



WHAT MAKES FEEDBACK MECHANISMS WORK?

Literature review to support an ALNAP–CDA action research into humanitarian feedback mechanisms

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ALNAPWORKINGPAPER

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Have you read the main study, guidance and case studies that accompany this literature review?

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List of acronyms

IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
CWS	Church World Service
AAP	Accountability to affected populations
SEA	Sexual exploitation and abuse
PSEA	Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse
UN	United Nations
OCHA	UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
WV	World Vision
WV FPMG	World Vision International's Food Programming and Management Group
CRM	Complaint and response mechanism
GBV	Gender-based violence
IASC	Inter-agency standing committee
SGB	UN Secretary General's Bulletin
ECB	Emergency Capacity Building
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
DRT	Development Research & Training
CFM	Complaints and Feedback Mechanism
ECB/AIM	Emergency capacity building inter-agency Accountability & Impact Measurement
FM	Feedback mechanisms
HPN	Humanitarian Policy Network

Introduction

This literature review supports a broader ALNAP and CDA initiative aiming at producing evidence-informed guidance for humanitarian agencies on ways to strengthen the effectiveness of mechanisms for gathering feedback from affected populations in humanitarian contexts. It focuses on two key questions: (1) why and how humanitarian agencies seek, process, and respond to feedback from affected populations and (2) which elements have been identified as having the most impact on the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. More specifically, it does the following:

1. Reviews what existing studies say constitutes a humanitarian feedback mechanism, and derives a working definition to be used during research (Section 1).
2. Identifies factors discussed in the literature as contributing to the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism in a humanitarian context (Section 2).
3. Identifies limitations in the existing literature on humanitarian feedback mechanisms (Section 3).
4. Suggests an overarching research question and several key lines of inquiry for future ALNAP–CDA action research, focusing on factors that are said to affect feedback mechanism effectiveness but whose actual contribution has not been empirically tested (Section 4).

Following these discussions, [Annex A](#) describes the review methodology in detail. [Annex B](#) offers excerpts from the database generated during the review. These are followed by a comprehensive bibliography.

Why the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms matters

The last two decades have seen a growth in research on the challenges of improving humanitarian performance (Adinolfi et al., 2005; ALNAP, 2005; Donini et al., 2008; ALNAP, 2010; Ashdown, 2011; ALNAP, 2012). Many in the humanitarian system have suggested that the quality of aid delivery would be improved by more active, accountable and meaningful engagement of crisis-affected populations (Borton, 2008; ALNAP and Groupe URD, 2009; Gostelow et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2012; Barry and Barham, 2012; Darcy et al., 2013).

These observations are in line with those from a desk study by CDA (2011) that focused on feedback mechanisms in international assistance organisations and highlighted some of the opportunities, constraints and challenges in gathering and utilising feedback from affected populations. It noted that there are few ‘closed’ feedback loops (in which responses are relayed back to the community), and that what makes humanitarian feedback mechanisms work remains an area of emerging research and practice (CDA, 2011: 2, 26). This review is intended to support ALNAP–CDA action research in this emerging area.

Methodology

This study began with a review of agency guidelines, reports, and other desk reviews on feedback-related subjects (most notably CDA, 2011; Jump, 2012) to identify what publications on feedback and complaints handling in humanitarian contexts they cited most often. The publications identified in this way included work by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2005), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC, 2008), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (in particular Baños Smith, 2009), Save the Children (Ashraf et al., 2010; Mun-

yas Ghadially, 2013), World Vision (in particular Levaditis, 2007; Wood, 2011a; b); Church World Service-Pakistan/Afghanistan, CWS-P/A (Raza and Khan, 2011) and Ground Truth and Keystone Accountability (2012; 2013). These works explore recent field-level practices, challenges, emerging guidance and lessons in the area of complaints and feedback handling, while touching on the related (and broader) issues of accountability to affected populations (AAP) and quality of humanitarian programming and response.

Documents were included in the literature review if they met criterion 1 below and at least one of criteria 2–5:

1. Discuss feedback handling in the context of a humanitarian project, programme or operation.
2. Describe the functioning of a feedback process.
3. Describe how a communication channel is or should be set up.
4. Discuss feedback mechanisms as part of broader accountability systems and practices.
5. Describe the role or function played by feedback in a larger mechanism or practice.

Literature on complaints and response mechanisms was included because feedback practices are often included in the literature and agency guidance on complaints handling.

Indeed, there seems to be an overlap and grey area between feedback and complaints handling processes. Definitions vary greatly between agencies and are not used consistently. For example, feedback handling practices are included in what Danish Refugee Council refers to as Complaints Mechanism (CM) (DRC, 2008); some HAP literature discusses feedback processes as part of complaints and response mechanisms (CRM), while Save the Children has been recently using the terms Complaints and Feedback Mechanisms (CFM).

For the purpose of this review, documents on complaints and feedback and complaints and response mechanisms were included unless they explicitly excluded gathering and responding to 'general' feedback. The research team thus wanted to ensure that the mechanisms reviewed dealt with a broad type of information and 'caseload'.

In particular, documents were excluded from the review if they focused solely on allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), fraud, mismanagement. This decision was based on the assumption that mechanism dealing with SEA and other grave allegations may call for specific procedures, considering the disciplinary and legal repercussions of malfeasance and abuse. During the literature retrieval phase, there could have been a selection bias linked to the retrieval of agency-specific documents and grey literature, which constitute the majority of the publications reviewed. This is because much of the literature retrieved and reviewed was suggested by other researchers who had also documented feedback and complaints mechanisms 'at work' in different field settings; and by practitioners and agency staff already part of HAP accountability learning group and by agencies members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on AAP. Some level of bias is possible in that these agencies and key informants may yield information that only partially represents the lines of thought in the body of knowledge on the topic of interest.

The methodology followed in this review is discussed in more detail in [Annex A](#).

1. What constitutes a feedback mechanism

The humanitarian literature offers different (but often only partially exhaustive) definitions of feedback mechanisms and their scope of work, purpose and benefits. In much of the relevant literature, feedback mechanisms are not the sole or primary focus; rather, they are discussed together with complaints handling or as a marginal point in broader discussions on topics such as the following:

- mechanisms for handling complaints, including accusations of SEA (e.g. DRC, 2008; Baños Smith, 2009; IASC PSEA Task Force, 2011, Useful references:)
- accountability to affected populations (e.g., Levaditis, 2007; Srodecki, 2008; Gostelow et al., 2010; Darcy et al., 2013)
- monitoring (e.g., IFRC, 2011a)
- communication with affected populations in crisis settings (Nelson et al., 2011; Wall, 2011; Chapelier and Shah, 2013; OCHA, 2013)
- listening to affected people on the receiving end of aid (Anderson et al., 2012)
- perception issues in humanitarian action (Abu-Sada, 2012)
- affected communities' participation in and ownership of emergency, recovery and development programmes (e.g., Levaditis, 2007; HAP, 2010; Sphere, 2011).

This diversity underscores the difficulty in delimiting the type of information handled by a feedback mechanism, purposes that feedback mechanisms serve, and the uses for the data generated by a feedback mechanism.

A variety of definitions exist for 'feedback'. The Oxford Dictionary (2013) defined it as 'information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement'. Frequently referenced HAP research defined it as including opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice that aid agencies 'may adopt, challenge or disagree with as appropriate' (Baños Smith, 2009: 33). A definition proposed by Keystone Accountability (n.d.) is 'information about constituents' perceptions of a set of activities and their impact. Feedback is used to influence related activities in the future.' Recent Save the Children guidance on programme accountability proposed a definition of feedback as:

a positive or negative statement of opinion about our programmes and the behaviour of our staff and representatives shared for information or action but not with the intention of lodging a formal complaint. Depending on the nature or seriousness of the feedback, however, the organisation itself may need to take the same action as if the feedback were a complaint. (Munyas Ghadially, 2013: 24)

Issues to consider before arriving at a working definition include the reasons for establishing a feedback mechanism, the differences and connections between feedback and complaints (especially those of a sensitive nature), and mechanisms for handling complaints and feedback.

1.1 Reasons for establishing a feedback mechanism

The reasons most often given for establishing a feedback mechanism are to support accountability, transparency, empowerment, monitoring and evaluation, and programme improvement, and to provide early warning of impending problems. Though these are presented below as distinct purposes, many overlap to varying degrees.

1.1.1 Accountability and rights

Some organisations implement feedback mechanisms to comply with internal (Sameera et al., 2010: 10; Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 1) or external requirements and standards. Others seek feedback out of respect for beneficiaries' rights, including the right to have a voice and be heard (McIvor, 2004; CAFOD, 2009; Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a: 1; Sameera et al., 2010: 5; Raza and Khan, 2011; Wood, 2011a: 2; FAO, 2012: 4) and so that beneficiaries may hold organisations to account against 'the promises and commitments made to the communities they support and other stakeholders' (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a: 1).

1.1.2 Transparency and trust

Feedback mechanisms offer beneficiaries the opportunity to approach an organisation to ask questions and receive a response, increasing their understanding of the program, reducing potential tensions and potentially developing their trust in the organisation (Baños Smith, 2009: 18; WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9; IFRC, 2011b: 42; Wood, 2011a: 2). The resulting trust and respect also help improve and maintain relationships with the affected community (Wood, 2011a; HAP Membership Services Team, 2011: 1). Some organisations have noted that feedback mechanisms improved their credibility not only with beneficiaries but also with the local government, donors and other NGOs (Baños Smith, 2009: 21), and enhanced the organization's public standing by allowing it to be seen as a 'listening organisation' (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a: 1).

1.1.3 Empowerment

World Vision sees feedback and complaint mechanisms as promoting community empowerment and participation (WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9; Raza and Khan, 2011: 27; Wood, 2011a: 2; Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 2). Along these lines, the vast majority of organisations that participated in a HAP training on complaints and response mechanisms (CRMs) reported that after they implemented this mechanism, beneficiaries were more willing to contribute feedback during open forums and get involved in the organisation's activities (HAP Membership Services Team, 2011: 1). IFRC found that 'a questions and complaints line can build trust in an organization. To the beneficiary, it suggests the organization cares enough to listen to their concerns' (IFRC 2011: 42).

1.1.4 Monitoring and evaluation

In a few cases, feedback and complaints mechanisms have been observed to help improve monitoring and evaluation activities by feeding beneficiaries' views and perspectives into monitoring, assessment and reporting practices.

'A complaints and feedback mechanism provides a means for stakeholders to provide comment and voice complaints about the IFRC's work. It is a particularly important data collection topic worth special mention. Complaints and feedback mechanisms provide valuable insights and data for the ongoing monitoring and periodical evaluation of a project/programme' (IFRC, 2011b: 40)

1.1.5 Programme or project improvement

Another of the expected benefits that motivate agencies to establish a feedback mechanism is that they can provide 'unique and invaluable sources of information to be used for better project management and outcomes' (Pepall, 2007 c: 1). They can help identify and address mistakes or

shortcomings, improving the quality of the programme or project (Sameera et al., 2010: 10; Thet et al., 2010: 12). These changes and the uptake of other suggestions from beneficiaries may lead to increased effectiveness and efficiency (WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9; HAP Membership Services Team, 2011: 1; FAO, 2012: 4). For example, targeting can be improved through identification of inclusion and exclusion errors (Baños Smith, 2009: 18; WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9), and any factors inhibiting affected populations' access to the programme or project can be minimised (WV FPMG, 2009).

