

## CAFOD Accountability Briefing: *Level 1 (Foundation)*

# Handling community feedback / complaints

This Briefing provides a basic step-by-step guide for CAFOD partners to handle community feedback and complaints as part of development and/or humanitarian projects. For more detailed information and case study examples of good practice and lessons learned, please refer to the Level 2 (Advanced) Briefing.

## 1. Introduction

Enabling people to be heard, including handling complaints, is recognised as a key component of accountability to the communities that we support in development and humanitarian contexts. This document provides practical guidance to assist organisations in implementing basic mechanisms for handling complaints. Although the expression of both positive and negative feedback should be encouraged, this document focuses primarily on issues or 'complaints' that require a response and are therefore a priority for action.

### Benefits

The benefits of mechanisms for handling feedback and complaints include:

- *Recognition of the dignity and rights of project beneficiaries*, including the right of people to express their opinions and concerns.
- *Holding organisations to account* against the promises and commitments made to the communities they support and other stakeholders.
- *Improved impact and effectiveness of programmes* e.g. through early identification and management of issues and risks; protection of staff by providing them with a way to investigate and respond to issues; continuous learning and improvement; and enhancing public standing by being seen to be a 'listening organisation'.

### A phased approach

In contexts where limited funds are available or during the early stages of a humanitarian response, it is advisable to adopt a phased approach to complaints handling. A basic mechanism may be introduced in the first instance which can then be strengthened and expanded upon to incorporate good practices and approaches (see *Handling community feedback/ complaints, Level 2 (Advanced) – in development*).

### Basic mechanism for complaint handling

The following provides a guide for designing and implementing a basic complaints handling mechanism with communities. 'Minimum requirements' for a basic complaints handling mechanism are as follows:

- Communities are informed about their right to register complaints.
- Communities are offered at least one way of making complaints, although this may be informal rather than formal e.g. via programme staff during visits to the community or via a published telephone number.
- A centralised record is kept of all complaints made including actions taken and the outcome of each complaint. This includes creating a written record of verbal complaints.

## 2. Planning complaints handling mechanisms

The following provides a structure for designing and implementing a basic complaints handling mechanism.

### a) Understanding the context

Complaints mechanisms should be developed with reference to the local context, including consideration of:

- ✓ *Existing systems and structures for community feedback and complaints* e.g. are community complaints generally handled by a community leader or a community committee? Are existing systems and structures accessible for vulnerable members of the community?
- ✓ *Ways in which community members express dissatisfaction.* Complaints are perceived differently in different cultures. It is important that complaint mechanisms are designed with sensitivity to community perceptions e.g. it may be appropriate to put the emphasis on 'feedback' (positive and negative) or 'comments and suggestions' rather than 'complaints' in contexts where complaining is not considered to be culturally appropriate.
- ✓ *Potential security risks* for project staff and beneficiaries. For community members, fear of retaliation can range from a concern that the individual or their community will be excluded from receiving aid or support to the fear that they will be personally persecuted for complaining.

### b) Target users

Who is expected to use the mechanism? Identify the stakeholders who will have access to complain e.g. community leaders, community members,

beneficiaries, local government, health workers etc.

### c) Types of complaints

The project team should identify the potential types of feedback and/or complaints they are likely to receive and consider whether there are any differences in the way these different types of complaints would be dealt with.

For example, CAFOD identifies the following categories of complaints:

*'Valid' complaints* – defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction directly associated to the commitments and promises made and therefore within the control of the organisation.” Valid complaints include:

- ✓ *'Non-sensitive' complaints* e.g. complaints relating to project activities or funding.
- ✓ *'Sensitive' complaints* e.g. abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation, staff misconduct, misuse of funds and fraud.

*'Non-valid' complaints* - usually relate to issues outside the control of the organisation. Good communications with the community will help reduce non-valid complaints, preventing false expectations being raised.

It is also to be expected that some 'non-valid' complaints may be received from time to time, especially in contexts where there are limited outlets for expressions of dissatisfaction.

