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SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS

Listening to communities in insecure environments

LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS IN AFGHANISTAN, SOMALIA AND SYRIA

By Lotte Ruppert, Elias Sagmeister and Julia Steets

This report is part of the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme. The overall goal of this three-year programme is to contribute to solutions for providing effective and accountable humanitarian action amid high levels of insecurity. This report was funded by UKAid. However, the views expressed do not necessarily represent the UK Government's official policies.

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Executive Summary

In insecure areas, access constraints limit opportunities for face-to-face interactions with communities. While agencies express their commitment to accountability to affected communities, achieving this is more complex in insecure settings and often requires a mix of approaches. At the same time, effective communication is more important in unstable settings than in stable ones due to the fact that engaging affected people in programming and addressing their most-relevant needs increases local support, which in turn can lead to greater acceptance and motivate communities to protect organisations (Haver & Carter, 2016).

This report presents SAVE findings on the effectiveness and appropriateness of community feedback mechanisms in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria. The research involved consultations with aid agencies, donors and crisis-affected communities, as well as a review of relevant documentation and literature.

The study found that, despite similarly high levels of risk to humanitarian operations and corresponding access constraints (Stoddard & Jillani, 2016), **existing feedback processes are remarkably different in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria**. Aid agencies use different media to collect and respond to feedback, and the number and density of formal feedback channels varies between the three contexts. In Afghanistan, most agencies rely on informal conversations with local community representatives. In South Central Somalia, formal phone-based feedback mechanisms such as hotlines and SMS platforms are much more prevalent. In Syria, communication with affected communities mostly happens through local agencies and local councils – both face-to-face and through online communication platforms such as Whatsapp. These different feedback landscapes reflect different socio-cultural environments, as well as different expectations from donors to establish mechanisms.

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

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

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

In addition, humanitarian staff emphasised that financing formal feedback mechanisms can be challenging for agencies that are already confronted with high operational costs due to security measures and multiple layers of subcontracting.

KEY LESSONS

The research concludes that setting up functioning feedback systems in insecure contexts does not require new or radically different approaches. Rather, agencies should adhere to documented good practice, and focus investments on frontline staff capacity and information management systems.

1. Make communication more inclusive.

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

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

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

3. Inclusive communication involves multiple, different feedback channels.

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

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

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

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

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

6. Donors should shape feedback practice more actively.

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

1. Introduction

Giving crisis-affected communities meaningful influence over decision-making and providing them with information about aid programmes is essential for relevant and effective humanitarian action (CHS Alliance et al., 2014). Many aid agencies have therefore committed themselves to creating accountability to affected populations.[1] Despite this pledge, their current monitoring systems are weak in achieving this and have a bias towards creating accountability to donors.[2]

Community feedback mechanisms can be an effective tool to strengthen community engagement and to improve the quality of humanitarian programming (Alexander, 2015). They enable crisis-affected people to share their experience with a particular humanitarian agency or the overall humanitarian response (ALNAP & CDA, 2014). A feedback loop is complete, or 'closed,' when agencies communicate a response and potential follow-up actions back to the community.

In insecure environments, where humanitarian staff have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction with communities, effective feedback systems are particularly valuable. Aid agencies that engage communities in their programming and address the most relevant needs expressed by them improve the quality of their programmes and increase opportunities for maintaining access (Haver & Carter, 2016). In situations where agencies work through implementing partners, they also set up feedback channels to ensure compliance and to detect corruption and aid diversion.

> **'Feedback mechanisms play a key role in our access strategy. You have to gain the trust of the communities to be able to operate in these areas, and this is an important channel to do so'.**
> International NGO, South Central Somalia

A lot of useful literature and guidance on how to establish feedback mechanisms exists (see table 1). However, there is little documented knowledge about the perspective of communities in insecure settings on feedback processes, or on the particular challenges of setting up feedback mechanisms in these settings.[3] Against this background, our research investigated three main questions:

1. **What factors influence the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms?[4]**
2. **What type of feedback processes do communities prefer?**
3. **What types of common or joint feedback mechanisms exist and how useful are they?**

[1] See, for example, the commitments on AAP endorsed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals in 2011: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-affected-populations-including-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse and the list of aid actors that publicly support the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality & Accountability: https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard/statements-of-support

[2] In an online SAVE survey among 190 M&E practitioners in Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria, respondents rated accountability to affected populations as one of the top three objectives of monitoring. Yet, respondents were less satisfied with their ability to achieve this objective than with other goals, such as accountability to donors and measuring and verifying outputs.

[3] A notable exception is the CCVRI Helpdesk Response (2013) 'Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States' by Jean et al.

[4] We follow the definition proposed by the ALNAP-CDA project, which defines the overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism as 'the ability of a completed feedback loop to bring about change that affects aid recipient populations'. ALNAP-CDA (2013) 'Effective Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms: Methodology Summary for a Joint ALNAP and CDA Action Research'.

Table 1: Key resources on community feedback mechanisms[5]

Literature and guidance material

ALNAP & CDA	Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts. Practitioner Guidance (2014) www.alnap.org/resource/10676
CDA	Feedback Mechanisms in International Assistance Organizations (2011) www.alnap.org/resource/6155
CHS Alliance	Humanitarian Accountability Report (2015) www.chsalliance.org/resources/publications/har
IASC Task Team on AAP-PSEA	Best Practices Guide for Community-Based Complaints Mechanisms (2016) www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/17836/view
Jean et al. / CCVRI Helpdesk	Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (2013) www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/ccvri-help-desk-request-and-response-beneficiary-feedback-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-fcas/
ODI / HPN	Humanitarian Exchange Special Feature: Humanitarian Accountability (2011) www.odihpn.org/magazine/humanitarian-accountability/
Save the Children	Programme Accountability Guidance Pack (2013) www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/programme-accountability-guidance-pack

Online platforms

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects	www.cdacollaborative.org/what-we-do/accountability-and-feedback-loops/
CDAC Network	www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/
CHS Alliance	www.chsalliance.org/resources
Feedback Commons	www.feedbackcommons.org
Feedback Labs	www.feedbacklabs.org
The Sphere Project	www.sphereproject.org/resources/sphere-essentials/
UK DFID Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms Pilot	www.feedbackmechanisms.org

[5] Annex 1 lists more relevant literature on community involvement in M&E and guidance for practitioners.

2. Methods

The research involved primary data collection in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria,[6] including 79 interviews with aid agencies,[7] a review of documentation and reports shared by these agencies and a review of existing literature. The SAVE research team examined which feedback mechanisms communities prefer through 65 focus group discussions and 121 individual interviews across the three countries. Evidence on whether crisis-affected populations feel consulted was also collected through a survey that garnered 3313 responses, part of SAVE research on Presence and Coverage.[8] The research on examples of joint feedback mechanisms consisted of a review of existing documentation and eight phone interviews with people involved in these initiatives.

Community consultation for SAVE in the Kandahar province.

FULL REPORT

For more information on the methods and larger findings of SAVE research on Accountability and Learning, please refer to the final report: Steets, J., Sagmeister, E. and Ruppert, L. (2016) Eyes and Ears on the Ground: Monitoring Aid in Insecure Environments (**SAVEresearch.net**).

[6] Our research agenda has been driven by the priorities of aid agencies in the focus countries. In South Sudan, the fourth focus country of the overall SAVE research project, partner agencies expressed more interest to learn about other M&E-related topics such as capacity development. As a result, this study did not look at the current use and effectiveness of community feedback mechanisms in South Sudan. For Syria, the SAVE research team focused on the feedback practices of Turkey-based organisations providing assistance in Syria.