Feedback mechanisms can also be useful for informing management of issues faced and support needed in the field (WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9), which can also lead to improved effectiveness.

Getting people's feedback through the information centres has proved valuable to project staff, as they've been able to make small but significant improvements to strengthen implementation and, ultimately, the impact of our activities. And as an organisation, we've been able to learn lessons that can inform our future activities. (Thet et al., 2010: 19)

Boughen and Sweatman (2010: 1) also reflected on expected benefits from a learning perspective: 'The benefits of mechanisms for handling feedback and complaints include: continuous learning and improvement; and enhancing public standing by being seen to be a "listening organisation."'

1.1.6 Early warning

Feedback mechanisms are also expected to help organisations identify issues and risks early and address them in a timely manner before they become larger and more difficult and expensive to manage or resolve (WV FPMG, 2009: 8–9; IFRC, 2011b: 42–43; Wood, 2011a: 2). The IFRC described its Noula system call centre as being able to 'act as an early warning indicator of problems in the community [and] as a tool to negotiate a solution' (IFRC, 2011b: 43). Wood (2011a: 2) described feedback and complaints mechanisms as 'acting as an "early warning system" to prevent, mitigate, or resolve tensions and problems before they escalate into more serious issues that will require extra resources to address'.

Such responsiveness and willingness to take remedial action have been reported to help increase the acceptance of the organisation even up to the level of local government (HAP Membership Services Team, 2011: 4); this is seen by some as beneficial for staff security (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a: 1).

1.2 Difference between feedback and complaints

It is important to distinguish between feedback and complaints. HAP's definitions are not intended to be prescriptive but to 'promote a shared understanding of terms used in the HAP Standard' (HAP, 2010b: 5), but its definition of 'complaint' is widely used and can provide a starting point for this discussion. A complaint is 'a specific grievance of anyone who has been negatively affected by an organisation's action or who believes that an organisation has failed to meet a stated commitment' (HAP, 2010b: 6). This definition frequently appears, as a whole or in part, within agency guidance.

In a HAP-commissioned study on the impact of CRMs, Baños Smith (2009: 33) defined feedback as opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice that 'agencies may adopt, challenge or disagree with as appropriate' and contrasted this with complaints, regarding which the 'stakeholder . . . is entitled to seek (safe) redress and receive a response'.

The literature reviewed for this study indicated that the 'need to respond' was the key factor differentiating a complaint from general feedback (Oxfam International, 2011: 1). CAFOD claims that complaints 'require a response and are a priority for action' (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a: 1); this is equally reflected in material from World Vision (WV FPMG, 2009: 42) and DRC (2008: 11).

A more tempered definition than the one given previously is found in HAP's definition of its Standard Principle of participation and informed consent as 'listening and responding to feedback from crisis-affected people when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes' (HAP 2010b: 9).

Some organisations reflect this more tempered thinking. For example, a Save the Children study asserted that 'all the complaints and feedback received need to be closed in a certain manner' (Sameera et al., 2010: 16), whilst Oxfam stated that feedback 'does not necessarily' require a response (2011: 1). World Vision FPMG suggested as 'CRM policy that 'in the case of feedback, the stakeholder [be] asked if they require a response. If not, a commitment will be made to pass on feedback' (2010: 43).

Most definitions of feedback include the following qualities (DRC, 2008: 11; Baños Smith, 2009: 33; WV FPMG, 2009: 1; Oxfam International, 2011: 1):

- being positive or negative
- being shared formally or informally
- being less specific
- involving opinions about someone or something
- being shared for information and not with the intention of being lodged as a formal complaint

DRC indirectly provides insight into what the organisation considers feedback—contributions to its feedback system in Somalia are categorised as follows: frequently asked questions about projects and services, inquiries, suggestions, appreciation, and questions or requests for information about projects or services not related to DRC interventions.

1.3 Handling feedback separately from sensitive complaints

Some of the literature on feedback in humanitarian contexts examines it together with procedures for handling complaints, including on SEA and gender-based violence (GBV). This can be problematic: there can be overlap between feedback and complaints handling systems (for instance, the same channels may be used to submit feedback and complaints), but there is also some rationale for keeping them separate and developing a different set of guidance for each.

One of the arguments for keeping feedback and complaints systems separate is that the latter need to be designed, maintained, and supported to handle very specific types of information including allegations of GBV and SEA; grave misconduct by agency staff or implementing partners including fraud, embezzlement or other abuses that, if true, would violate an agency's code of conduct and require disciplinary action; and crimes under national law or another applicable legal frameworks.

Some practical repercussions of the differences between feedback, complaints and SEA allegations are: the need to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, allow for appeal and redress, and apply more stringent verification requirements.

The specific (and often very sensitive) content addressed by complaints and SEA mechanisms require humanitarian agencies to codify the procedures and requirements needed to establish

and support such systems. In particular, protection from SEA (PSEA) and GBV has, in recent years, attracted high levels of attention and has been the focus of awareness-raising at both agency and inter-agency levels. Under the aegis of both the UN Secretary General and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), several agencies have collaborated to develop and pilot guidance, training, awareness-raising and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools on these issues (see for instance IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team, 2012b; 2013). In particular, the Secretary-General's 2003 Bulletin on Special measures for protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13) has been instrumental in focusing agencies' attention on these issues and developing guidance on how to communicate, raise awareness, monitor, and follow up SEA allegations.

At the inter-agency level, a recent development has been the merging of the two IASC groups working on AAP and on protection against SEA. The purpose of this merged group is 'to create a system-wide "culture of accountability to affected populations" [through the] institutionalisation of AAP, including PSEA, in functions and resourcing within each humanitarian organisation alongside system level cohesion, coordination, and learning' (IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team, 2013:1).

Regardless of how carefully agencies distinguish between complaints and feedback, mechanisms designed to address sensitive complaints may also elicit other types of feedback (particularly where they are the sole feedback mechanism available), and general feedback mechanisms may also inform about SEA or other serious abuses. Formal and informal mechanisms should be available to address all types of feedback and have necessary referral procedures in place.

1.4 Links between feedback and complaints

Lewis and Lander (2011: 9) asserted that 'if, in the case of a joint feedback/complaints system, one organisation does not respond in a timely and systematic manner, what was initially feedback can become a complaint.' Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) has argued that by actively seeking to improve policy and practice in the 'key elements' of leadership/governance, transparency and feedback, organisations will significantly decrease the number of complaints received (ECB, 2010: 3).

The links between these two concepts is also reflected in organisations' perceptions of them as levels or points on a range. For example, ECB has defined feedback as 'the systems, processes, attitudes and behaviours through which an organisation can truly listen to its stakeholders' (ECB, 2010: 3). For them, complaint handling is a 'subset' of this. Save the Children refers to feedback, regular complaints and serious complaints—the first being minor, positive or negative, and provided informally or formally; the second being in regards to program design or services (such as changes in timing of food or non-food items distribution or in the location of child-friendly spaces or distribution points); and the third being related to issues such as corruption, harassment, discrimination or SEA (Sameera et al., 2010: 11). World Vision's Food Programming and Management Group (FPMG) uses very similar definitions and categories, adding that serious complaints, or what they call sensitive complaints require 'the protection of the complainant, because they either feel embarrassment or shame, or fear of reprisal from another person' (WV FPMG, 2009: 42).

The common thread among these levels of complaints or feedback is indeed sensitivity, which may or may not involve the issue of confidentiality. From the literature it seems that this is dependent on cultural and contextual elements as well as on the content (Bainbridge, 2011; Norman, 2012).

1.5 Mechanisms for handling complaints and feedback

The definition of a complaint mechanism (or complaints handling or response mechanism) is similar across organisations and guidance documents and usually includes the following characteristics:

- It constitutes a formalised system (DRC, 2008) for processing grievances thoroughly, objectively and impartially (DRC, 2008; HAP, 2010a).
- It provides a safe and transparent means of voicing concerns (DRC, 2008; Save the Children, 2010: 1; Darcy et al., 2013: 52).
- It ensures that grievances are addressed or receive a response (DRC, 2008: 3; Darcy et al., 2013: 52).

Feedback mechanisms are not as clearly framed and are often merged with complaints handling. For instance:

- Save the Children guidance refers to 'complaints and feedback mechanisms' (Sameera et al., 2010: 5).
- World Vision requires all food programs to have a CRM. They aim to capture both feedback and complaints, and clear definitions are provided of each (WV FPMG, 2009). This is reflected in the definition of CRMs as 'formal mechanisms to help us to understand our programs from the beneficiaries' perspective, giving us the information to adjust our programs to best meet beneficiary community needs' (ibid.: 8). There is a clear point at which comments received from the community are categorized as one or the other (Wood, 2011b).
- At the DRC, feedback is considered a broader process within which complaints handling is located: feedback 'remains an important part of interacting with beneficiaries, while addressing the complaint mechanism in many situations will constitute a last resort' (DRC, 2008: 11).

For ease of reference, table 1 gives a snapshot of the sparse descriptions of feedback and complaints and how these can be handled.

Table 1: Snapshot of different characteristics of feedback and complaints handling practices

	Relevant excerpts from the literature	
	Feedback	Complaint
Need for a response	A response is optional (Baños Smith, 2009: 9).	Require a response and are a priority for action (Boughen and Sweatmean, 2010a: 1); refer to serious issues that require redress (HAP, 2010a: 42).
Ways of sharing comments with the organisation	'Can be given formally or informally' (Save the Children- Sameera et al., 2010: 10).	'The [user] can choose to address an issue/grievance directly to the [complaint mechanism] without first informing field staff (as the field staff may indeed be the object of the complaint)' (DRC, 2008: 11).
Types of actions that may be taken by the agency in response	Adjustments may need to be made based on feedback (Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9).	A clear system for investigating that complaint and taking appropriate action is needed (Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9).

	Relevant excerpts from the literature	
	Feedback	Complaint
General content	Opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice which agencies can adopt, challenge or disregard as appropriate (Baños Smith, 2009: 33); an opinion shared for information, a more informal statement (Oxfam, 2011: 1, 11).	Formal expression of discontent about someone or something and/or allegation of misconduct (Oxfam, 2011: 11).
	Less specific (DRC, 2008: 11).	A specific grievance (HAP, 2010b: 6).
	Can be positive or negative (Boughen and Sweatmean, 2010a: 1; ECB, 2007: 22)	Complaints mean that things may have gone wrong (ECB, 2007: 22).
	Generally to do with minor issues (Sameera et al., 2010: 10).	
Specific content	Comments on a programme or project (Sameera et al., 2010: 11; Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9).	'The quality of programme work (considered non-sensitive). This may include, but is not limited to: timeliness, safety, cleanliness, appropriateness, comfort, ease and privacy, where relevant, lack of appropriate equipment and non-fulfilment of promises' (Oxfam, 2011: 2).
	Frequently asked questions about projects and services; inquiry; suggestion; appreciation; questions/request of information about projects or services not related to the agency's intervention (DRC, 2011).	'Staff and volunteer behaviour (considered sensitive). This may include, but is not limited to: staff/volunteer misconduct, allegations of corruption, nepotism or favouritism, allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation, aggressive or threatening behaviour, discrimination, indifferent treatment or other form of disrespect for the community and its customs. Sensitive complaints may also be about role and actions of the camp committee as part of the activities of Oxfam' (Oxfam, 2011: 2).

