in the project worked in rural areas where cell coverage is not fully available. Furthermore, not everyone in the respective community might be having a mobile phone that would allow them to provide feedback (which then again would require a proxy).

While embracing technological solutions, it is prudent to acknowledge their limitations. Hence, a comprehensive approach recommends the establishment of an alternative "offline" feedback and reporting channel. This ensures resilience in the face of technological constraints, guaranteeing that diverse community members, even in areas with limited connectivity, can actively participate in the feedback process. Striking a balance between technological innovation and practical considerations enhances the effectiveness and inclusivity of feedback mechanisms within humanitarian initiatives.

Learning 5: Communication Is Not a One Way Road

An essential takeaway is recognising that communication within feedback and reporting mechanisms is reciprocal, facilitating a continuous and meaningful exchange between affected individuals and humanitarian actors. Participants are assured that every communication effort, whether a complaint, concern, or feedback, will be acknowledged and addressed in due course. This can be done through a simple acknowledgment notification for each received communication. This acknowledgment serves as a confirmation of the message's receipt, offering reassurance to those providing feedback that their voices have been heard. Moreover, participants are assured of a final response outlining the measures taken in response to their communication, tailored to the specific nature of the issue raised.

By establishing a clear framework for acknowledgment and resolution, this approach instils transparency, trust, and accountability in the feedback process. Affected individuals can be confident that their input is valued and has a direct impact on the actions taken by humanitarian actors. This two-way communication strategy not only validates the concerns of the community but also fosters a collaborative and responsive environment between the humanitarian actor and the crisis affected communities.

Learning 6: Manage Sensitive and Non-sensitive Feedback Differently

The experience from the project partners shows that most beneficiaries are very open to share their feedback and thoughts openly if they have the feeling it will not lead to any negative consequences for them. But this is limited to certain types of feedback such as satisfaction with services provided.

However, there is sensitive issues that is likely not be shared openly. Sensitive feedback/concerns include issues such as the violation of Safeguarding Policies (e.g. any form of exploitation, abuse or harassment of children or adults), protection related incidents, unsafe programming (including media and communication work), discrimination, fraud and corruption, security threats, or related concerns involving other organisations.

As a learning from the project, it is recommended that at least one accessible, confidential channel exists that can be used by communities to report sensitive issues.



CBM staff interviews a beneficiary of humanitarian activities in Zimbabwe as part of a real-time evaluation. (© CBM)

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