[7] The guideline for field-level interviews is available in Annex 3. All interviews were conducted anonymously.

[8] This survey also included communities in South Sudan. For more details, see Stoddard, A. & Jillani, S with Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D. & Klimentov, V. (2016). The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage (Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: www.SAVEresearch.net)

3. Main findings

3.1 Existing feedback processes are remarkably different in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria

Humanitarian actors in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria all face high levels of risk to their staff and operations, and corresponding access constraints to implementation sites and communities (Stoddard & Jillani, 2016). However, the community feedback landscapes that have developed in these three countries are distinct, reflecting different socio-cultural environments and varying expectations from donors to establish mechanisms. Agencies use different media to collect and respond to feedback, and the number and density of formal feedback channels varies between the countries.

AFGHANISTAN: STRONG RELIANCE ON INFORMAL FEEDBACK MECHANISMS AND KEY INFORMANTS

Most agencies in Afghanistan rely on informal feedback processes, meaning that they do not have organisational structures and systems at the capital and/or field level dedicated to collecting, analysing and responding to feedback. Of the 17 aid organisations examined, only four had formal feedback mechanisms in place and most of these had been established very recently.

This relative lack of formal mechanisms in Afghanistan does not mean that organisations do not collect and respond to feedback from communities.[9] Rather, most agencies rely on informal processes and collect feedback on an ad-hoc basis, in parallel with project work. Most common are conversations with community development committees or *Shuras*, open office hours and, depending on security conditions, field visits by M&E or programme staff. A few organisations have started to train local community monitors that function as their 'eyes and ears' on the ground, either openly or discretely. Finally, almost all of the reviewed agencies also provide community members with the phone numbers of project staff to call in case of problems.

Table 2: Types of feedback mechanisms most commonly used in Afghanistan

Consultations with community development committees	Open office hours	Monitoring visits by staff (where possible)	Local community monitors	Providing communities with staff phone numbers

This ongoing, informal communication with communities is cost-effective and allows for instant responses from relevant staff members. However, communication focuses on influential male individuals with some authority over communities, such as local elders, representatives of local government or committee members.[10] Where feedback was collected

[9] See, for instance, the study from the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (2013) that maps the current use of feedback mechanisms from eighteen aid agencies.

[10] This echoes findings from other studies, such as CDA's desk review of UK DFID's Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilots Programme in Pakistan (2014), which mentions 'ubiquitous and real concerns with elite capture and challenges with ensuring inclusiveness when designing transparency and feedback mechanisms'. Available from: http://cdacollaborative.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Lessons-from-The-Beneficiary-Feedback-Pilot-in-Pakistan.pdf

informally, there was no systematic documentation and use of the information collected and nobody was formally assigned for addressing the issues raised by communities.[11]

SOUTH CENTRAL SOMALIA: FORMALISED PROCEDURES AND PHONE-BASED SYSTEMS

Compared to Afghanistan, formal phone-based feedback mechanisms are much more prevalent in South Central Somalia. This includes hotlines, call centres with active call-out systems and SMS platforms. Of the 14 agencies reviewed in South Central Somalia, eight had fully formalised hotlines in place.

Most aid agencies created feedback systems to address a strong demand for upwards accountability from donors, and to enhance compliance following large-scale and highly visible aid diversion scandals in 2011 and 2012. Hotlines and direct phone-based communication provided a basic information flow from communities while managing programmes remotely, often from bases in Nairobi. The affinity of the local population for communication technology and the longstanding experience of the aid sector with various technologies supported this development.

Table 3: Types of feedback mechanisms most commonly used in South Central Somalia

Hotlines	SMS platforms	Call centres	Help desks	Community gatherings	Suggestion boxes	Open office hours

The key strength of Somalia's phone-based mechanisms is that they are easily accessible – especially when the service is toll-free. Since almost 80 per cent of the population in South Central Somalia personally own a mobile phone,[12] these systems are relatively inclusive. In contrast with other contexts such as Afghanistan, agencies in Somalia receive comparatively more feedback from women. Still, phone systems entail a bias against the most vulnerable who cannot afford phones and people in rural areas who cannot access networks.

Agencies using phone systems can provide a rapid response to urgent inquiries, at least where the required organisational procedures are in place. Establishing and managing phone-based mechanisms, however, can be time- and resource-intensive.[13] Most agencies consulted do not have a dedicated budget to cover these costs and rely on budget lines for monitoring or on regular programme budgets instead. Financing formal mechanisms can be a challenge for agencies that are already confronted with high operational costs due to security measures and multiple layers of subcontracting. Publicising phone-based mechanisms also raises expectations of communities, which can lead to frustration when the number is out of order or when the agency does not address complaints.

SYRIA: RELIANCE ON LOCAL ACTORS AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

As face-to-face interactions between teams in Turkey and Syria have become extremely limited, most international agencies based in Turkey work through remote partnership models with local Syrian NGOs. Active communication and outreach efforts are constrained by the zero visibility policies that many international NGOs have adopted. Out of the 13 international agencies assessed in Turkey, seven fully rely on their partners to collect and respond to feedback, without always knowing which mechanisms these use. In terms of format, face-to-face surveys administered by national partners or agencies' own field staff is the preferred mode of feedback collection of international agencies.

[11] For an overview of general benefits and disadvantages of formal and informal feedback mechanisms, see the Practitioner's Guidance from ALNAP and CDA (2014) listed in Annex I of this report.

[12] The mobile phone ownership rate for South Central Somalia is 78,5%, according to a 2013 poll from BBG & Gallup on media use. Available from: http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2013/11/gallup-somalia-brief.pdf

[13] A full overview of the strengths and weaknesses of different types of formal mechanisms in insecure settings can be found on page 21. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects is currently finalising a more general overview of the benefits and downsides of each type. This 'Menu of Options' can be found on: http://cdacollaborative.org/

Most local Syrian NGOs, on the other hand, are still able to regularly communicate with communities in the field. In addition, nine out of the 15 Syrian agencies reviewed also gather satisfaction data and transfer information to communities through local councils. Another unique aspect of the Syria context is the high usage of online communication channels by local NGOs, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. With few functioning phone networks, but broad internet access in most areas, these channels match the day-to-day communication behaviour of the Syrian population. However, only a few local agencies have elaborate formal procedures in place to register and respond to face-to-face and digital feedback.

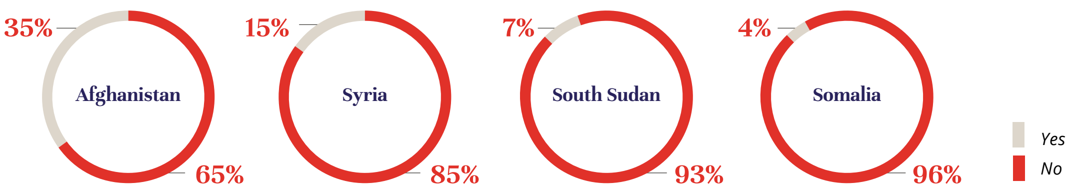
Table 4: Types of feedback mechanisms most commonly used in Syria

International Agencies	Feedback Reports from Implementing NGOs	Face-To-Face Surveys including Satisfaction Data	Conversations through Syrian Field Staff (if the iNGO has a local office)		Feedback Collection by Third-Party Monitors		Email
Local NGOs	Receiving Feedback through Local Councils	Face-To-Face Surveys including Satisfaction Data	Office visits	Suggestion Boxes	Facebook	Whats App	Email

3.2. Many formal feedback mechanisms does not automatically mean better communication with communities

In all four focus countries, the majority of communities surveyed indicated that they have never been asked for their opinion about the aid they received by aid agencies. This confirms results from other large-scale consultations with communities across a diverse range of countries: very few crisis-affected people have had direct communication with humanitarian staff, and agencies are perceived as not sharing information with the wider community (Anderson et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2016). Part of the challenge is that agencies often only consult 'key informants' such as local elders, council members, gatekeepers and government officials. Many communities feel excluded from feedback processes and uninformed about which organisations are operating in their area.