Source: Authors

1.6 Working definition of a feedback mechanism

In the literature reviewed here, humanitarian feedback mechanisms have seldom been researched and analysed in their own right. This has made it difficult to find a clear, commonly used definition of feedback mechanisms. The research team thus proposes the following definition:

A feedback mechanism is a formal system established and used to allow recipients of humanitarian assistance (and in some cases other crisis-affected populations) to provide information on their experience of a humanitarian agency or of the wider humanitarian system. Such information is then used for different purposes, in expectation of a variety of benefits, including taking corrective action to improve some element of the response.

2. Elements that influence the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism

The literature points to a number of elements that positively or negatively affect the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. Some are highlighted in good practice material and case studies, while others are presented as key considerations in guidance documents. The most frequently reoccurring elements are discussed below. They fall into two broad categories: overarching elements that may exert influence throughout the process, and elements related to specific steps in the process.

2.1 Overarching considerations

Elements that can affect many parts of the process include trust in the organisation and its feedback mechanism, the location of the feedback mechanism within the organisation, and resources and capacity.

2.1.1 Trust in the feedback mechanism and the organisation that runs it

Trust is one of the elements most often mentioned in the literature reviewed. Some authors emphasise the importance of the affected population's trust not only in the feedback mechanism but also in the organisation running it and its individual representatives: 'a lot of time and effort were required to build sufficient trust before any [complaint and response mechanism] would work efficiently' (Baños Smith, 2009: 18). Bainbridge indicated that though it takes time to build trust, 'factors such as the length of time the NGO has been working on the ground have been found to be less significant than the attitude and commitment of project staff' (2011: 33).

It transpired that their negative views on complaint boxes came from the perception that the programme manager (also in charge of the boxes) was, as one man put it, 'not a responsible person'; having faith in the CRM required faith in the programme manager. (Baños Smith, 2009: 17)

Various stakeholders raised concerns regarding the authenticity of feedback recorded by local staff. One stakeholder questioned the extent to which local staff can be trusted to involve excluded or minority groups in soliciting feedback. Another commented that there was a danger that even where feedback and complaints are solicited, the response provided to that would be inadequate or even non-existent. (Norman, 2012: 74)

Perception plays an important role. One case study found that trust in the mechanism was most hindered by the time that was required to get a response. Yet, one of the factors contributing to this was that staff had limited transportation, making verification difficult (2009, p.19). Based on the documents reviewed, it could be argued that the actual accuracy and confidentiality of the mechanism are less important than community perceptions of it (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3). Many authors allude to the complementarity of trust in an organisation as a whole and trust in its feedback mechanism. This can create either a virtuous or a vicious cycle:

If the community does not feel comfortable using the CRM, the CRM will not be used and cannot possibly be effective. (WV FPMG, 2009: 19)

The more effectively the NGO responds to feedback the more community members will be encouraged to use the system and any initial reservations or suspicion will be reduced. (Bainbridge, 2011: 33)

Field staff have a strong capacity and skills to build relationships within the communities they work. This increases the likelihood of reliable, open feedback. (Souness, 2011: 9)

2.1.2 Location of the feedback mechanism within the organisation

The literature reviewed rarely discusses where feedback mechanisms should be located within the organisation, programme or project. Should they be a specific and dedicate function singled out from programme units? Should it be part of 'central' organisational function such as monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) or a broader thematic units covering accountability to affected populations? Who should be responsible for the feedback mechanism? To whom should staff working on feedback processes report to? Most studies addressing these issues point to the need for feedback mechanisms to be part of broader processes and not stand-alone components.

Incorporated in programme or project cycle.

FAO and ECB have argued that a feedback mechanism should be in place throughout each emergency programme and project (ECB, 2010: 3; FAO, 2012: 4). IFRC has indicated that what it calls a 'questions and complaints service' needs to be nested within the larger planning process so that roles are clear and guidelines are established on what information can feasibly be responded to and acted upon. It sees CRM as an 'essential part of programme delivery' (2011: 45). In Haiti, the British Red Cross found that 'embedding CRM within programming allowed rapid response time, [and] built understanding of the programme and the CRM' (ibid.: 25). FAO has said that means of providing feedback should be available at each stage of the project cycle (2012: 4). This requires that feedback be considered from the beginning of an intervention.

Linked to monitoring and evaluation

Munyas and Norman argued that the feedback mechanism should be linked to monitoring and evaluation activities. Munyas Ghadially says that 'the CFM [Complaints and Feedback Mechanism] should complement regular programme monitoring and evaluation activities' (2013: 27). In Myanmar, Save the Children's general information centres were run by accountability staff but supervised by an M&E officer (Thet et al., 2010: 15). Norman found that it is good practice to 'incorporate beneficiary feedback questions into standard monitoring, review, and evaluation surveys and templates' (Norman, 2012: 75). IFRC agreed, adding that when designing a feedback mechanism, individuals responsible for planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting should be included, as this mechanism should form part of monitoring plans (IFRC, 2011b: 45).

Bainbridge (2011: 33) asserted that 'it is also important to distinguish between the feedback and complaints system and regular project monitoring and evaluation, with clarity for staff on what each is intended to address'. DRC explained this as follows:

Processed complaints can and should also 'feed back' adjustments to the programme, but it is important to distinguish between the two. The more general process of getting feedback through evaluations and monitoring does not respect key elements of a [complaint mechanism]. (2008: 11)

Baños Smith's findings were less conclusive on how separate the feedback mechanism should be from M&E activities. However, as one HAP member representative put it:

Where you sit the accountability mechanism in the [management] structure is key; ideally it should be separate from monitoring and evaluation and from implementation; those responsible for complaints and response mechanisms need to be independent, like an ombudsperson. (2009: 30)

2.1.3 Resources and capacity

The need for dedicated resources to support the feedback mechanism has been stressed repeatedly. For instance: 'It was noted that the way [feedback] policies were implemented at the grassroots greatly depended on the availability and competence of financial and human resources' (DRT, 2012: iii). Pepall suggests to get a sponsor within senior management who will advocate for the resources needed (2007 a: 3). IFRC (2011) and WV FPMG (2009) discussed the issue of resources in greater detail, dividing them into three broad and overlapping categories: human, financial and physical, and technical resources.

Human resources

Organisations have argued that organisations need to 'ensure adequate [human] capacity to manage the feedback and complaints system' (Bainbridge, 2011: 33; see also Save the Children, 2011). For this it is important to allot time for staff to manage the feedback mechanism (HAP Membership Services Team, 2011: 5), establish clear roles and responsibilities for the day-to-day operations of the mechanism (Thet et al., 2010; Bainbridge, 2011; Raza and Khan, 2011: 27; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 29) and maintain 'effective team work between those collecting feedback and complaints, those promoting the mechanism and the MEAL team was identified as one of the "key enablers for success"' (Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 5).

'Senior management and field staff must support the idea of the CFM' (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013, p.28). Staff may worry that feedback from aid recipients and programme participants may criticize their work and that this may reflect poorly on their performance (Darcy et al., 2013: 53). If not addressed, these concerns may influence staff attitudes towards the feedback mechanism (Bainbridge, 2011: 32–33; Norman, 2012: 74). '...Managers need to carefully manage relationships between staff working in the information centres and other project staff, so that the former are not perceived as "spying" on the latter' (Save the Children, 2011: 21).

Financial and physical resources

How well feedback mechanisms take root at the field level greatly depends on the availability of funds (DRT, 2012: iii). Concretely, 'some financial resources [need] to be made available for the set up of the CFM' (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 28). The need for physical resources varies depending on the type of feedback mechanism; these can include computers, paper logs, desk, chairs and printed promotional material (WV FPMG, 2009: 24).

Technical resources

In addition to providing information and training on how the feedback mechanisms work (for instance in terms of collection, analysis and response process) much literature emphasised the importance of offering periodic training on broader issues that relate to accountability and quality and effectiveness of the project or programme within which the feedback mechanism is situated. The paragraphs below expand on these points.

- Accountability — Levaditis found that 'Organizational awareness of the importance of beneficiary feedback in [the World Vision Sri Lanka Tsunami Response] can be directly attributed to [Humanitarian Accountability Team] activities', which included trainings (2007: 24). Bainbridge recommended that staff be introduced to accountability issues in a creative and practical way so as to build enthusiasm (2011: 33; Save the Children, 2011: 5). 'It is important to ensure that thorough explanation is provided to both beneficiaries and local staff as to why soliciting and responding to feedback and complaints is important. In remotely managed settings, senior programme and/or primary organisation personnel should ensure that practical, interactive training is provided to local staff on the principles of beneficiary feedback and complaints handling' (Norman, 2012: 74).

- The feedback mechanism — Several studies have emphasized the importance of thorough training on the implementation of the feedback mechanism (Baños Smith, 2009: 21; Save the Children, 2011: 5; IFRC, 2011b: 44; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 29). Without sufficient training, staff may ‘focus on the “hardware” elements of the system, such as noticeboards and suggestions boxes, without fully grasping the underlying principles and values that form the foundation of effective feedback and complaints systems’ (Bainbridge, 2011: 32). Training is important not only at the outset but also in refreshers and new staff orientations (CAFOD, 2009; Bainbridge, 2011: 33; Norman, 2012: 68–69, 73–74).
- Broader programme and project context — Tearfund has observed that it is important that staff receive a comprehensive induction to programmes so that they feel more comfortable answering questions (Bainbridge, 2011: 32–33); ‘most complaints can be resolved quickly and informally with common sense and knowledge of the programme’ (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 30).

2.2 Considerations related to specific steps

This section describes the workings of a feedback mechanism in approximate chronological order—beginning with design, planning, then clearly communicating the feedback process to stakeholders, and finally, follow up, responding to and using feedback.

2.2.1 Design

Feedback mechanisms should be designed to reduce barriers to access by offering different means of, and access point to providing feedback (for examples, see Wood, 2010a; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 27–29; FAO, 2012: 4). For instance, community meetings may be used to gather comments and suggestions, but separate meetings may be planned for men, women and other vulnerable groups to encourage respondents to speak freely (Agyemang et al., 2009: 28).

Gender issues and different lines of discrimination within the affected population and aid recipient can be a barrier to effective feedback collection. A number of guidance materials recommend gender balance within the team collecting feedback (Baños Smith, 2009: 37; Tearfund, 2010: 4; Save the Children, 2011: 10; Souness, 2011: 9). Other possible barriers include language, literacy and confidentiality (Baños Smith, 2009: 16–17; WV FPMG, 2009: 40; Save the Children, 2011); people may fear reprisal from the organisation or from the community if they speak their minds (Norman, 2012: 62). In some instances this may be due to the regional or historical context (e.g. corruption, conflict) (Wood, 2011a; Norman, 2012). People providing feedback may not be willing to write it down and leave a permanent record (Baños Smith, 2009: 16–17). People in regions characterised by a markedly oral communication culture may not be as keen to share written feedback (Wood, 2011a: 3–4). Moreover, there may be a perception that oral feedback is more likely to be resolved (Baños Smith, 2009: 18–19) or resolved quickly (Bainbridge, 2011: 32; Raza and Khan, 2011: 27–28).

