

# Effective Community Complaints

## Agency Self Audit

**Joshua Pepall**

**Humanitarian Accountability Team**

**World Vision LTRT Sri Lanka**



A Community Complaints/Question Box used during Community meetings.

In recent times the humanitarian sector has received much criticism for its lack of humanitarian accountability to beneficiaries. A recent report by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International notes that while most international NGOs (INGOs) accept that accountability to beneficiaries was crucial to their legitimacy (Lloyd, 2005), they lack the tools to develop specific accountability strategies relevant to the multiple stakeholders. The Tsunami

Evaluation Coalition (TEC) also highlighted that beneficiary communities were not adequately consulted, and large information gaps exist between agencies and communities.

All communities have the basic right to register a protest regarding unfair treatment, report cases of wrongdoing and seek that their rights are fulfilled. Such a system is a challenge to implement in the initial response but a system should be established in the first 90 days. Receiving complaints and responding to them is central to accountability, impact and learning. It is also a formal recognition of the power imbalance between beneficiaries and World Vision. Social justice begins to be addressed when these power imbalances are addressed.

A good community complaints mechanism will serve several ends. First, it assists with transparency by creating a channel for people to register concerns. Second, it provides a mechanism for people to report corruption and the abuse of power by the organization or staff, for example the exploitation of vulnerable groups such as children or unaccompanied women. Third, it provides unique and invaluable sources of information to be used for better project management and outcomes.

## 1.1 How to create a Community Complaints Handling System

- Does your agency have an effective complaints handling system?
- Can you be sure that the complaints are handled consistently and fairly across the program?
- Do you use the feedback from complaints to improve the program?
- Is your community complaints system accessible to children, women and people with disabilities?

The Community Complaints Agency Self Audit is designed to help you gauge your agencies performance against best practice standards by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of your existing complaints management arrangement and identify areas for improvement.

## 1.2 Who should use the checklist?

A representative cross section of field staff and senior management should be involved. Forming a team that represents the breadth and depth of your program may provide the best results. The answers are meant to reflect the gaps in the whole program not just the views of the individual completing the checklist.

## 1.3 Assessment Guidelines

- There are 14 elements. These reflect the essential requirements for effective complaints management.
- The indicators are the policies, procedures and practices that would be expected in a good quality internal complaints management system and humanitarian accountability system.
- Use the following three-point scale to assess each indicator **1. No, 2. Partially, 3. Yes and N/A (Not Applicable)**
- Where you have indicated a 2 or 3, record the details of the policies, procedures or practices you have relied upon to make the assessment in this column. This assists verification if your program is being audited for HAP certification.
- In recommended actions for improvement column you should try to put your



recommended actions for improvement for the indicator into an action plan. Your action plan should address the process, responsible staff, reporting requirements and time frames. A separate sheet may be preferable in some cases.

#### **I.4 Putting it all together**

Once completed, the checklist should indicate the gaps you have identified in your complaints management system and provide a series of action plans that address those gaps.

The World Vision LTRT Humanitarian Accountability Team developed as a resource this tool for the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) certification of their program. The checklist incorporates HAP benchmarks and facets of good complaints management.

This tool is one of a suite of community accountability tools and resources on Community Complaints Management. If you have any questions regarding this tool or would like others, or suggestions as to how it could be improved I would appreciate your feedback.

Regards,

Joshua Pepall  
Stakeholder Capacity Building Advisor  
Humanitarian Accountability Team  
Lanka Tsunami Response Team [LTRT]  
Mobile +94 077 3207 749 | [Joshua.Pepall@wvi.org](mailto:Joshua.Pepall@wvi.org)

#### **References:**

- Effective Complaints Management, office of the Ombudsman (2006) Queens land Government.
- The Right To Know: The Challenge of Public Information and Accountability in Aceh and Sri Lanka (2006), Office of the UN Sectary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.
- HAP 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management, HAP International, Geneva.