Figure 1: Did aid agencies consult you about the aid you received? (N = 3313)



The share of people that said they were consulted is highest in Afghanistan (35 per cent), despite the relative scarcity of formal feedback mechanisms in that context. This can be explained by the prevailing operational model in Afghanistan: most international NGOs have 'localised' programmes by hiring (almost) all field staff from the vicinity of the project (Stoddard & Jillani, 2016). This has helped increase sustained community relations, allowing for informal communication during field visits.

In Somalia, on the other hand, the country with most formal phone-based systems, only four per cent of the respondents said that they had been consulted. Communities reported that hotline numbers are often outdated and that their calls are not answered. Creating formal feedback mechanisms is therefore not sufficient in itself, and potentially even counter-productive if these systems are not properly publicised, managed and maintained.

3.3 Despite the differences in existing feedback mechanisms, communities in all three countries are similarly sceptical

The views of communities consulted in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria about available feedback mechanisms were remarkably similar and critical. In addition to the fact that agencies rely too much on powerful community representatives, aid recipients voiced three common concerns:

1. Existing channels are not suited for complaints about corruption.
In Syria and Afghanistan, field staff from implementing partners or local representatives are typically the ones collecting feedback. Community members felt that they could not voice complaints about the corrupt behaviour of the very same individuals or about other sensitive issues through this channel. Instead, communities suggested regular face-to-face communication, preferably one-on-one, with actors that are not directly associated with programme implementation. As other studies have noted, this would allow them to confidentially report issues concerning field staff and local powerholders without fear of retaliation (Jean et al., 2013).

> **'In the past year, I personally criticised the distribution method of the local council, which was based on favouritism. The result of this was that I was deprived of aid with unconvincing arguments such as "we do not have enough aid" and "your name is not on the list". I tried to complain but without any results'.**
> **Community member, Qar Bin Wardan, Syria**

2. Communities almost never hear back from agencies after providing feedback.
Existing communication flows are experienced as very one-directional. Feedback collection alone is not sufficient and communities stressed that they want to receive a response that clarifies which actions were (not) taken.[14]

> **'We had a complaint about the rehabilitation projects in our village and told that to representatives from NGOs. They promised to not repeat it again in the future, but we have not seen any changes, and their activities have decreased since then'.**
> **Local council member, Kandahar, Afghanistan**

[14] The importance of not only collecting, but also responding to feedback is explained in several studies, such as ALNAP-CDA (2014) 'Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts'. Available from: http://www.alnap.org/blog/142

3. **Instead of being asked for feedback at selected points in project cycles, communities expect more inclusive programming.**

Communities are often only consulted when problems arise or when agencies need information. There is little consultation on project design before implementation starts.[15] Instead, they demand continuous involvement and want to contribute to designing aid programmes.

3.4 Joint feedback mechanisms are more user-friendly

Where many aid agencies are present, communities are often confused about which agency to issue complaints to. Except for certain well-informed community representatives, many community members are not aware which agency is responsible for the aid they receive. This is particularly true in Syria due to the zero visibility policies of many international NGOs, but also in South Central Somalia, where a high density of agencies and agency-specific feedback systems exists.[16] As more feedback mechanisms are being set up in Afghanistan, fragmentation is becoming more of a concern there as well.

Affected people consulted also expressed the need to talk about general concerns that are not related to specific organisations. But agencies continue to set up individual mechanisms due to the high transaction costs of joint approaches, limited willingness to share information with other agencies, and fear of financial consequences if negative feedback from communities reaches the donor. In Syria, for example, most of the 28 Turkey-based organisations consulted recognised the need for better communication with communities, but did not consider joint feedback systems a viable option with current sensitivities about sharing information.[17] This fragmented landscape makes it difficult to aggregate and jointly analyse incoming messages. As a result, aid agencies miss opportunities to identify broader trends and to inform programme design.

> **'There should be a council with representatives from different aid agencies that receives and addresses all complaints'.**
> **Local elder, Helmand, Afghanistan**

To explore the potential of more collaborative approaches in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria, this research reviewed four examples of different types of inter-agency mechanisms that were established in other humanitarian and development settings[18]:

1. **Iraq:** The Inter-Agency Information Call Centre is a nationwide toll-free hotline for displaced populations (IDPs) and host communities.
2. **Kenya:** The Integrated Complaints Referral Mechanism is a web-based platform managed by Transparency International.
3. **South Sudan:** Interactive Community Radio, developed by Internews, run at Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites.
4. **Nepal:** The Common Feedback Project – see figure 2 for a detailed description of this full-fledged inter-agency system.

[15] This echoes findings from earlier studies, such as ALNAP (2015) 'The State of the Humanitarian System Report 2015 Edition'. Available from: http://www.alnap.org/resource/21036.aspx

[16] The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Somalia (2016) therefore suggests to increase inter-agency coordination on accountability practices 'to minimize duplication and identify (...) potential for harmonization of feedback and complaints mechanisms between agencies'. Available at: http://www.unocha.org/somalia

[17] This confirms findings from SAVE research on Presence and Coverage on concerns around information-sharing. See Stoddard, A. & Jillani, S with Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D. & Klimentov, V. (2016). The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage (Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: www.SAVEresearch.net)

[18] Annex 2 presents information on the costs, challenges and lessons on each of these four examples. This element of the SAVE research was based on remote interviews and existing documentation.

Figure 2: The Common Feedback Project in Nepal[19]

Situation	On April 25, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake affected the lives of over eight-million people across 39 districts of Nepal. Affected communities – especially those in hard-to-reach areas – were in need of reliable and timely information about the crisis situation, as well as about how to access the aid and services available to them. Most aid agencies operating in Nepal had their own communication channels in place, but there was **no systematic collection, analysis or use of feedback**.
Solution	Three months after the earthquake, a mixed group of UN agencies, INGOs and media agencies launched an inter-agency common service referred to as the Common Feedback Project (CFP).[20] The CFP team consists of six members who collect, analyse and elevate feedback that various implementing agencies have voluntarily shared, after receiving it through their own mechanisms. In addition, feedback comes in through other Communication with Communities (CwC) initiatives that receive financial support through the CFP project. For example, Ground Truth, an organisation specialising in feedback services, conducts bi-weekly micro-surveys on people's perceptions related to services and outcomes. All information is consolidated and uploaded onto an **online data analysis platform** that all agencies can access. The team also produces analytical reports with summaries for specific time periods, geographic areas, population groups and thematic issues.
Costs	The costs for the first three months were around **300,000 USD**, and the project has been extended until at least July 2016. It is funded by UK-DFID.
Challenges	It is difficult to track the impact of CFP feedback data and reports on strategic and operational decisions, but the team reports that its findings are increasingly being used. At district level, the latest CFP findings have become an agenda item at cluster and government-led meetings. A few NGOs have also started using the CFP findings as outcome-level monitoring indicators.[21] Influencing cluster plans and programmes on the national level has proven to be more challenging.
Lessons	1. **Make the necessary preparations before a crisis hits.** The project could have been launched sooner if generic Terms of References and templates for partner agreements had been available at the global level. Aid agencies are currently preparing such required documentations, and similar CFP projects are being piloted in Yemen and Burundi. 2. **Demonstrate the value of feedback aggregation to participating agencies.** Most agencies operating in Nepal turned out to be very willing to share their incoming feedback, except for certain personal details and protection-related complaints. Giving them usable analytical information and reports in return is crucial to ensure their continuous involvement.