Five broad steps emerged from the literature on how to design feedback mechanisms. Rather than one-off steps, the process of establishing a feedback mechanism should be seen as iterative, calling for adjustments and changes based on the context, programmes and services delivered:

1. Ask what exists already and how people prefer to give feedback.

2. Build on existing local or traditional communication and dispute resolution mechanisms and strengthen them as appropriate.
3. Adapt tools to the local context.
4. Integrate existing feedback channels with any new channels to be introduced.
5. Assess whether the mechanism is working.

Before discussing these, a few key lessons should be pointed out. Firstly, be sensitive to what means are seen as legitimate (Wood, 2011a) and appropriate use of technology, not to replace face-to-face communication but to complement other tools (WV FPMG, 2009: 7; Save the Children, 2011: 3; Wood, 2011b: 11; Iacucci, 2012). Additionally, consider if it is possible to reduce the length of the feedback or feedback and complaint channel (Wood, 2011b, p.4). Feedback can be resolved more easily, cheaply and efficiently when addressed locally (WV FPMG, 2009: 40; Wood, 2011b: 4, 15). Not only does this help ensure that comments are addressed, hence maintaining accountability (Wood, 2011b: 15) and, potentially, improving overall trust in the mechanism, but it also aids in removing unnecessary strain on staff responsible for follow-up. Making the feedback mechanism more direct (e.g., not relying on a group of volunteers to collect comments) helps improve its accuracy and credibility (ECB/AIM Standing Team, 2011; Wood, 2011b).

The five design steps are discussed in more detail below.

- **Ask what exists already and how people prefer to give feedback** - Many authors have emphasised the need to ask different groups within the affected community how they wish to provide feedback (Thet et al., 2010: 15; Raza and Khan, 2011: 38; Norman, 2012: 73–74; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 28). The community itself must choose or at least agree to the feedback system (Tearfund 2010:2; Norman, 2012: 73), how often feedback should be gathered (FAO 2012: 4) and how they wish to receive a response to the feedback. If communities are not asked how they wish to give feedback, there is a risk that the mechanism will not be used (WV FPMG, 2009: 19).
- **Strengthen existing local or traditional mechanisms** - A recent study of community complaints mechanisms found that organisations should first identify traditional mechanisms that already exist in the community and see whether they can be strengthened and/or complemented by a new mechanism (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 28). Bypassing these and creating completely separate mechanisms can lead to an avoidable, additional burden on the organisation (Wood, 2011b: 13–15). NGOs should focus on improving the ‘response’ side of existing mechanisms (ECB/AIM Standing Team, 2011).
- **Adapt tools to the local context** - There is a broad consensus on the value of adapting feedback mechanisms to the local context and culture (ECB/AIM Standing Team, 2011; Raza and Khan, 2011: 38); doing so ‘ensures that they are accessible, safe and easy to use’ (Bainbridge, 2011: 31). It is also important to consider different users (Save the Children, 2011; Wood, 2011a; FAO, 2012) and the expected content to be handled by the mechanism. Some mechanisms, for instance, may be designed and established to receive and deal with both feedback and complaints, including SEA, while other may only deal with SEA and other allegations of grave misconduct. World Vision provides country teams with clear but non-restrictive guidance on how to set up a feedback and complaints handling mechanism. Country teams are encouraged to use templates provided by the organization to create their policies and procedures, but have the flexibility to determine their own complaint categories (WV FPMG, 2009). In Afghanistan,

Tearfund found that the affected population were willing to raise feedback if it was directed to a third party and not directly to the organisation or staff providing assistance (Norman, 2012: 63).

- Integrate new feedback channels with existing one** - World Vision has affirmed that ‘a mix of mechanisms should be used to ensure full coverage and access’ (Wood, 2010a: 3). As no tool is perfect, it is important to use complementary methods when possible (ECB/AIM Standing Team, 2011). This can help ensure that no voice goes unheard and that no issue goes unnoticed (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007; Bainbridge, 2011). For instance, opinions that would not be shared during meetings, due to issues such as confidentiality, cultural norms or fear of reprisal, can be expressed using feedback boxes (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 2). To be effective, multiple channels must be properly linked to the organisation (Wood, 2011b) and integrated (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3; Iacucci, 2012) to ensure consistency in how they are handled. ‘Multiple channels of communication . . . can lead to confusion and frustration. The most effective mechanisms are simple and defined by communities themselves’ (Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9). Creating feedback mechanism guidelines or policies for internal use and reference may help in assuring consistency. These can be very simple, should be created in a consultative way and should be reviewed periodically (Pepall, 2007 a, c).
- Assess whether the mechanism is working** - Just like a programme or project, a feedback mechanism should be periodically assessed and modified if necessary. This is facilitated by having clear documentation on the feedback mechanism and its implementation (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3). World Vision’s observations on this point are that feedback mechanisms should ‘be subject to periodic reviews with a view of improving the mechanism and its stated procedures and understanding the impact it is having on users and the project. Indicators and methods to measure the performance and effectiveness of receiving and responding to complaints will be stated at the time when the complaint and response mechanism is set up.’ (WV FPMG, 2009: 40)

Once a complaint mechanism has been established, it needs to be monitored to ‘determine whether it is actually functioning and effective’. Various indicators can be used for this. At the output level, these can include indicators to demonstrate whether principles have been fulfilled and whether the agency’s objectives for a complaint mechanism are being achieved (Wood, 2011a, p.4).

World Vision proposes that a complaint mechanism be assessed for:

effectiveness: has the feedback mechanism contributed to better, more accessible programme outputs?; efficiency: what are the costs of applying it, including nonmonetary costs such as time inputs from beneficiaries, and how do they compare to the benefits?; and sustainability: how long have the tools been used? Is the approach ad hoc or can it be institutionalised? (Wood, 2011a: 4).

2.2.2 Clearly communicate the feedback process

The literature contains numerous references to the importance of clear, transparent communication with affected populations. ‘Effective information provision can strengthen trust, build community ownership and encourage feedback and participation’ (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010b: 1). An organisation’s accountability standards, or at least minimum standards should be made available in the local language (Agyemang et al., 2009: 1; Boughen and Sweatman, 2010b: 1–2; Bainbridge, 2011: 31; Norman, 2012: 74). Much care must be taken in explaining the mechanism (FAO, 2012: 4), as translations need to ‘culturally as well as linguistically “comprehensible”’ (Baños Smith, 2009, p.35), and communications may need to be modified to avoid negative or strong connotations (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 1; Boughen and Sweatman, 2010a). At least three types of content are commonly mentioned as needing to be communicated:

the principle of accountability, the identity of the organisation and the nature of the programme or project, and how the feedback mechanism works.

- **Accountability** - 'Being accountable to the people we support through development and/ or humanitarian projects involves ensuring people are aware of their rights' (Boughen and Sweatman, 2010b: 1; WV FPMG, 2009: 24). Many authors refer, more or less explicitly, to the need to sensitise communities to the concept of providing feedback and make them aware that they have the right to do so even when receiving free services or goods (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3; Agyemang et al., 2009: 31; Bainbridge, 2011).
- **Identity of the organisation** - Introducing the organisation to the affected community is considered essential. For Save the Children UK programming in Myanmar, this included 'mission, vision, plans and policies' (Thet et al., 2010: 13–14). The same applies to the goals and objectives of the programme or project on which feedback is being sought (Abu-Sada, 2012). A number of studies described problems that occurred when this was not done.

'The women said there was a general lack of knowledge about the agency . . . which made it difficult to know what to expect from them, how to reach them or what issues to raise' (Baños Smith, 2009: 20). 'If we had proactively shared information more, we wouldn't have got a lot of the feedback that we did. A lot of the feedback was basic questions about who we were and what we were doing' (Wall, 2011: 39).

Lack of communication may inhibit use of the feedback mechanism (Baños Smith, 2009: 20–21; Boughen and Sweatman, 2010b: 1) or create unnecessary strain on staff (Wall, 2011: 39). It can be helpful not only to share an organisation's mission but also to clarify what the organisation does not do and any organisational restraints it may have, so as to help manage expectations (Dijkzeul and Wakenge, 2010: 1164; Iacucci, 2012).

- **How the feedback mechanism works** - The affected population should be made aware of the steps in the feedback process (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3; Darcy et al., 2013: 70; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 30). The process should be made as transparent as possible. This can include answering the following questions:
 - Why is feedback being collected? It is important to explain this to both staff and beneficiaries, including local authority figures (WV FPMG, 2009: 41; Bainbridge, 2011: 33; Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 5; Norman, 2012: 74).
 - What is the difference between feedback and complaints? The distinction an agency makes in this regard may not be obvious to all stakeholders and may need to be carefully explained (Wall, 2011: 40), both when the mechanism is introduced and when responding to feedback.
 - What is the scope of the feedback mechanism? What can I complain or give feedback about? For instance, Save the Children can address feedback and complaints about the project and the behaviour of its staff and representatives (other examples of such scoping: DRC, 2008: 11; Baños Smith, 2009: 33; WV FPMG, 2009: 1; Oxfam International, 2011: 1; Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 5; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 28).
 - Are confidentiality and non-retaliation assured as needed? How? Many make clear that beneficiaries should be able to raise feedback without fear of retaliation or discrimination. Though confidentiality may not always be necessary, depending on the content and context, the option of providing feedback confidentially should be available (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3; Pepall, 2007 a: 8, 11-12; Sameera et al., 2010: 16; WV FPMG, 2009: 41; Oxfam International, 2011: 2; Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 29).

- Who is involved at each step of the feedback process? Feedback mechanisms vary in their setup and staffing. Wherever possible, feedback should not be collected and responded to by the same person (Baños Smith, 2009: 19). One study of a feedback effort in Haiti reported that ‘participants said that they had wanted to lodge complaints, but did not feel that they could because handling complaints was a committee responsibility, [or] there was poor staff representation’ (Gleed, 2011: 43). In Kenya, Tearfund decided that only staff would be allowed to empty feedback boxes, to reassure the affected population that community volunteers were not removing feedback (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3).
- When can feedback be shared? A sense of regularity is said to be important for users of the feedback mechanism (ECB/AIM Standing Team, 2011; DRT, 2012: iii). People giving feedback want to know that it is collected and heard (Baños Smith, 2009: 18; Sphere Core Standard 1, 2011; DRT, 2012: iii; FAO, 2012: 4; Norman, 2012: 62). FAO has stated that ‘appropriate and inclusive channels for feedback should be available to affected communities and their representatives through each phase of the project cycle’ (2012: 4).
- What kind of response can be expected and when? Bainbridge says that ‘it is vital to manage expectations so that communities understand... what response they can expect from the NGO’ (2011: 33). For example, users should be made aware of how often feedback boxes are checked (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 30). Pepall proposes a clear amount of days within which the beneficiary should be contacted with a response (2007 a).

2.2.3 Verification, analysis, follow-up and response

Studies have indicated that a feedback mechanism’s effectiveness is improved if a sequence of actions is initiated as soon as an individual engages, formally or informally, with the mechanism. These actions vary from organisation to organisation. The steps described below are given in general chronological order; each step is further removed from the original feedback contributor than the one before.

Acknowledging and recording receipt

The first steps in responding to feedback are acknowledging and recording it.