## Element I-Setting the Scene

| Indicators                                                                                                                                                           | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Does the agency currently have a community complaints system in place                                                                                             |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Is the complaint handling system widely known within your agency                                                                                                  |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. Does staff know how to handle community complaints                                                                                                                |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 4. Is the community complaints system and Accountability given much prominence in agency documentation (e.g. Strategic plan, donor reports, policies and procedures) |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 5. Is the office aware of the benefits of a proper community complaints handling system                                                                              |                         |                                |                                        |             |

## Element 2-Commitment

| Indicators                                                                                                                | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Does the office have a community complaints management policy and procedures                                           |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Does community complaints have the visible support of senior management                                                |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. Do staffs know that senior management supports community complaints management                                         |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 4. Does the agency have a community complaints friendly culture whereby complainants and complaints are viewed positively |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 5. Are complaints management staff appropriately trained and resourced                                                    |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                   |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 6. Are there sufficient resources to properly manage complaints                   |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Is there a senior staff member responsible for the effectiveness of the system |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Is the system reviewed annually for effectiveness                              |  |  |  |  |

**Element 3-Communication**

| Indicators                                                                                                  | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Does the agency-</b>                                                                                     |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 1. Ensure that intended beneficiaries, affected communities and its staff understand the complaints process |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                                                                                   |  |  |  |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 2. Have clear arrangements for people of different language groups, those with impairments, isolated communities, children, women and the elderly |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Have information that is straight forward                                                                                                      |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Ask intended beneficiaries and the host community about appropriate ways to handle complaints                                                  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Genuinely advise complainants of decisions and the review process                                                                              |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Convey to the intended beneficiaries and the host community a 'complaint friendly culture'                                                     |  |  |  |  |

|                                                                                                                                          |  |  |  |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 7. Ask staff and beneficiaries to contribute to the improvement of the system                                                            |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Review strategy and activities for raising awareness around these groups of their right to file a complaint and the procedures to use |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Provide training in areas such as interviewing skills, problem solving and conflict resolution                                        |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Provide cross-cultural training for staff                                                                                            |  |  |  |  |

## Element 4-Complaints Management Models

| Indicators                                                                                           | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Do your agency's current processes for handling complaints feature the following:</b>             |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 1. A logical and methodical structure from start to finish                                           |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. A structured approach to dealing with complaints (e.g. complainant forms, data management system) |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. A flexible structure that can accommodate the different sectors of the program                    |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 4. Clear lines of authority                                                                          |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 5. An independent review process                                                                     |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 6. Power vested in the reviewer to overrule the decision complained of (i.e. beneficiary list)       |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                                                         |  |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 7. Clear guidelines on how complaints move from one stage to another                                                    |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Easy access to relevant material for intended beneficiaries                                                          |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Control mechanisms to ensure consistent outcomes                                                                     |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Direct lines of communication to the appropriate staff and management to address issues arising from the complaints |  |  |  |  |

**Element 5-Visibility and Access**

| Indicators                                                                                                     | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Can the intended beneficiaries readily find out how to lodge a complaint against your agency with your help |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                    |  |  |  |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 2. Can they readily find out how to make a complaint                               |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Are people able to find out what information is needed to make a complaint      |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Is it easy for them to lodge a complaint                                        |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Is assistance available to people to help them fill out a complaint if required |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Can complaints be made verbally                                                 |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Is the complaints policy readily available to staff                             |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Are complainants told of possible time frames for dealing with their complaints |  |  |  |  |

|                                                                                                    |  |  |  |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 9. Are complainants able to obtain advice as to the progress of their complaint                    |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Are groups (i.e. elderly, children, people with disabilities) catered for in each of the above |  |  |  |  |

**Element 6-Responsiveness**

| Indicators                                                                         | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Are your complaints policy and procedures widely known about within your agency |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Are they widely understood                                                      |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. Are they translated into the local language                                     |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                         |  |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 4. Have staff been trained in how the system works                      |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Do you have indicated time frames for dealing with matters           |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Are complaints monitored                                             |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Are timeframes met                                                   |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Are complainants given indicative time frames at the outset          |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Do you prioritise according to criteria such as seriousness, urgency |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Do you deal with anonymous complaints                               |  |  |  |  |

## Element 7-Assessment and Action

| Indicators                                                                                                               | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Do you have a methodical process for assessing complaints (as opposed to receiving and recording them)                |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Is it clear who has responsibility for assessing complaints                                                           |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. Is there a whistle blower policy                                                                                      |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 4. Are staff aware of the whistle blower policy                                                                          |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 5. Does your agency's policy/procedure encourage you to resolve matters quickly and promote positive conflict resolution |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                       |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 6. Have staff been trained in assessment                              |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Does your agency preserve complainants privacy and confidentiality |  |  |  |  |