[19] Full report: Communication with Communities Working Group Nepal. (2015). Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project: Nepal Earthquake 2015, Humanitarian Country Team.

[20] The project proposal was developed for the Nepal Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Nepal UN Resident Coordinator's Office, with support from UNICEF, Save the Children International, SimLab, Internews, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Plan International and the CDAC Network.

[21] Common Feedback Project (November 2015). Understanding the Uptake of Findings from the Common Feedback Project: June to October 2015.

From a community perspective, joint or inter-agency feedback mechanisms, as established in Nepal, Iraq, South Sudan and Kenya, are more user-friendly, as communities can communicate with one general platform, which can also channel their specific complaints to the appropriate agency.[22] Moreover, agencies benefit from peer learning and peer pressure when engaging in shared mechanisms, as they are able to remind and encourage each other to respond to feedback. Compared to individual feedback systems, joint approaches benefit from increased scale, for instance, because network providers offer more favourable conditions for hotlines with increasing volume. And in cases where inter-agency platforms are run by entities not involved in aid delivery itself, they offer the benefit of neutrality, which can help people communicate about sensitive issues (IASC Task Force on PSEA, 2012).

3.5 Feedback mechanisms do not deliver what agencies expect

Humanitarian staff noted that their mechanisms do not deliver the type and amount of feedback that they had expected or hoped for. Common objectives include finding out about corruption and aid diversion by partners or community representatives, misconduct of staff and low performance of contractors. In practice, however, regardless of the mechanism used, complaints about such sensitive issues remain rare. This research was not able to determine why incidents of corrupt behaviour or diversion are rarely reported via available feedback channels, despite this being a major concern for affected populations consulted. However, selected respondents noted that they do not trust phone-based systems and that they fear reprisal for speaking out against influential community members entangled in corrupt practices. In any case, most of the incoming feedback concerned practical questions about targeting or day-to-day operational matters. Agencies reported that they also regularly receive useful feedback about programme quality – another key objective of feedback mechanisms – but mainly through their face-to-face channels. Table 5 provides an overview of the types of feedback that aid actors in Afghanistan, South Central Somalia and Syria typically receive.

> **‘The challenge is that 95 per cent of the complaints are daily operational issues, such as the loss of beneficiary cards. This kind of system in Somalia does not bring out the real issues of aid diversion.’**
> **International NGO staff member, Somalia**

[22] See: Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (2010) ‘Collaboration and Innovation: Developing a Joint Complaint and Response Mechanism in Haiti’. Available from: http://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/collaboration-and-innovation-developing-joint-complaint-and-response-mechanism-haiti

Table 5: Type and frequency of feedback collected

Type of feedback	Frequency	Examples
Targeting/selection criteria	Often	• Why is my household or community excluded? • The amount of aid we received is insufficient.
Day-to-day operational concerns	Often	• I have lost my beneficiary card. • When is the next food distribution?
Programme quality	Regularly	• We would prefer to receive another type of shelter.
Corruption and aid diversion	Rarely	• Our local council charges us if we want to be put on the aid distribution list.
Security warnings or threats by armed groups	Rarely	• It is not safe to come to our village at this time.
Sexual exploitation and abuse	Rarely	• Your staff members are misbehaving.

In addition to the type of feedback, agencies are also often unsatisfied with the volume of feedback received. In South Central Somalia and Afghanistan, the amount of feedback gathered through phone-based mechanisms was much lower than most agencies hoped for. Four of the eight agencies in Somalia that had hotlines in place recorded less than 30 calls per month. The volume increases significantly when agencies use their call centres to actively reach out to communities,[23] but only a few agencies have done so due to financial and time constraints.

In Syria, on the other hand, local staff often feels overwhelmed by the amount of feedback coming in through face-to-face and digital channels. One international NGO with offices inside Syria reported that on certain days, as many as 200 people came by their offices to talk or complain. This can be highly time consuming for field staff. Most local NGOs that use WhatsApp and Facebook report that the amount of digital feedback coming in is also relatively high, with some receiving over a hundred messages each week.

[23] For example, one UN agency has set up a call-out system for which all its implementing partners are required to collect the phone numbers of at least 30 per cent of the aid recipients. These numbers are then called in order to verify aid delivery, to assess people's satisfaction and to identify sensitive issues such as potential diversion of aid.

4. Key lessons and good practice

This study found that establishing effective feedback mechanisms in insecure contexts does not require new or radically different approaches. Agencies should adhere to documented good practice,[24] and focus investments on frontline staff capacity, information management systems and collaborative approaches to communicate with affected populations. The research identified the following lessons:

4.1 Make communication more inclusive

In insecure areas, aid agencies often rely strongly on local authority figures to be able to operate and to gain community acceptance. Too often, aid agencies only consult those 'key informants', leading many community members to feel excluded from feedback processes. By nature, more marginalised groups are not as visible and will not always use existing channels to voice their views. Agencies should therefore actively seek the views of those without power and inform them about their rights and entitlements.[25]

Targeted community outreach with field staff or where access is constrained, through third parties, can help gather perspectives of a more representative sample. One good practice example comes from an international NGO in Afghanistan that visits its implementation sites with an M&E team consisting of multiple officers, preferably both female and male: as one staff member speaks with official representatives, the other(s) walk off and try to capture the voices of other (marginalised) community members.[26] Where possible, radio is also useful to advertise feedback channels broadly, while SMS or phone-based surveys can be used to pose questions to large parts of the population.[27] Where technology is not available or feasible, targeted micro-surveys as piloted in South Sudan, Lebanon or Pakistan can broaden the scope of feedback collected.[28] Such methods allow agencies to gather valuable feedback from non-beneficiaries as well, a perspective that none of the agencies covered by this research systematically considered so far.

[24] Annex 1 lists relevant literature on community involvement in M&E and practitioners guidance.

[25] See also: Development Initiatives et al. (2014)

[26] Such monitoring systems need to be designed in a conflict-sensitive manner, which requires a thorough understanding of socio-political context and conflict dynamics. For more information on conflict-sensitive monitoring techniques, see: Jean et al. (2013) 'Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States' and DFID Afghanistan (2014) 'Learning on How to Fold Conflict Sensitivity into Beneficiary Monitoring'

[27] See page X in this report on using technologies for monitoring. For more details and examples, see: Dette, R., Steets, J. and Sagmeister, E. (2016) 'Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments: A Menu of Options' (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: SAVEresearch.net)

[28] See, for example, the work of Ground Truth Solutions: groundtruthsolutions.org.