Acknowledging: ‘Let the person who made the complaint know that you have received it’ (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 30). This will take different forms depending on whether the feedback is oral or written. For written feedback, when using a feedback box or text messaging system, the organisation should acknowledge receipt, for example with a follow-up text message (DRC 2011; IFRC, 2011b).

Recording: Written feedback is by its nature recorded. Other types of feedback, such as that submitted through a help desk or given directly and informally to staff during a field visit, may not automatically be recorded. Recording oral feedback in writing (for example in a logbook, summary sheet or tracking sheet) improves the accuracy and completeness of the information collected (WV FPMG, 2009: 24; Save the Children, 2011: 10) and helps ensure follow-up (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3) and integration in reporting (Rogers, 2010: 3; Bainbridge, 2011: 32). It is also important for the people giving feedback to see that it is being documented (WV FPMG, 2009: 24). Sharing feedback orally requires a certain level of trust in the individual receiving it (Wood, 2011a: 17).

Filtering and sorting

Some studies have recommended that after feedback is received, it should go through a series of filters. These can be expressed as questions such as the following:

- Is this feedback or a complaint? This distinction should be clear both to staff (Rogers, 2010: 5) and to those giving feedback (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013). One observer reported that ‘few residents understood the agency’s concept of “feedback”, and recommended more systematic and effective communication around what does and does not constitute a “complaint”’ (Wall, 2011: 40). World Vision encourages national teams to create their own categories for feedback (WV FPMG, 2009: 41).
- Does this relate to our project or programme? Some organisations only consider feedback and complaints about their own initiatives, but many authors point to the importance of having a referral system. This is discussed in more detail in the section on timely and appropriate response.
- Is it possible to respond right away, or does this need to be passed on to someone else within the organisation? This filter can help reduce the caseload for field staff. For instance, the IFRC’s Noura phone line in Haiti was outsourced to a private call centre. To make this possible, a detailed list of potential questions and their answers needed to be created by agency staff. Any feedback that could not be addressed by the call centre was then passed on to field staff (IFRC, 2011b). A similar process took place for World Vision’s help desks. Referrals to other organisations are discussed in more detail below.

Verification

According to Tearfund, one should a feedback mechanism should be supported by ‘third party verification’. This includes for example: visits by senior national staff; peer monitoring by other agencies; meetings between representatives of the affected population and senior expatriate staff in a secure location (Norman, 2012: 65). This document goes on to explain:

Tearfund has utilised visits by senior national and expatriate staff to support the verification of feedback mechanisms in Kandahar. Senior national staff include questions regarding feedback mechanisms in their discussions with beneficiaries when they visit. They themselves verbally solicit feedback, which is used to compare against the feedback solicited and recorded by local staff. Expatriate staff, when visiting the Kandahar project office, will meet with beneficiary representatives at the office. Though it is only possible to meet with male representatives, there is at least some opportunity to hear and triangulate the feedback that they provide. Peer monitoring presents a further opportunity for organisations to monitor and triangulate the feedback that is recorded by local staff. Peer agencies can meet with beneficiary groups, not only soliciting their own feedback but confirming that feedback is regularly solicited by local staff or partners. (ibid: 75)

CARE also uses triangulation and monitoring visits to verify feedback (Rogers, 2010: 5).

Providing a timely, appropriate and fair response

In guidance and policy documents, organisations repeatedly commit to providing timely, appropriate and fair responses to feedback (Raza and Khan, 2011; FAO, 2012: 1). This is further reflected in comments shared by affected populations with a HAP researcher: ‘Participants said that in order to complain, they would also need to feel confident that the response would be received and that complaints would be dealt with on a frequent and fair basis’ (Baños Smith, 2009: 17).

Providing frontline staff members and volunteers with training and information sharing about the project, programme and organisation, allows them to immediately address much of the feedback or questions raised. World Vision states that ‘If the feedback or complaint is not related to World Vision’s programs, commitments or conduct, the stakeholder can be politely turned away

or referred to the relevant organisation or committee' (WV FPMG, 2009: 43). When feedback is relevant to the organisation but the volunteer or staff member at the point of contact is unable to respond immediately, they should make sure that the feedback provider is aware of the steps in the feedback process and understands why the issue cannot be resolved immediately (Thet et al., 2010: 15; Munyas Ghadially, 2013: 30–31).

Ideally, the feedback should be referred to the appropriate individual within the organisation or a partner organisation. This is sometimes challenging:

Issues around remoteness and speed of response to complaints or feedback are stronger when the senior or decision making staff are removed from the action. This can be mitigated through the creation of stronger structures or spaces (such as targeted weekly recurrences) dedicated only to the sharing and analysis of feedback and complaints between the field staff and the decision makers. (Persiani, 2012: 12)

Save the Children has said that having 'strong referral mechanisms internally and externally' is 'crucial for effective CRM' as 'complainants especially children do not differentiate organisational scope and mandate' (2011: 8).

In terms of feedback use, in Afghanistan, Tearfund, 'in some instances, may take on an advocacy role to fulfil the request through another agency' (Souness, 2011: 9). If this is not possible, the organisation should be able to redirect the individual to the organisation that can address the issue. 'In order to function well, a feedback and complaints mechanism needs a clear referral system. . . . If feedback is given on a project or programme, adjustments may need to be made. In the case of a complaint, a clear system for investigating that complaint and taking appropriate action is also needed within each organisation' (Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9).

Once feedback has been considered and the organisation has decided how to respond, this should be communicated back to the person giving the feedback (Sameera et al., 2010: 16). In a tool developed by World Vision's Humanitarian Accountability Team (working on the tsunami response in Sri Lanka), one of the indicators of good quality complaints management system is if standards on what is a timely response is set (Pepall, 2007 c: 15). It has also been recommended that organisations demonstrate or publicise how feedback is used and responded to and provide regular updates on actions taken (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 2; Norman, 2012: 74). 'There is a general recognition that the more effectively the NGO responds to feedback the more community members will be encouraged to use the system and any initial reservations or suspicion will be reduced' (Bainbridge, 2011: 33).

Finally, the organisation must carry out the promised response (CAFOD, 2010: 6). Depending on the nature of the feedback and at which level within the organisation changes need to be made, this may occur prior to the response being given to the original feedback provider. 'If feedback is given on a project or programme, adjustments may need to be made' (Lewis and Lander, 2011: 9). At a broader, more strategic level, analysis helps trigger 'appropriate corrective "corporate" action' (ECB, 2010: 3). Amassing such information can also help improve future activities, projects and programmes (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3). In World Vision's self audit tool mentioned above, the agency is asked: Does your system have a clear and workable mechanism to advise areas of the agency where potential improvements are identified? (Pepall, 2007 c: 16).

'The organisational culture must be open to making changes based on complaints. There needs to be a willingness by programmes to adapt their work based on the feedback or complaints being received from beneficiaries' (IFRC, 2011b: 44). This willingness must also be demonstrated to staff.

'Feedback may not appear useful to... field staff, to instigate change due to the rigidity of project objectives and budget' (Souness, 2011: 9).

Data management and analysis

Many feedback processes described in the literature include the step of digitising feedback and compiling it in a database or spreadsheet, which makes it easier to share with programme staff (Sameera et al., 2010: 16; Oxfam International, 2011: 5; Save the Children, 2011: 5; Mahmood and Barech, 2012: 3; Norman, 2012: 65).

'All the complaint has been stored in the excel database which covers the detail of this complaint such as date, type of complaint, location etc. The database also has a column on date when the complaint is solved. The updated information has been shared with concerned programme staff for timely action' (Mahmood and Barech, 2012, p.3).

Many organisations provide a template for such databases (see Sameera et al., 2010; Norman, 2012; WV FPMG, 2009).

Compiling information in such a way facilitates analysis so that common themes and concerns can be identified (Blagescu and Rogers, 2007: 3; Pepall, 2007 a: 11; ECB, 2010: 3). These can be drawn on for programme reports and project meetings (Munyas Ghadijally, 2013: 15) and can help 'ensure learning from the information [received] through the specified channels' (Oxfam International, 2011: 5). For information centres:

Computerising the feedback will also, alongside regular field visits from the staff, ensure that the agency is able to more effectively check the quality of the system (through monitoring the kind of responses given and the timeframe a response is given in), recognise weaknesses and make improvements. (Wood, 2011b: 25)

As WV details in its CRM guidance, a data management system is important to make broader use of the complaints received. Examples provided include:

- identifying early any common issues with the project that needs to be addressed on a wider scale,
- informing and provide evidence for the development of new proposals,
- informing programming decision,
- tracking progress against particular issues (WV FPMG, 2009: 24).

3. Gaps in the existing research

Most of the documents analysed for this literature review had the following characteristics:

- Most are qualitative and tend to be case-based, and in most cases lack a method statement or fail to clearly specify their scoping criteria and data analysis approaches used.
- Studies employing quantitative or mixed methods remain absent from this nascent stream of humanitarian literature.
- There are few peer-reviewed or scholarly publications on humanitarian feedback mechanisms. The overwhelming majority of documents are from grey literature including case studies, field research reports and agency-specific guidelines. This is a challenge because grey literature gives only intermittent attention to research design and method choices including issues such as definition and measurement, scoping and case selection, data collection and validation, bias, subjectivity and transferability. These limitations affected our ability during this review to conduct cross-case and cross-context analysis.
- Most work tends to be commissioned by the same organisations running the feedback mechanisms; this poses the risk of bias and transferability challenges.
- Evaluative work appears to be rarely commissioned on this topic area, unless feedback mechanisms are addressed in conjunction with other participatory practices during the project or programme cycle (see for instance Barry and Barham, 2012). In the few evaluations that touch on feedback mechanism issues, feedback use is not explored. Few studies offer in-depth discussion of feedback processes in humanitarian contexts.

The inconsistent use of terminology to define feedback handling in humanitarian contexts is also a problem. Many studies offer only patchy analysis of the similarities, differences and complementarities between complaints and feedback processes (in all the steps from collection to use). Even when these issues are discussed, untested assumptions remain about what makes a feedback mechanism successful. Finally, few studies explore the perspectives of users of the feedback mechanisms – first and foremost aid recipients.

Some of the ambiguity in definitions of feedback practices could be resolved by acknowledging the broad diversity of the field and categorising feedback mechanisms based on characteristics such as the following:

- caseload (type of content dealt with in the feedback mechanism)
- scale of operation (at the activity, programme or organisation level)
- location in the organisational structure (for instance, within central services, such as communication and advocacy, or within an operational department)
- time frame (for instance, within zero to three months after a sudden-onset emergency, after three months, or later)
- expected use of feedback (for instance, for implementation troubleshooting, day-to-day project adjustment, broader programme redesign, strategy revision, new strategy development or advocacy with donors or the host government).

Being able to categorise different humanitarian feedback mechanisms in this way would help in analysing and learning from comparable cases with varying effectiveness.

4. How the findings from literature review informed the broader ALNAP-CDA research on feedback effectiveness

Based on the discussion above, the research team established that the ALNAP-CDA action research should focus on identifying and testing what are the features and characteristics that make a humanitarian feedback mechanism effective.

From the literature reviewed, it emerges that a functioning effective feedback mechanism can be described as one where feedback from affected populations is collected, acknowledged and documented and receives a response. However, the literature does not discuss which features and characteristics contribute more decisively to make such system work. The overarching research question to be explored in the ALNAP-CDA action research was thus formulated as:

Which features are most likely to contribute to the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms, as perceived by different user groups, but especially by the crisis-affected population?