**Element 8-Feedback**

| Indicators                                                                                                    | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Do you have standards regarding providing timely advice to complaints after decisions have been made       |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Do you give meaningful reasons for negative decisions that specifically address the complainants complaint |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                                                                                                     |  |  |  |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 3. How are 'unsuccessful' complainants advised of outcomes                                                                                                          |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Are 'unsuccessful' complainants automatically advised of any internal review available to them and/or referred to other agencies that may be able to assist them |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Does your system have a clear and workable mechanism to advise areas of the agency where potential improvements are identified                                   |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Does your system have a clear and workable mechanism for following up this advice                                                                                |  |  |  |  |

**Element 9-Monitoring Effectiveness**

| <b>Indicators</b>                                                                                             | <b>Assessment<br/>3,2,1,N/A</b> | <b>What supports your assessment?</b> | <b>Recommended actions<br/>for improvement</b> | <b>Action plan</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Does your agency have policy and procedures reporting requirements regarding community complaints handling |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 2. If, so is your current system able to reliably meet these requirements                                     |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 3. Are you able to identify complaint trends from your complaints data                                        |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 4. Is it clear who is responsible for identifying complaints data                                             |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 5. How is the data used to improve program effectiveness                                                      |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 6. Does your agency have a structured process and timetable for evaluating procedures                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Are results of your complaints management system reported to staff                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Are the intended beneficiaries involved in the review of your system                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Does your agency publish effectiveness criteria, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ number and type of complaints received;</li> <li>▪ time taken to resolve, as measured against targets;</li> <li>▪ outcomes in broad categories (e.g. resolved/not resolved)</li> <li>▪ remedies provided</li> <li>▪ action taken/program improvement as a result of complaints</li> </ul> |  |  |  |  |

## Element 10-Resources

| Indicators                                                                                                                                                            | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. A detailed complaints handling procedures manual and reference material readily available to complaints staff                                                      |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 2. Modern information and communication complaints management technology and/or equipment that can both track individual cases and classify and report aggregate data |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 3. A designated Community Complaints Officer and/or complaints staff                                                                                                  |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 4. Sufficient budget to and implement the system                                                                                                                      |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                                                       |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 5. Assistance for beneficiaries unable to write or communicate due to language or literacy difficulties or disability |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|

**Element I I-Personnel and Training**

| <b>Indicators</b>                                                 | <b>Assessment<br/>3,2,1,N/A</b> | <b>What supports your assessment?</b> | <b>Recommended actions<br/>for improvement</b> | <b>Action plan</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Is the Complaints Officer happy to do the job                  |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 2. Are complaints staff suitable to the job                       |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 3. Are complaints staff organizationally positioned to do the job |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |
| 4. Have staff received training in good decision-making           |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |

|                                                                                                                                               |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 5. Have staff received training in complaints handling                                                                                        |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Have staff received training in such things as dispute resolution, negotiation, handling difficult people, trauma and communication skills |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Are complaints staff able to de-brief                                                                                                      |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Does the agency offer complaints staff any other mechanism or assistance for dealing with stress                                           |  |  |  |  |

**Element 12-Remedies**

| Indicators                                         | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Does your system-</b>                           |                         |                                |                                        |             |
| 1. Offer an appropriate range of possible remedies |                         |                                |                                        |             |

|                                                                                                                                                                     |  |  |  |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 2. Are 'unsuccessful' complainants automatically advised of any internal review available to them and/or referred to other agencies that may be able to assist them |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Identify, where applicable, other beneficiaries entitled to a remedy granted as a result of a complaint by another similarly placed person                       |  |  |  |  |

**Element 13-Program Improvement**

| <b>Indicators</b>                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Assessment<br/>3,2,1,N/A</b> | <b>What supports your assessment?</b> | <b>Recommended actions<br/>for improvement</b> | <b>Action plan</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Does your agency's complaints management policy emphasize that systematic improvement and improved program service to beneficiary communities are major objectives of complaints |                                 |                                       |                                                |                    |

|                                                                                   |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| management                                                                        |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Does your system allow complaint trends to be identified periodically          |  |  |  |  |
| 3. If so are those trends analyzed for underlying systemic causes                 |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Is it clear who is responsible for making that analysis                        |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Are these analyses reported to senior management                               |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Are these analyses fed back to beneficiaries                                   |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Are these analyses fed back to the relevant sector/department area for action  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Is there follow up by a designated person to see if this action has been taken |  |  |  |  |

## Element 14-Review

| Indicators                                                                                              | Assessment<br>3,2,1,N/A | What supports your assessment? | Recommended actions<br>for improvement | Action plan |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Does your system indicate the various external review options available to dissatisfied complainants |                         |                                |                                        |             |