Case Study 1 provides examples of complaints received on a CAFOD-funded programme in Uganda. The complaints are typically relating to programme activities but also including a 'non-valid' complaint relating to local land disputes.

**Case Study 1: Supporting famine affected communities in Karamoja, Uganda, 2009**

The Diocese of Moroto implemented a complaints handling mechanism and received complaints relating to:

- The long distance community members had to travel to collect food items at a distribution point
- The size of the food ration was too small
- Community members complained they had not been included in the project
- A land dispute, whereby a local family claimed ownership of the land where many of the food-for-work projects were situated
- Individuals found the work too heavy given the amount of food received in return. (CAFOD, 2010)

**d) Mechanisms for capturing complaints**

Figure 1 below identifies different options for capturing complaints. Appropriate mechanisms should be selected to ensure access for all community members, including vulnerable groups.

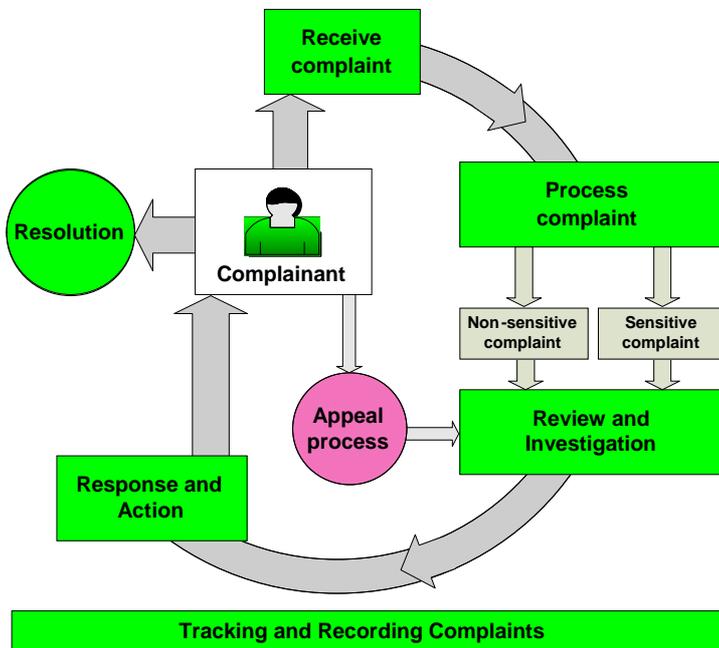
<i>Community complaints committee</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Enables a high level of accountability. Builds community confidence and networks.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> May depend on facilitation and capacity building skills of programme staff.</p>
<i>Community complaints / suggestions box</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Ability to make anonymous complaints.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> May be used inappropriately e.g. for putting rubbish in. Not suitable if low levels of literacy. Requires regular collection.</p>
<i>Focus group discussions to elicit feedback &amp; complaints</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Opportunity to build trust and tease out concerns from vulnerable groups.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Requires an appropriate facilitator e.g. female staff member for women's focus groups.</p>
<i>Complaints desk</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Semi-informal – may encourage more people to interact with programme staff.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Requires programme staff to resource the desk at set regular times.</p>
<i>Weekly 'complaints hour' at organisation offices</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Ability for community members to air concerns discreetly in a safe environment. May be convenient for programme staff.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Requires the office to be within easy access of the community.</p>
<i>Programme staff carry complaints forms for ad hoc collection of complaints</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Informal - may encourage complaints from vulnerable groups or those less likely to participate in a group setting.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> May affect ability of programme staff to effectively carry out programme activities.</p>

**Figure 1: Advantages and disadvantages of mechanisms for capturing complaints**

<i>Published telephone contact number</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Ability to make anonymous complaints. Direct access to programme staff. An option for use in insecure contexts.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Community will lose trust if the telephone is not answered.</p>
<i>Published email address</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> Direct access to programme staff. An option for use in insecure contexts.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Depends on community access to internet. Not suitable if low literacy levels.</p>
<i>Time set aside at the end of every community meeting</i>	<p><b>Advantages</b> May be most convenient option.</p> <p><b>Disadvantages</b> Risk of vulnerable groups not feeling able to express their concerns.</p>

**e) Procedures for handling complaints**

Figure 2 below outlines a standard process for handling complaints.