The literature review has been used for two main purposes:

1. Identifying existing knowledge gaps and assessing whether they could be addressed by ALNAP-CDA research;
2. identifying an overarching research question and several key lines of inquiry into feedback mechanism effectiveness.

These points are discussed in more details in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Identifying knowledge gaps

Two areas of inquiry into humanitarian feedback mechanisms appeared to be overlooked in both scholarly and practitioner-driven literature: i) the perspectives of the users of the mechanisms; and ii) the ways and extent to which feedback is used to inform decision-making, make changes and improve responses. These issues had been incorporated in the scope of the ALNAP-CDA work and case-based research in the field.

4.1.1 Developing a guidance for practitioners

To support the development of evidence-based guidance, a research approach needs to do the following:

- Ensure that research results are credible and accurate.
- Minimise bias and subjectivity.
- Make explicit how conclusions will be generated from the data collected.
- Discuss how research findings and the resulting recommendations are relevant to other organisations and contexts besides those that were the immediate focus of the research.

A separate method paper that accompanies and supports the ALNAP-CDA action research spells out the details of all the above points (Bonino and Knox Clarke, 2013).

4.1.2 Understanding FM users' perspectives

In this context, the users of a feedback mechanism are understood to be, first, crisis-affected people, but also agency staff with different levels of responsibility for management and decision-making. The research team will explore the following:

- whether users consider feedback mechanisms to be working, and how
- whether they access and use them
- whether they consider some features as essential for the mechanisms to be effective
- whether they can suggest ways to improve the mechanisms.

4.1.3 Examining feedback utilisation

Feedback utilisation is crucial if these mechanisms are to improve the humanitarian response and increase accountability to crisis-affected populations. However, the fact that feedback is collected does not necessarily mean that it is used (Jacobs, 2010; CDA, 2011; Wood, 2011a; b; Anderson et al., 2012; Twersky et al., 2013). Questions to be explored include the following:

- To what extent is feedback from affected populations used to inform decision-making and programming?
- To what extent is this feedback used to support actions that improve elements of the broader humanitarian response?
- How does feedback utilisation happen in practice? Which elements promote or hinder effective feedback use?

4.2 Identifying the main lines of inquiry

Some features identified in the literature as affecting the quality of feedback mechanisms do not appear to have been tested or supported by primary research. Features often associated with a well-functioning feedback mechanism include:

- why and how it is designed and established
- whether and how it is communicated to the affected population, other intended users and programme staff
- how feedback is gathered and whether this is safe and acceptable under local norms
- how feedback is verified and analysed
- whether and how feedback is followed up, responded to and used
- whether and how the feedback mechanism is valued and supported in terms of both human resources and funding.

The literature reviewed appears to describe these elements as desirable features that should characterise a functioning feedback mechanism.

Based on the literature review, we have identified seven propositions (tabled below) about what makes feedback mechanisms effective, which are broad enough in scope to be relevant to a wide

range of feedback mechanisms and to cover issues related not only to the internal functioning of feedback mechanisms (e.g. data collection and verification) but also to more cross-cutting issues such as organisational and staff support and incentives. The research and analysis helped proving or disproving those propositions.

Table 2: Introducing the seven feedback mechanism effectiveness propositions to be tested

A humanitarian feedback mechanism is more effective if...	Related FM effectiveness proposition
...there are mechanisms in place, and time is allocated, to periodically reflect on, reassess and make necessary adjustments to the feedback mechanisms (e.g. based on changes in programmes, context, security, access, and / or changes in the affected populations' situations / status, changes in their preferences, including communication preferences, and changes in the use of assistance provided etc.)	→ PROPOSITION 1 on FM periodic reassessment and adjustment
...in the humanitarian context where the feedback mechanism is established it is 'normal' and culturally / socially acceptable to give feedback up the power gradient (for instance to staff in leadership and decision-making roles); and if the feedback mechanisms, communication tools and channels are known and familiar to the recipients using it.	→ PROPOSITION 2 on FM cultural / context appropriateness
Aid recipients are clear about what they can legitimately expect from the feedback mechanism and the organisation running it. Also if affected populations / communities are aware of and understand how to use the feedback mechanism (and are made aware of changes affecting them).	→ PROPOSITION 3 on FM expectation-setting and knowledge
...users perceive that feedback collection methods are accessible, safe, do the job and provide a trustworthy channel for feedback. (Confidentiality is ensured where relevant)	→ PROPOSITION 4 on Feedback collection
...i) feedback data is disaggregated based on the nature of feedback and complaints received (for instance, smaller issues versus more serious or programmatic / strategic issues); and ii) data quality is ensured (including through logging, sorting, checking, analysing and synthesising feedback data as appropriate); and iii) feedback data is processed and shared paying attention to who will receive this information and who is expected to use it	→ PROPOSITION 5 on Verification and analysis of feedback information
...i) agency staff / field staff (and other staff such as community focal points and volunteers) acknowledge the feedback received from users; ii) agency staff / field staff act on or refer feedback received to the relevant party (within or external to the field project team, and, if needed, external to the organisation); iii) relevant actors (e.g. other departments within the organisation, project partners national authorities etc.) receive, acknowledge, and respond to feedback so that changes can be made at the appropriate level	→ PROPOSITION 6 on Acknowledgement, response and use of feedback

A humanitarian feedback mechanism is more effective if...	Related FM effectiveness proposition
...the feedback mechanism is run by staff (and sometimes implementing partners and volunteers) with the relevant competencies and attitudes; and the mechanism is run by staff within an agency that supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice, and makes the necessary resources available for running the feedback mechanism.	→ PROPOSITION 7 on Individual and organisational support to the FM

Source: Authors; see also Bonino and Knox Clarke (2013:10)

The information collected from key informants and observations and the subsequent analysis was used to establish whether these features actually make the mechanisms effective. The analysis also helped identifying any other important features not prominently discussed in the literature, but that appear to impact on feedback effectiveness.

ANNEX A: Review methodology

This annex describes the research question that guided the literature review, criteria for inclusion of literature, sources used, and steps undertaken to analyse the literature.

Compared to more structured literature reviews, as discussed for instance in Hagen-Zanker and Mallet (2013), this is a 'lighter' review because for instance: i) does not include a meta-review of other syntheses and literature reviews; and ii) a detailed analysis of the literature on feedback handling from other sectors (such as for-profit customer satisfaction studies and perception studies).

Research questions explored in the literature review

The main research question that informed this literature review was: Which features of feedback mechanisms for crisis-affected populations are discussed in the literature as making these mechanisms effective? Three related sub-questions shaped the review:

1. How are feedback mechanisms defined in humanitarian literature?
2. How is their functioning in humanitarian operational contexts described?
3. Does the literature identify elements that influence the effectiveness of such mechanisms?

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A document (report, case study or evaluation) was included in this review if it discussed feedback mechanisms in the context of humanitarian activities, projects, programmes or operations. The humanitarian context was the chief criterion used for this round of selections.

Secondary criteria used to refine the search were whether the document did the following:

- Described the internal steps and procedures of a feedback mechanism.
- Described how communication channels and processes were used to support a feedback mechanism.
- Discussed a feedback mechanism as part of broader accountability or Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) systems and practices.

Documents addressing complaints and feedback or complaints and response mechanisms were mostly included in the review. Feedback handling often appears as a secondary focus in discussions of complaints handling. However, if it was made clear that the mechanism did only handle complaints, the document was excluded.

Documents that focused exclusively on mechanisms for handling allegations of SEA were excluded. We also took note of, but excluded from a detailed review, discussions of citizens' engagement through feedback mechanisms (see for instance Rocha Menochal and Sharma, 2008), feedback mechanisms as part of participatory development, and customer satisfaction surveys (see for instance Keystone, 2013).

Literature retrieval

A first search was conducted, using the basic search term 'feedback' and its possible associations with 'handling', 'process', 'mechanism', 'practice', 'response to' and 'collection of', in the following online document collections:

- ALNAP's online library, which includes both research and evaluative documents
- HAP's online library, which focuses on quality and accountability in humanitarian action
- World Vision DGroup's intranet library as it was put at the disposal of a HAP thematic learning group on the impact of humanitarian accountability.

This first search returned 121 entries. Subsequently, 70 of these were excluded based on the criteria described above; the remaining 51 entries were selected for review. In some cases, the focus on feedback was central to the document; in others, it was more marginal, but the document was still of value to the discussion of feedback effectiveness. Documents chosen for review were entered into a research database (Excel workbook), a portion of which is presented in **Annex B**.

Analysis

The 51 documents were classified by answering the following question: How central is the focus on feedback handling in humanitarian contexts? If marginal, yet the document was of particular value to the discussion on feedback effectiveness, it was still reviewed.

Documents were then reviewed in detail, scanning and grouping information and excerpts around a series of tags that fell into three broad categories of the 'what' 'why' and 'how' of feedback handling in humanitarian contexts (Labin, 2012):

- what constitutes a feedback mechanism
- why organisations set up feedback mechanisms and what they are expected to achieve
- how do they function and what factors makes feedback mechanisms work.

ANNEX B: Excerpts from the literature review database

The table below offers excerpts from the database produced during the review. It uses the following colour and formatting cues:

- **Blue** marks content that relates to definitions and terminology.
- **Pink** marks content that relates to why and how organisations use feedback mechanisms.
- **Green** marks content that relates to factors that improve effectiveness.
- **Boldface** or **yellow highlighting** are used to emphasise passages of particular value.