4.2 Face-to-face communication channels are most valuable, but require formal procedures and capacity development of frontline staff

Frontline international and local implementing organisations are best positioned to lead face-to-face communication efforts with affected populations. This is an effective and relatively cheap way to maintain contact with communities. In all countries studied, some field contact is possible, and agency staff has opportunities to engage with communities. Where their own staff cannot go, third parties are frequently used to collect data, which sometimes includes community feedback.[29]

In many cases, however, feedback from face-to-face interaction is not registered. As a result, findings and lessons are not shared with other parts of the organisation, partners or donors. A more systematic and formalised approach is needed to ensure that the voices from communities influence programming and that their insights reach across the organisation. This involves processes for recording, analysing and following up on feedback, and designing a realistic long-term plan (including budget) for feedback management.[30]

The lack of field-level staff capacity is a major obstacle to effective feedback mechanisms. In situations where aid agencies operate with national staff or through local implementing partners, more financial support is required to strengthen and formalise their feedback procedures. Organisations also need to make informed hiring decisions based on a solid understanding of the local context, conflict and power dynamics. Hiring local staff can help them gain access, but they should work with integrity and have relevant personal networks beyond their own ethnic background (Haver & Carter, 2016).

4.3 Inclusive communication involves multiple, different feedback channels

Face-to-face contact by local field staff or implementing partners needs to be complemented with other communication channels in order to connect crisis-affected people with both international agencies and donors without field presence. Communities rightly demand a channel to discuss issues with actors who are not personally involved in aid implementation. Various methods can be employed for this, ranging from hotlines and suggestion boxes to field visits by independent third party monitors. Each of these channels comes with its own strengths and weaknesses (see table 6). To decide which communication channels are most appropriate, agencies should conduct a (joint) assessment of the communication and information behaviour, as well as the needs of community,[31] and involve them when designing the feedback mechanism (Lewis & Lander, 2011).

[29] See, for example, Amin Consulting Group (2014), 'ACG SPAD Beneficiary Monitoring Full Report' (report commissioned by UK-DFID Afghanistan and DANIDA)

[30] The website from the CHS Alliance contains a list of tools and manuals for developing and running complaints-handling mechanisms: http://www.chsalliance.org/resources

[31] In Iraq, for instance, an inter-agency team of UN agencies, INGOs and a media development organisation carried out a rapid assessment with displaced populations and their host communities to understand their information needs and access to communication channels. Report available from: http://www.alnap.org/resource/20642

Table 6: Strengths and Weaknesses of Different Formal Mechanisms[32]

Type	Strengths	Weaknesses
Hotlines	+ Easy to use + Good for providing a rapid response + When answered by an external actor, it is adequate for compliance issues	– Requires resources – Difficult to set up toll-free lines – Less adequate for direct programme improvements in the field – Exclusion of people without phones – In practice, not many calls about sensitive issues due to lack of trust
SMS platforms	+ Rapid: can serve as an alert system + Transparent, since feedback is published on an online platform + Useful for simple queries + Easy tracking and aggregation of data, which is good for project management	– Exclusion of illiterate people – Expensive and not easily adaptable – Limited to what can be conveyed in one SMS – Exclusion of people without phones – Requires intense awareness-raising in communities
Call centres with call-out service	+ Versatile: can be used for both accountability and compliance + Cost-free for community members + Inclusive system, since operators usually call out random numbers	– Expensive and time-intensive – Difficult to get back in touch with a caller, since multiple people may share a phone – Exclusion of people without phones
Help desks, usually during distribution	+ Predictable due to periodicity + Direct, face-to-face interaction + Easy for communities + No need for phones or literacy	– May be dangerous to establish in certain areas; concern for 'do no harm'[33] – Less likely to be used to report frauds and diversion
Formalised community meetings	+ Community ownership and oversight of programme reduce risk of diversion + Direct interaction with communities + Versatile: can be used for both accountability and compliance + Encourages sustainability	– May lead to exclusion of less powerful groups, e.g., women – Reinforces existing power structures in communities – Sensitive issues may not be raised in public settings
Suggestion boxes	+ Inclusion of people without phones + Cheap + Allows for anonymous complaints	– Not ideal for dispersed settings or large camp settings – Exclusion of illiterate people – Often distrusted by community members because they do not know who will access information – May cause security issues for communities if not handled confidentially
Office visits	+ Direct, face-to-face interaction + Good for building trust + Encourages transparency + Immediate response possible	– May be difficult to manage – Requires tight information flow – Exclusion bias for people who lack time or means to access the office
Outsourcing feedback collection to third-party monitors	+ Face-to-face interaction with external and independent actor + Useful for verifying agencies' own monitoring data + Selected TPM providers can offer expertise on feedback collection, analysis and use	– Requires clear lines of communication between the contracting agency and the TPM provider – Can be expensive to set up, depending on the TPM provider – TPM providers do not always have access to programme areas – Should not replace communication efforts by agencies' own staff entirely

[32] For a more detailed overview on the benefits and downsides of different types of feedback channels for all aid contexts, consult the useful practice notes from the Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism Pilots programme, commissioned by DFID (2016): http://feedbackmechanisms.org/resources/

[33] 'Do no harm' refers to the ethical principle requiring humanitarian actors to strive to minimise the harm they may inflict by providing assistance in a specific area. This includes (a) not exposing people to physical hazards, violence or abuse, (b) not undermining the affected population's capacity for self-protection and (c) managing sensitive information in a way that does not jeopardise the security of the informants or those identifiable from the information. More details can be found on the website of the Sphere Project: www.sphereproject.org/.

4.4 Enable two-way communication, instead of only extracting information

Passive feedback systems that depend on communities to initiate communication deliver sparse amounts of feedback with limited usefulness. Instead, agencies need to actively invest in sensitising communities about their rights and entitlements and make them aware of available feedback channels from the beginning. For people to trust the feedback mechanisms, it is also crucial that aid agencies show how they follow up on feedback they receive. In addition, agencies need to provide affected people with accessible, reliable and timely information about the crisis situation, as well as about available aid and services.

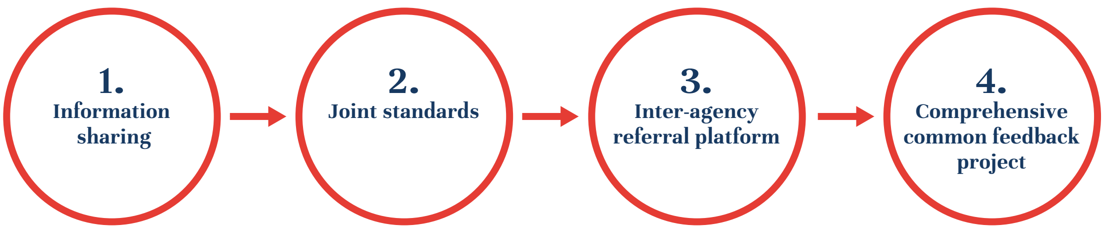
Agencies commonly use posters and leaflets to inform communities and to publicise feedback channels, but they also need to explore more innovative approaches. One international NGO in Somalia, for instance, added a call-out function to their call centre where it actively reaches out to aid recipients whose numbers have been registered during field visits. Another good practice example comes from South Sudan, where the NGO Internews uses community radio broadcasts to engage with communities (see Annex 2). Through this approach, Internews does not only manage to share vital information, but also creates a trusted channel where people can share their general opinions and aid-related concerns.

4.5 Where multiple agencies are present, more collaborative communication with communities is required

Feedback mechanisms are typically set up and managed by individual aid organisations. Agencies rarely share the costs for managing mechanisms and there is little joint analysis of emerging issues or learning on how to effectively respond to feedback. At the same time, the uncoordinated roll-out of agency-specific or even project-specific mechanisms risks creating confusion among communities. Joint or inter-agency systems such as the examples in Iraq, Kenya, South Sudan and Nepal remain relatively rare in practice, despite their benefits.[34]

Although agencies in insecure contexts may not always be willing to develop full-fledged systems – due to sensitivities about sharing information for instance – they should take steps towards more collaboration. This would mitigate the downsides of a fragmented feedback landscape emerging in the contexts studied.