Key elements to incorporate within the complaints handling process include:

- ✓ A system for logging, tracking, recording and reporting on complaints e.g. an Excel spreadsheet could suffice (see Annex 1). 'Sensitive' complaints may be logged in a separate, password-protected file, for security purposes.
- ✓ A process for reviewing complaints and deciding how to deal with them e.g. during project team meetings.
- ✓ Guidelines for handling different types of complaint. For example: 'non-sensitive' complaints should be dealt with in an open and transparent way in liaison with the community, where possible; 'Sensitive' complaints require a higher level of confidentiality and referral to an appropriate member of senior staff and/or local authorities; and 'non-valid' complaints should be referred back to the complainant, assisting them to find an appropriate

ombudsman for their complaint, where possible.

- ✓ A method for capturing verbally received complaints (see Annex 2)
- ✓ Response times for acknowledgement (e.g. 1 week) and resolution (e.g. 1 month) from receipt of complaint.

**f) What resources are required?**

Implementation of a basic complaints handling mechanism will require:

- ✓ Staff / consultant time to design an appropriate mechanism and communicate it to community stakeholders.
- ✓ Staff awareness and training in complaints handling procedures, ensuring clarity of roles and responsibilities.
- ✓ Financial resources to cover the cost of communication materials, maintenance of the complaints mechanism, staff time involved in receiving and processing complaints etc.

**g) How to monitor if complaint handling mechanisms are effective?**

- ✓ Review the types of complaints that have actually been received – nearly all should be 'valid' complaints?
- ✓ Talk to community members – are they aware of their right to provide feedback and/or complaints and how to do so? Talk to project staff - what complaints mechanism has been put in place and how is it maintained?
- ✓ Review of complaints systems – procedural documentation and system for logging, tracking and monitoring complaints.

**Further Information:**

CAFOD standards and commitments  
<http://www.cafod.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/standards>

CAFOD Complaints Handling Policy and Procedures for International Programmes  
<http://www.cafod.org.uk/partners>

CAFOD Complaints Manager Directory for International Programmes  
<http://www.cafod.org.uk/partners>

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP) resources  
<http://www.hapinternational.org/projects/field/case-studies.aspx#complaints>

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Annex 1:

Complaints Log Template

Ref.	Complainant Details				Complaint Details			
	Name	Contact Details	Age (o. 18/u. 18)	Sex (M/F)	Date Received	Project / Programme	Complaint Method	Complaint Description

Status Details											Outcome Details	
Logged		Acknowledged		Investigated		Response Given		Appeal		Closed		Outcome of Complaint
Date	Initials	Date	Initials	Date	Initials	Date	Initials	Date	Initials	Date	Initials	

**Annex 2:****Complaint Collection Form**

This form may be used by project staff as a way to record verbal complaints received from community stakeholders during field visits.

<b>Part 1: To complete with complainant</b>	
<b>Date:</b> Date complaint is received	
<b>Personal Details:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name and contact details of the complainant</li> <li>• Age - adult or child</li> <li>• Sex – male or female</li> </ul>	
<b>Project Details:</b> Name / reference no. of project or programme	
<b>Nature of Complaint:</b> Brief outline of the complaint	
<b>Detail of the Complaint:</b> A detailed description of the complaint the person has made	
<b>Who received the Complaint:</b> Name of person who received the complaint	
<b>Part 2: For office use and feedback to complainant, as appropriate</b>	
<b>Outcome of Complaint:</b> Outline of what action was taken and what has happened as a result of the complaint	
<b>Comments:</b> Any further comments e.g. follow-up action recommended as a result of the complaint such as a change to current policy or procedures.	

*Source: Adapted from Action Aid, 2008*