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisation Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Relevance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Bainbridge, 2011) O	Tearfund in HPN Verbal feedback, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC	<p>'Tearfund's approach to feedback and complaints handling is part of a broader organisational commitment to accountability, which promotes information sharing, transparency, participation and learning with project participants. Feedback and complaints mechanisms are based on community preferences and cultural norms to ensure that they are accessible, safe and easy to use. All feedback is recorded, responses are given to community members or groups and a monthly report of the feedback received and responses given is sent to Tearfund's head office in London. Many project teams include staff with specific responsibility for supporting the mechanism, such as Accountability Officers or Community Animators' (p.31).</p> <p>'In DRC, the Beneficiary Accountability Officer (BAO) and Community Animators received a regular flow of feedback from communities. This appeared to be open and honest, including many negative comments. Communities reported misconduct by Tearfund staff and by their own committees, and there were complaints about targeting and project design. Communities often used the mechanism as a means to request further services (p.31).'</p> <p>'In Darfur, the majority of feedback was either to do with issues that were beyond Tearfund's ability to address, or were requests for the provision of services. ... feedback concerned project management and targeting criteria. Most was verbal...' (p.31)</p> <p>'In South Sudan, the vast majority of feedback was given verbally. Requests for the provision of services were common, and complaints and enquiries were mostly about project design, such as when a grinding mill was going to be repaired or why Tearfund was ending work on primary healthcare in a particular location' (p.31).</p>	<p>Why: value statement What: overarching characteristic How: step-base/response How: resources – staff</p> <p>What: caseload (ex: DRC)</p> <p>What: caseload (ex: Sudan)</p> <p>What: caseload (ex: South Sudan)</p>	<p>'Complaints against community leaders pose another challenge to feedback mechanisms' (p.32). Explains how AP may not be willing to say negative things about community leaders during meetings.</p> <p>See example for instances of importance of cultural understanding</p> <p>Preference for verbal medium keeps coming back</p> <p>Ex from infosaid – benefit of a comms person in initial stages</p>

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisation Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Relevance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Bainbridge, 2011) O	Tearfund in HPN Verbal feedback, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC	<p>'In Afghanistan, virtually all of the feedback was given verbally and no negative comments or complaints were received. Rather, the feedback focused on appreciation for services given, for instance disaster risk reduction training, distributions of water filters and requests for the extension of these services'(p.31).</p> <p>'Tearfund has found that expectations are raised when communities are asked for feedback, as people then feel disappointed or ignored if they perceive that no action is taken in response and lose faith in the feedback system. In Darfur, for instance, people asked Tearfund to do things that were outside of its sectoral focus and expertise. Particular problems arose in insecure locations where it was difficult for staff to visit the communities sufficiently regularly to follow up on feedback received.</p> <p>In Afghanistan, community members appeared to fear losing assistance if they made complaints. In many operating environments it takes considerable time to build trust and confidence in the transparency of the process, especially in places where corruption or conflict lead many people to doubt that such a process can exist' (p.31).</p> <p>'In DRC, Sudan, South Sudan and Afghanistan there is a predominantly verbal tradition in many areas and literacy rates are historically low. A particular challenge is managing confidentiality when most feedback is given verbally. In DRC, staff found large community meetings to be a very effective way of sharing project information, but some complaints and feedback were better dealt with in smaller meetings. There may also be issues relating to gender, age or class which prevent particular community members or groups from speaking in public meetings; again, holding separate meetings for different groups can help overcome this barrier. Extra effort is also needed to ensure that verbal feedback is recorded by project staff and included in reporting, and managers need to ensure accuracy when translation is required' (p.32).</p> <p>'Challenge with staff: There has been a tendency for some staff to focus on the 'hardware' elements of the system, such as notice boards and suggestions boxes, without fully grasping the underlying principles and values that form the foundation of effective feedback and complaints systems. This may be due to limited induction. Staff have not always asked different groups how they prefer to feed back or make complaints, which can result in the mechanism not meeting their needs.</p>	<p>What case-load (ex: Afghanistan)</p> <p>How: step-establishment: communications (ex: Darfur, Afghanistan)</p> <p>How: collection - providing different means considerations for verbal feedback (ex: South Sudan, DRC, Afghanistan)</p> <p>How: step – collection, confidentiality</p>	

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Bain- bridge, 2011) O	Tearfund in HPN Verbal feedback, Afghan- istan, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC	<p>Tearfund has found that some staff do not feel confident that they understand every aspect of the overall project, and so feel unable to respond to feedback about other aspects. Some staff may feel threatened and may interpret complaints as a poor reflection on their performance. As a result they may not welcome feedback and may fear the implications of being reported on by communities or by their colleagues. In this context lack of support from managers has a big impact on the effectiveness of accountability systems and has been cited as a key constraint by staff (p.32).</p> <p>'Lastly there are issues of staff capacity. Senior managers in DRC highlighted the value of having a dedicated Beneficiary Accountability Officer (BAO) budgeted into each project, and have trialled combining these responsibilities with other functions such as monitoring and evaluation and community mobilisation. Community Animators at the village level support mobilisation and reinforce the feedback system to the BAO. In Afghanistan the accountability focal point in each field location has not been a dedicated role and it has proved difficult to find the right balance between having dedicated accountability staff and making sure that accountability is understood as everyone's responsibility. There is also a danger of a dedicated role being perceived by the rest of the team as the "Accountability Police" (p.32).</p> <p>'In many programmes projects cover wide geographical areas, making it impossible for one BAO to get round to all the communities or project sites regularly enough. In such instances it would be preferable for other staff also to gather feedback and respond to it. In highly insecure project locations further work is needed to develop accountability systems and structures such as Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs – groups of community members who gather feedback and pass it to Tearfund)'(p. 32).</p> <p>Recommendation: 1. Develop comprehensive induction programmes for staff 'Induction needs to be improved to include more information about projects, more detail on the basics of accountability and steps to address staff fears about the feedback system. Refresh-er training is needed to keep staff current and to address staff turnover. It is important to make induction sessions creative, and to use practical examples to build enthusiasm behind accountability. Having dedicated capacity to focus on staff induction, training and follow-up will strengthen the overall effectiveness of the feedback and complaints system. This has cost implications, unless the extra responsibilities can be undertaken within existing roles' (p.33).</p>	<p>How: resources – staff</p> <p>How: resources – staff How: step – collection, links</p> <p>How: resources- staff, financ- es, training</p>	

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Bain- bridge, 2011) O	Tearfund in HPN Verbal feedback, Afghan- istan, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC	<p>Recommendation 2. Emphasise accountability within line management 'Line managers need to reinforce the importance of accountability systems alongside their other responsibilities, and to lead by example. This can be done through existing performance management and appraisal systems, for example by including the establishment and promotion of the accountability system as part of a staff member's objectives. It may be useful to introduce a checklist for managers to review levels of compliance with the requirements of feedback and complaints systems' (p.33).</p> <p>Recommendation 3. Ensure adequate capacity to manage the feedback and complaints system 'Ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and that there are sufficient staff in Accountability Officer- or Community Animator-type roles. In Tearfund's experience, donors have been willing to fund such roles and have been supportive of the approach. Develop community reference groups so that representatives can be fully involved with the NGO in reviewing and responding to feedback and complaints'(p.33).</p> <p>Recommendation 4. Ensure an equivalent feedback and complaints system for staff 'An effective staff feedback and complaints mechanism should be in place. Such a move will match the organisation's commitment to listening to and responding to community feedback and complaints with a commitment to listening to its own staff. This will reinforce consistency in good practice across the organisation's policies and procedures' (p.33).</p> <p>Recommendation 5. Ensure timely responses are provided to the feedback and complaints received 'There is a general recognition that the more effectively the NGO responds to feedback the more community members will be encouraged to use the system and any initial reservations or suspicion will be reduced. Little or no negative comment should not be interpreted as a community being completely happy with a project, but rather that the mechanisms in place to facilitate their feedback and complaints are not yet fully functioning. Factors such as the length of time the NGO has been working on the ground have been found to be less significant than the attitude and commitment of project staff' (p.33).</p>	<p>How: resources – staff, leadership</p> <p>How: resources – staff</p> <p>How: resources – staff's own FM</p> <p>How: step-re- sponse</p>	

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Bain- bridge, 2011) O	Tearfund in HPN Verbal feedback, Afghan- istan, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC	<p>Recommendation 6. Provide clarity on the scope of feedback and complaints</p> <p>‘Clarify that feedback is encouraged on poor behaviour, poor quality and poor delivery. Whilst this is an enormous challenge in many of the environments where humanitarian agencies work, it is vital to manage expectations so that communities understand what constitutes a complaint and what response they can expect from the NGO. This should be part of a broader commitment to providing clear information on the organisation, its mandate and its goals. It is also vital that the message is reinforced that communities are free to give their honest opinions, and that they will not be penalised or assistance withheld as a result of negative feedback. It is also important to distinguish between the feedback and complaints system and regular project monitoring and evaluation, with clarity for staff on what each is intended to address’ (p.33).</p> <p>Examples of utilisation/response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Following a seeds and tools distribution in Omdurman, South Sudan, villagers complained to Tearfund that the number of beneficiaries was fewer than in other villages. Project staff responded by explaining the selection criteria to clarify how beneficiaries were chosen’ (p.33). • ‘In DRC, following an animal fair where goats were distributed, some recipients reported having to sell the animals they had received because they could not transport them back to their villages. In response the project team reviewed how the fairs were organised’ (p.33). • ‘In Ed Daein, Darfur, Tearfund received verbal complaints that the seeds provided to farmers as part of a food security project were not what had been agreed with project staff. The project manager looked into the complaints and followed up with the seed supplier, who acknowledged the mistake and agreed to replace the seeds with the type of sorghum seed originally agreed. This was reported back to the community members and subsequent feedback confirmed that they were satisfied with the outcome’ (p.33). • ‘A livelihoods project in Afghanistan provided training and support to women in wool spinning. Participants asked Tearfund to supply chairs for them to use as they worked the spinning wheel (many were standing or sitting on jerry cans). The project team explained that the budget was fully spent and so it was not possible to provide immediate additional assistance. However, they confirmed that chairs would be provided in future livelihoods projects’ (p.33). 	<p>What: defini- tion – feed- back</p> <p>How: step – response, ex utilisation</p> <p>How: step – response, future utili- sation</p>	

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Baños Smith, 2009) R	HAP Percep- tion of CRM, case studies, ef- fectiveness of CRM, collecting evidence	<p>*Vague distinction between complaints and feedback *NOTE used old HAP Standards (2007)</p> <p>‘...the majority of complaints fell into three main categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requests for further assistance (goods and services) and/or about the quality of goods and services provided - Targeting: people either did not know what the targeting criteria were or they felt that people were included on the beneficiary list who should not have been or people who should have been on the beneficiary list had been omitted Staff (paid or voluntary) behaviour, although complaints of this nature were generally less frequent. <p>‘...Staff at all levels from most agencies stated that they received very few complaints in the course of their programmes and that they had not conducted a systematic analysis of who was complaining. Whilst most took the low level of complaints as a sign that they were doing a good job, a minority recognised that the small number of complaints could suggest that the mechanism was not functioning properly’. (p.32)</p> <p>‘...the HAP 2007 Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard states that humanitarian accountability means that agencies take account of beneficiaries’ opinions, concerns, suggestions and complaints. A complaint relates to a specific grievance that requires a response while opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice constitute feedback which agencies may adopt, challenge or disagree with as appropriate’. (p.33)</p> <p>‘Importantly, the word “complain” was said by many to be difficult to translate (in Bangladesh, some staff chose to use the English word “complain” rather than a Bangla equivalent). One staff member from the head office argued that the word would usually be translated into something more akin to “feedback” or “suggestion”, because the most common translations of the word had “quite hard connotations”, which may be threatening to staff. Translations of information into the local language need checking to make sure the concepts are culturally as well as linguistically “comprehensible”’. (p.35)</p> <p>‘As staff from the head office of one HAP Certified Agency acknowledged: “We have encouraged 1:1 [male to female] ratio and especially in some contexts it is essential for a woman to work with female members of the community if women are to feedback. But...it can be difficult to recruit women, but more so, it might be that the project staff probably have not thought through fully the requirements of the function and maybe we (as management) are not pushing hard enough” (p.37).</p>	<p>What: caseload – complaints</p> <p>What: caseload, Undefined users Staff perception of effective- ness</p> <p>What: defini- tion – feed- back</p> <p>How: step-estab- lishment, name of FM- connotation, sensitise to accounta- bility</p> <p>How: resources- staff, gender balance</p>	<p>‘It is the agency’s responsibility to solicit feedback and complaints and to ensure that factors preventing disaster-affected populations from raising concerns are minimised and addressed’. (p.9)</p> <p>See Section 3.1: perception of effectiveness of the CRM by community and staff for 3 agencies</p> <p>One of the case studies clearly illustrates the importance of clearly communicating how the function (can be used and how feedback and complaints are responded to)</p> <p>Issues raised by community that affected effectiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language barrier - women from minority group ‘expressed little confidence in receiving a reply: “who knows whether we would receive a response?”’ (p.16) - illiteracy; ‘Even those [women from majority ethnic group] who were literate felt that they could not express themselves properly in writing which left them feeling ashamed; as a consequence, they encouraged each other not to use the complaints boxes’. (p.16) - fear of being reprimanded by the community for complaining and broader fear of reprisal by agency - ‘As one participant said, “we could not write down things