Figure 3: Steps towards more collaborative approaches for community feedback



[34] For more interesting joint initiatives, see for example the web-based feedback platform from the Somalia Return Consortium: http://onlinefeeds.org/, as well as the development of inter-agency handling processes for complaints from refugees in Melkadida refugee camp (Ethiopia), supported by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Accountability to Affected Populations and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (AAP/PSEA).

1. **Increased information-sharing.** At minimum, aid agencies should share experiences with setting up and managing feedback mechanisms. They can also share meta-information on the type of feedback they are receiving and look for any significant overlaps or differences.[35]
2. **Joint standards on feedback mechanisms**. Agencies can commit to minimum standards on accountability, for example based on the Core Humanitarian Standard. This may include rules for which communication channels to use, which feedback data should be shared, how to process data and how to provide a timely response.
3. **An inter-agency referral platform.** Either through a joint call centre, an online web-based platform or a simpler referral system, such platforms can present one interface to communities and ensure that complaints reach the appropriate agency.
4. **A comprehensive common feedback project.** With sufficient financial support, the Humanitarian Country Team or other bodies (including independent ones) can establish a dedicated common feedback team that collects and aggregates all feedback coming in from agency-specific mechanisms.[36] This can also include additional information collection by agencies themselves or third parties.

4.6 Donors should shape feedback practice more actively

Donors are in a strong position to shape the feedback landscape.[37] In Somalia, for instance, pressure from donors for greater accountability proved a major driver of the surge in hotlines. Currently, donors are increasingly requiring agencies to have feedback systems in place.[38] This is not only useful for enhancing accountability to affected populations directly, but also for increasing acceptance and access of aid agencies. However, this should not become an incentive for all implementing agencies to set up their own mechanisms. To avoid duplication and to promote wider utilisation of feedback, donors should provide clear incentives for agencies to participate in joint initiatives.

Finally, demanding feedback is only effective if donors, as well as international agencies that operate through national partners, create an atmosphere in which implementing agencies feel comfortable to also share the negative feedback they receive. Currently, their ‘zero tolerance’ policies on corruption can prevent agencies from openly reporting feedback, especially in areas where terrorist groups of particular concern to donors are active.[39] Delivering aid in highly insecure contexts is a risk shared by both donors and implementers. Instead of sanctioning those who report negative results or incidents of corruption, donors and implementers need to address challenges and potential incidents jointly. Donors should also make sure that their compliance requirements do not hinder responsive programming and they should provide flexible funding so that agencies are able to make significant changes to their programmes based on the input from communities.[40]

[35] The platform http://feedbackcommons.org/ offers a range of tools to compare benchmarks and harmonise feedback collection.

[36] So far Nepal is the only humanitarian context where such a comprehensive system has been set up, but the UN’s Working Group on Community Engagement is currently assessing the potential for similar Common Service Projects in Yemen and Burundi. See UN OCHA (2015) ‘Yemen Common Service Feedback Mechanism: Improving System-Wide Accountability’. Available from: http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/common-service-feedback-mechanism-improving-system-wide-accountability

[37] For more general policy suggestions for donors that are intent on supporting the implementation of the AAP reform, see Steets et al. (2016) ‘Drivers and Inhibitors of Change in the Humanitarian System’, available from: www.gppi.net/pea

[38] The US Congress recently passed legislation which requires all agencies receiving USAID funding to report on ‘the degree of satisfaction among the beneficiaries of its programming’. UK DFID has inserted similar requirements into its funding guidelines, see DFID (2015) ‘Partner Effectiveness Tracker’.

[39] These are notably Al-Shabaab for Somalia and the Islamic State for Syria. See: Haver, K. and Carter, W. (2016) Enabling Access and Quality Humanitarian Aid in Insecure Environments (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: SAVEresearch.net)

[40] The CHS Alliance is currently assessing whether it can develop a self-assessment tool for donors to see how their reporting requirements encourage or hinder effective community feedback processes.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Overview of Practitioners' Guidance and Literature

This table gives an overview of existing guidelines for setting up a feedback mechanism, as well as important literature on the topic.

Guidelines & Literature

ALNAP and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2014) *'Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts: Practitioner Guidance'*	This practical guideline is part of the research project from ALNAP and CDA Collaborative. It is intended for people designing or implementing feedback mechanisms in a humanitarian programme. It starts with a one-page 'digested read' for practitioners who have only limited time. http://www.alnap.org/resource/10676.aspx In addition, there is a 45-minute online course with the main findings. http://cdacollaborative.org/publications/accountability-and-feedback-loops/
ALNAP (2014) *'Rhetoric or Reality? Putting Affected People at the Centre of Humanitarian Action'*	Around the 29th ALNAP Annual Meeting in 2014, ALNAP produced this paper to summarise current understandings of methods and approaches to engaging with crisis-affected people in humanitarian action. It highlights the limitations of and obstacles to meaningful engagement. http://www.alnap.org/resource/12859.aspx
ALNAP & Groupe URD (2009) *'Participation Handbook for Humanitarian Field Workers: Involving Crisis-Affected People in a Humanitarian Response'*	This handbook contains practical advice for how to develop a participatory approach and implement it at every stage of the project cycle. http://www.alnap.org/resource/8531.aspx
CCVRI Helpdesk (2013) *'Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States'*	A comprehensive paper on 'how to do beneficiary feedback best' in fragile and conflict-affected states. http://www.cdacollaborative.org/media/128358/CCVRI-Help-Desk-Request-and-Response-Beneficiary-Feedback-in-FCAS-Finance-Performance-and-Impact-Department-UK.pdf
CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2011) *'Feedback Mechanisms in International Assistance Organizations'*	An extensive study on the use of community feedback mechanisms in international aid efforts. It lists useful examples of various agencies with 'closed feedback loops'. http://www.alnap.org/resource/6155

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2014) *'Lessons from the Beneficiary Feedback Pilot in Pakistan: DFID Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilots Programme'*	Based on an evaluation of the beneficiary feedback mechanism pilot funded by DFID in Pakistan, this paper presents key lessons on setting up a functioning system. It is part of a larger series of feedback mechanism pilots in DFID's Access and Beneficiary Feedback Pilots Programme that will be evaluated. http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/lessons-from-the-beneficiary-feedback-pilot-in-pakistan/
CDAC Network (2016)	This network aims to ensure that communities affected by crisis are actively engaged in decisions about the relief and recovery efforts in their country. Their website lists relevant publications, tools and guidelines on communicating with disaster-affected communities. http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/
CHS Alliance (2015) *'Humanitarian Accountability Report'*	This volume of the CHS Alliance consists of contributions from 13 speakers on how to make accountability to affected populations a reality. It offers many recommendations and actionable solutions for humanitarian aid actors. http://www.chsalliance.org/resources/publications/har
Danish Refugee Council (2008) *"Complaints Mechanism Handbook"*	The handbook provides a step-by-step guide, including a number of practical tools and exercises to facilitate the process of setting up and managing a complaint mechanism. It also lists a set of minimum requirements for agencies to ensure that the mechanism is of satisfactory quality and that the expected benefits materialise. http://www.alnap.org/resource/8762
Feedback Commons (2016)	This online platform is a tool from Keystone Accountability that helps aid agencies to listen and respond to those they seek to help, while gaining insight from other agencies doing similar work. It provides a repository of survey questions and associated benchmarks that organisations can use to collect and interpret feedback in order to improve their performance and get better results for their beneficiaries. http://feedbackcommons.org/
Feedback Labs (2016)	Feedback Labs is a collective of organisations that believes that affected citizens should drive the policies and programmes that affect them. Their online platform contains a quiz to test how good your organisation is at closing the feedback loop and a useful collection of actionable resources to help you improve feedback processes. http://feedbacklabs.org/
Food Security and Agriculture Cluster Afghanistan (2013) *'Beneficiary Feedback and Complaints Mechanisms'*	This paper summarises the formal and informal feedback mechanisms that are currently used by the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) member agencies in Afghanistan. It is aimed at helping other agencies to consider establishing or amending their own mechanisms. http://www.alnap.org/resource/10672.aspx

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (2014) *'Report on the HAP PSEA Conference: Do Complaints Mechanisms Work?'*	This paper summarises the results of the HAP conference held on May 8, 2014, with a focus on how to handle complaints of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff. http://www.chsalliance.org/what-we-do/psea
IASC Task Team on AAP-PSEA (2016) *'Best Practices Guide for Community-Based Complaints Mechanisms'*	A user-friendly guide with instructions on how to set up and run an inter-agency community-based complaint mechanism to handle reports of sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarian aid workers. Based on the lessons learned from a two-year project piloting such inter-agency mechanisms in two distinct humanitarian settings: Ethiopia and the DRC. www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/node/17836/view
ITAD & the Rockefeller Foundation (2014) *'Emerging Opportunities: Monitoring & Evaluation in a Tech-Enabled World'*	This discussion paper provides an overview of how M&E can learn to better use ICT for more-inclusive feedback from affected populations. It discusses the promises, limitations and inherent risks of emerging technologies. https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/emerging-opportunities-monitoring/
ODI Humanitarian Practice Network (2011) *'Humanitarian Accountability'*	A special feature from the Humanitarian Exchange Magazine dedicated to accountability in humanitarian action. Contains articles about collective accountability, NGO accountability in South Sudan and early lessons from Tearfunds' experience with feedback and complaints mechanisms. http://odihpn.org/magazine/humanitarian-accountability/
Plan International, World Vision Int. & IOM (2015) *'Who's Listening? Accountability to Affected Populations in the Haiyan Response'*	This recent case study on the response to Typhoon Haiyan offers valuable insights on how agencies can improve accountability to affected populations. https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/file/494700/download/539031
Save the Children (2013) *'Programme Accountability Guidance Pack'*	This resource contains practical 'how-to' guidance, films and training materials to help development and humanitarian workers at country-level put accountability into practice. http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/programme-accountability-guidance-pack
World Vision, INTRAC, SIMLab & CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2016) *'Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism Practice Notes – UK DFID Pilots'*	This collection of '6 Practice Notes' includes tips on how to address challenges that can arise when setting up a feedback mechanism, takes into account complex organisational and community realities. There is a specific focus on how to make feedback channels accessible, how to manage internal and external referral processes and how to communicate a response to feedback. It also contains a useful 'Menu of Options', developed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, on the strengths and limitations of different communication channels. http://feedbackmechanisms.org/resources/

Annex 2: Examples of Joint Feedback Mechanisms

Model 1: The Inter-Agency Information Call Centre for IDPs in Iraq[41]

Situation

When the Iraqi Civil War began in 2014, an inter-agency team composed of UN agencies, international NGOs and Internews carried out a rapid assessment with displaced populations (IDPs) and host communities to understand their information needs. The study demonstrated that these people did not have many **channels for interacting with aid agencies**, and that they had **limited access to reliable news** from local media.

Solution

In July 2015, after a year of negotiations and logistical preparations, an inter-agency group of UN agencies and NGOs launched a **nationwide toll-free hotline**. This Erbil-based call centre is run by two coordinators and four Iraqi operators, three of whom are female. The operators collect information from cluster leads and agency heads every week in order to be prepared to answer straightforward questions from callers. With more complex queries, the call centre's coordinators usually contact the relevant agency or cluster to obtain the relevant information and then get back to the caller within three days. When agencies themselves have a well-working hotline in place, the operators refer the caller directly to this number.

Costs

The call centre's budget for the first six months of the project was set at **318,000 USD**, covering requirements such as personnel trainings and logistics. The running costs in the following months were lower.[42]

Challenges

Unsurprisingly, the project faced some teething problems in its first months of operation. For example, the online data platform for logging calls was not finished when the call centre opened. Operators initially made use of an Excel spreadsheet instead.

Especially in the beginning, **raising awareness** about the hotline was difficult. In the first four months, the centre received an average of 16 calls per working day. This volume increased enormously after the major mobile phone operators in Iraq sent a message to every cell phone to explain how the call centre functions. In January 2016, the operators received about 150 calls a day, and this number is expected to rise further.[43]

Another issue was how to handle calls about **sensitive matters**, such as those related to gender-based violence. The team acknowledged that such calls might come in despite the fact that the call centre is advertised as an information (as opposed to complaints) hotline. A neutral Complaints Review Committee was established to investigate sensitive communication and respond to the caller.

Lessons

1. **Avoid friction between participating agencies.** It is important to include all actors in decisions affecting the setup of and communication about the call centre. Similarly, the collaborative aspect should be emphasised in public communication about the project.

2. **Assure long-term funding.** While three agencies committed to funding the project for 2015, the question of how to fund running costs remained unanswered for a long time. Donors were interested in covering the costs, but wanted to see results from the pilot first.[44]

[41] More information about the Iraqi IDP Call Centre can be found online at CDAC Network (July 2015) 'Case Study Iraq Humanitarian Country Team: DP Information Centre' and IRIN (August 2015) 'Dial A for Aid: Iraq's New Humanitarian Hotline'. More information about the Iraqi IDP Call Centre can be found online at CDAC Network (July 2015) 'Case Study Iraq Humanitarian Country Team: IDP Information Centre' and IRIN (August 2015) 'Dial A for Aid: Iraq's New Humanitarian Hotline'

[42] IDP Call Centre (August 2014) 'Call Centre Budget 1 October 2014 – 31 March 2015'

[43] Reliefweb (January 2016) 'UNHCR Iraq Country Representative Visits the Iraq IDP Information Centre'

[44] CDAC Learn (March 2015) 'The Art of Listening: Setting up a Two Way Communication Centre in Iraq'

Model 2: The Integrated Complaints Referral Mechanism in Kenya[45]

Situation

Conducted by **Transparency International (TI) Kenya**, an analysis of the 2011 drought response identified a lack of accountability mechanisms at the grassroots level of aid operations, which allowed for food diversion.[46] Kenyans did not complain publicly because adequate mechanisms to do so were lacking or remained unknown to most people.

Solution

TI Kenya developed a web-based platform dubbed 'Uwajibikaji Pamoja' that facilitates the **submission and referral of complaints from one aid provider to another**. People are able to provide feedback either through a toll-free SMS line or by loading a message onto the portal. Those without phone or internet access, as well as illiterate persons, can walk to the closest office of any participating agency to share a query or speak with local members of a Community Drought Management Committee. If no action is taken after a week, the platform automatically sends a reminder to the agency's point person. By the end of 2015, the project included 46 international and local agencies, as well as **relevant government authorities**. Most of these agencies attend monthly partner meetings, convened by TI Kenya to enhance information sharing.

Costs

The total costs for the project's first 18 months were approximately **239,000 USD**.[47] This has been financed with support from both the African Development Bank and the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO).