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Baños Smith, 2009) R	HAP Percep- tion of CRM, case studies, ef- fectiveness of CRM, collecting evidence	<p>'In the light of feedback from the communities interviewed in the course of the case studies (section 3.1.4) and in view of the importance of taking into account cultural norms (section 4.3), more female staff at all levels would be likely to improve accessibility to the CRM for both community members and staff and bring a different perspective in the process of setting up the CRM'. (p.37)</p> <p>'When community members were asked how they could raise complaints, a mixture of views was expressed. Most men and some of the women knew that they could submit a complaint using a complaints box, although the majority did not understand the complaints handling process. The vast majority of women and a minority of the men did not know of the boxes or of any other options for raising complaints. These same men said that only those "with more power" in the community would know about the boxes rather than the majority of people in the village. Some others recalled being given a phone number of the area manager to contact with any complaints. The understanding of the women from the ethnic minority group was that complaints or concerns were to be raised during weekly meetings that took place with staff'. (p.15-16)</p> <p>'When study participants were asked about the type of complaints that could be raised, <u>those who had heard of the complaints boxes said that they could only complain about fraud, corruption and bribery</u>. It was the group of young men that seemed to be best informed, stating that complaints could be raised with respect to any problems related to the agency's programme. A few of the young men said that staff had developed the CRM after consultations with the community committee. All of the other FGD participants said that they, and to their knowledge nobody else in their community, had been involved in establishing the CRM. None of the interviewees had been asked, or had heard of anyone else being consulted on improving the CRM'. (p.16)</p> <p>'They [women from ethnic minority group] felt uncomfortable about recording their complaint in writing and using the complaints boxes, seeing this as "leaving something permanent". (p.16)</p> <p>'...it transpired that their negative views on complaint boxes came from the perception that the programme manager (also in charge of the boxes) was, as one man put it, "not a responsible person"; having faith in the CRM required having faith in the programme manager'. (p.17)</p> <p>'Although the agency had ongoing programmes and the complaints boxes were still in place, some staff reported that these were no longer needed as "we are no longer in a crisis"'. (p.18)</p>	<p>How: re- sources- staff, gender balance</p> <p>How: step- estab- lish- ment</p> <p>How: per- cep- tion</p> <p>What: case- load</p> <p>How: step-estab- lishment</p> <p>How: step - collection</p> <p>How: step- estab- lishment, context appropriate</p> <p>How: re- sources</p> <p>Other: trust</p> <p>Other: importance of accounta- bility</p>	<p>with men?'''. (p.17)</p> <p>- community committee: 'according to a number of interviewees, the community committee told them not to use the complaints mechanisms since they (the committee) knew what further assistance the community required and they would take action. As one man stated, "this is the way they stopped us"'. (p.17)</p> <p>- timing: complaints were perceived to be collected too late</p>

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Baños Smith, 2009) R	HAP Percep- tion of CRM, case studies, ef- fectiveness of CRM, collecting evidence	<p>'...most community members reported that the CRM had made no discernible difference – positive or negative – on the attitudes and/or behaviours of staff or on the quality of service provided'. (p.18)</p> <p>'... Both programme site and national office staff felt that the CRM had affected the quality and relevance of their work by enabling them to prioritise those most in need or ensuring that the right people were being targeted: "given that there were insufficient resources to reach all families, the suggestions received in these boxes helped us identify new people that needed support". However, the complaints received sometimes left programme site staff feeling demoralised as they knew the limits of the support being provided'. (p.18)</p> <p>'At the national office level...staff said CRMs increased the credibility of their agency with government and other NGOs as well as with donors'.</p> <p>'Interviewee expectations were that a lot of time and effort were required to build sufficient trust before any CRM would work efficiently. They also believed that a trusted mechanism would improve the work of the agency. The ethnic minority women saw an effective CRM as a tool which could make the agency more responsive to their needs. The men from the FGD said that it would help the agency provide a better service; the ethnic majority men stated it would help the agency deal with corruption and give the agency a "very good name" and the young men thought that it would improve targeting and would make staff take the community more seriously because "staff would feel they had to respond to the community"'. (p.18)</p> <p>'With regard to suggestions, there was a general feeling that they needed to understand what services they should expect from the agency in order to reduce the difficulty of making a complaint'. (p.18)</p> <p>'All participants said that they would prefer to talk to someone about their complaints. As one man put it "If we write something, it just stays there on a piece of paper; if we talk, then people have to listen". They also wanted complaints to be actively sought by the agency rather than passively received; they wanted someone to come and ask them about the quality of services and behaviour of staff. The ethnic minority women stressed that this person would need to explicitly raise issues of sexual exploitation or abuse since they would be unlikely to spontaneously discuss them otherwise. All women interviewed suggested that this person should be female</p>	<p>Why: observed benefit</p> <p>Why: observed benefit</p> <p>Why: observed benefit</p> <p>Other: trust Why: expect- ed benefit</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment How: step-collec- tion, face-to- face</p>	<p>'Rather than giving people a voice, the complaint boxes seemed to serve as a reminder of how little they felt their opinions were valued. Participants said that in order to complain, they would also need to feel confident that a response would be received and that complaints would be dealt with on a frequent and fair basis'. (p.17)</p> <p>Staff felt that the full potential of complaint box not 'unlocked'. Challenges with setting up an effective CRM: 'the probability of complaints arising due to the agency not being able to provide service to the whole community; the length of time it was taking to verify whether people really were eligible for support, resulting in a number of false complaints; that responding to a complaint would often take too much time; limited transportation making it hard for staff to travel and investigate the complaints' (p.17-18).</p>

(Citation entry) Lit type	Organisa- tion Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Baños Smith, 2009) R	HAP Percep- tion of CRM, case studies, ef- fectiveness of CRM, collecting evidence	<p>and ideally someone from outside the community. As one woman stated, “after a while a local person would become proud and no longer listen”. In addition, they would like to have the option to change the selected person if they felt that they were no longer taking account of their concerns’. (p.18-19)</p> <p>Suggestion from community: ‘... someone directly involved in the service delivery should not open complaints boxes’. ...’ some “honest and educated community members” [should be part of the team responsible for the boxes, so that] if a complaint was being made against a member of staff it could not be hidden by the agency’’. (p.19)</p> <p>‘All women (bar one who said a “foreigner had once come to talk to them about complaining) stated that no one had ever explained to them how to complain’. (p.20)</p> <p>‘The men stated that the phone numbers were provided on the target beneficiary list that was publicly accessible in the village but pointed out that there was no mention of to whom the phones belonged or what would happen with the complaint. Participants from neither the male nor female FGDs were sure of the criteria for lodging a complaint’. (p.20)</p> <p>‘...no participant had been asked or had ever heard of anyone else being asked to provide feedback on the CRM’. (p.20)</p> <p>‘The women said there was a general lack of knowledge about the agency – who they were or what they did – which made it difficult to know what to expect from them, how to reach them or what issues to raise’. (p.20)</p> <p>‘...programme site staff agreed ... that the current mechanism was not very effective. They said the short life cycle of projects (five months) within the programme left an insufficient timeframe for the community to become habituated to such a complaints-handling system. They also talked of insufficient training in order for them to roll out an effective CRM’. (p.21)</p> <p>‘A senior manager from the national office of the HAP member agency felt the CRM impacted positively upon their own staff as well as the partner’s. He stated that “It has made us more conscious of what we do!” and that it helped programme site staff improve their communication with intended beneficiaries and the wider community’. (p.21)</p> <p>‘In general, women felt that a properly functioning CRM would make them feel a part of the process and listened to, resulting in a stronger relationship with the agency; the men focused the</p>	<p>How: step-re- sponse</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>How: step- estab- lishment</p> <p>How: re- sources How: pro- cedure –timing</p> <p>Why: observed benefit</p> <p>Why: expect- ed benefit</p>	<p>See Section 3.1.5 Impact of the CRM on service provision and 3.1.6 Community expect- ations and suggestions for CRMs (p.18)</p> <p>CRM for staff: ‘...the programme site staff pointed out that, to their knowledge, there was no specific policy or procedure available to them to make complaints’. (p.19)</p> <p>See Section 3.5. Presentation of mate- rial from supportive interviews (p.26 -30) for further discussion on issues and benefits of CRM. Captured in other parts of doc.</p> <p>Section 4 presents analyses the material gathered further and draws out the result- ing implications for planning, implement- ing and maintaining an effective CRM:</p> <p>4.1. Explaining the CRM to the community</p> <p>4.2. Power imbalances</p>

(Citation entry) <hr/> Lit type	Organisa- tion <hr/> Keywords	Noteworthy excerpts / citation (with exact citation)	Tags: Rel- evance to ALNAP-CDA research	Notes
(Baños Smith, 2009) R	HAP Percep- tion of CRM, case studies, ef- fectiveness of CRM, collecting evidence	<p>the discussion on their expectation that an effective CRM would assist the agency in better understanding the needs of the community and be in a stronger position to respond to them. One participant said, "If they listened to us, then we would listen to them". (p.21)</p> <p>'When asked what sort of CRM would best suit their context, the FGD of women wanted one that highlighted the agency's purpose and mandate, promoted information sharing and detailed acceptable complaints'. (p.21)</p> <p>'The majority of staff had a relatively detailed understanding of the mechanism, possibly since they had been consulted in its development and implementation'. (p.22)</p> <p>'In general, staff also considered that the CRM improved their performance and helped them to assess their performance in meeting the needs of intended beneficiaries. As a result, they believed that their service delivery had improved: "Our success in this programme is very much down to the complaints and response mechanism. It has increased our transparency and opened us up to beneficiaries". (p.25)</p> <p>'Overall, there was little consensus on where those responsible for CRMs should sit within the management structure'. ...' head office staff of two different HAP members (international agencies), one of whom said: "Where you sit the accountability mechanism in the [management] structure is key; ideally it should be separate from monitoring and evaluation and from implementation"; "those responsible for complaints and response mechanisms need to be independent, like an ombudsperson". (p.30)</p> <p>'Others suggested that CRMs should be linked with monitoring functions. For example, some agencies believed that their monitoring units had considerable power since they were seen as "the third eye" and their findings were taken seriously. Some felt that responsibility for CRMs should lie with national rather than expatriate staff as only national office staff could contextualise the cultural dynamics, placing them in a much better position to translate the theory of accountability into a practice that would work in the given context. However, a minority stated the opposite: having the responsibility lie with expatriate staff "outside the culture could allow complainants to speak more freely than with people from their same culture.</p>	<p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>How: step- establish- ment</p> <p>Why: observed benefit</p> <p>How: loca- tion</p> <p>How: loca- tion</p>	<p>4.4. Staff attitudes, competencies and gender balance</p> <p>4.5. Management issues</p>

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ALNAP LITERATURE REVIEW

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