Challenges

As of April 2016, the platform receives around **70 new complaints per week**.[48] Although the mechanism was initially set up to tackle corruption, the majority of incoming complaints concern the quality of aid (28 per cent), non-inclusion (16 per cent) and the timeliness of aid (11 per cent). Reports of staff misbehaviour, bribery, embezzlement, fraud and political interference are less common (12 per cent altogether). **Complaints about sexual abuse and exploitation are rare**. The TI Kenya team noted that it has been challenging to assure high satisfactory resolution rates because not all agencies take action or are able to, or because complainants are dissatisfied with the given response.

Gender balance continues to be an issue. Almost 82 per cent of all complainants are male. TI Kenya is trying to address this imbalance through better outreach, but so far, it largely relies on partners to publicise the platform at field level.

Lessons

1. **Include the local government.** The effectiveness of the project largely depends on the involvement of governmental service providers. TI Kenya managed to increase their buy-in over time, especially as they recognised that a large number of local non-state actors were getting involved.

2. **Do not name and shame.** The trust of all partner agencies has been gained by focusing on peer learning, rather than by policing those that do not manage to address complaints. During the monthly partner meetings, humanitarians are able to openly discuss difficulties and share lessons.

[45] The complaints referral platform can be accessed online at haipcrm.com. More information about the initiative is available in TI Kenya (April 2014) 'Uwajibikaji Pamoja: Giving Voice to Turkana Residents'

[46] TI Kenya (2012) 'Food Assistance Integrity Study: Analysis of the 2011 Drought Response in Kenya'

[47] TI Kenya (2015) 'Integrated Complaint Response Mechanism: Budget Feb2014 – Aug2015'

[48] The online platform haipcrm.com features charts showing how many complaints have been received so far, with distinctions by region, gender, age, sector, type of complaints and the concerned agency.

Model 3: Interactive Community Radio at PoC sites in South Sudan[49]

Situation

When violent conflict erupted in South Sudan in December 2013, over 1.4 million people were forced to flee their homes. Nearly 10 per cent of these displaced persons are now living at one of the nine Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites set up by the United Nations Missions in South Sudan (UNMISS). Most of the South Sudanese communities at PoC sites did not have access to **reliable and timely information**, were not updated about aid programmes and had few methods at hand to **channel feedback to aid agencies**.

Solution

Since many South Sudanese do not have a mobile phone or internet access, and since the mobile network is patchy, the NGO **Internews** turned to community radio to engage with people in two of the PoC sites in Juba.

Mindful of the highly insecure and low-tech environment, the local team chose an unusual setup that allowed focused targeting. Audio shows are pre-recorded, stored on USB sticks and played at strategic locations within PoC sites. At designated times, a local information officer from the team mounts speakers on motorcycles ('Boda Boda') to stream the latest 30-minute show.

During the broadcasts, people are able to approach and speak with the information officer, who registers their concerns. Internews also arranges 'listening groups' that listen to the recording together and engage in a thematic discussion afterwards.

This setup allows communities to share their general feelings, opinions as well as aid-related concerns with **an independent actor**. When a large number of complaints about a specific aid agency come in, the Internews team usually engages with the agency in question to address these concerns.

Challenges

Communities were timid at first and largely disillusioned about providing feedback. But as they picked up what was being said and grew curious, larger crowds began gathering around broadcasting time.

Aside from earning the trust from communities, Internews also had to work hard to **gain trust from humanitarian actors** working in the PoC sites. Some agencies feared that they would be evaluated or publicly criticised. Over time, however, agencies noticed that this was not the case and that better communication with their target population helped them improve their programmes.

Lessons

1. **Ensure that people like the content.** The inclusion of entertaining elements in the radio show was critical to getting community members to listen to the broadcasts regularly and to share their opinions.

2. **Make it a local and sustainable initiative.** Local community members were involved in creating the show from the start. Over time, international staff was gradually replaced by South Sudanese staff, who will continue the radio programme in the future.

[49] More information about the radio programme from Internews can be found online at Internews (June 2014) 'Boda Boda Talk Talk: A Bike Delivers Information to Displaced People in South Sudan' and by Meena Bhandari in the Guardian (May 2015) 'In South Sudan, a Local Radio Project is Calming Community Tensions.'

Model 4: The Common Feedback Project in Nepal [50]

Situation	On April 25, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake affected the lives of over 8 million people across 39 districts of Nepal. Affected communities – especially those in hard-to-reach areas – were in need of reliable and timely information about the crisis situation, as well as about how to access the aid and services available to them. Most aid agencies operating in Nepal had their own communication channels in place, but there was **no systematic collection, analysis or use of feedback**.
Solution	Three months after the earthquake, a mixed group of UN agencies, INGOs and media agencies[51] launched an inter-agency common service referred to as the Common Feedback Project (CFP). The CFP team consists of six members who collect, analyse and elevate feedback that various implementing agencies have voluntarily shared, after receiving it through their own mechanisms. In addition, feedback comes in through other Communication with Communities (CwC) initiatives that receive financial support through the CFP project. For example, Ground Truth, an organisation specialising in feedback services, conducts bi-weekly micro-surveys on people's perceptions related to services and outcomes. All information is consolidated and uploaded onto an **online data analysis platform** that all agencies can access. The team also produces analytical reports with summaries for specific time periods, geographic areas, population groups and thematic issues.
Costs	The costs for the first three months were around **300,000 USD**, and the project has been extended until at least July 2016. It is funded by UK-DFID.
Challenges	It is difficult to track the impact of CFP feedback data and reports on strategic and operational decisions, but the team reports that its findings are increasingly being used. At district level, the latest CFP findings have become an agenda item at cluster and government-led meetings. A few NGOs have also started using the CFP findings as outcome-level monitoring indicators.[52] Influencing cluster plans and programmes on the national level has proven to be more challenging.
Lessons	1. **Make the necessary preparations before a crisis hits.** The project could have been launched sooner if generic Terms of References and templates for partner agreements had been available at the global level. Aid agencies are currently preparing such required documentations, and similar CFP projects are being piloted in Yemen and Burundi. 2. **Demonstrate the value of feedback aggregation to participating agencies.** Most agencies operating in Nepal turned out to be very willing to share their incoming feedback, except for certain personal details and protection-related complaints. Giving them usable analytical information and reports in return is crucial to ensure their continuous involvement.

[50] Full report: Communication with Communities Working Group Nepal (2015) 'Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project: Nepal Earthquake 2015, Humanitarian Country Team'

[51] The project proposal was developed for the Nepal Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Nepal UN Resident Coordinator's Office, with support from UNICEF, Save the Children International, SimLab, Internews, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Plan International and the CDAC Network Secretariat.

[52] Common Feedback Project (November 2015) 'Understanding the Uptake of Findings from the Common Feedback Project: June to October 2015'.

Annex 3: Field interview guide on community feedback mechanisms

Field interview guide on community feedback mechanisms in volatile environments
Focused at M&E staff and programme staff (if existent: FM focal point)

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Where are you currently based and what is your position within the agency?
2. In which sector(s) does your agency operate?
3. In which provinces does your agency operate? Which are particularly insecure (district level)?
4. How does your agency collect feedback? Please rank the importance of the different channels you use (from most important to least important). Why are some more important than others?
5. Have you personally used collected feedback in your work? If yes, how?
6. For which specific program(s) is feedback being collected?
7. Specifically for this program, through which channels do you receive feedback from affected communities?
8. In case of Hotline / SMS: is the service toll-free?
9. Since when is the FM running? Is it still running? If not, when has it stopped and why is the FM not running anymore?
10. How was the FM introduced to the community? Were there procedures to build acceptance and trust of communities in the FM?

II. AGENCY-SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES

11. Who is/are responsible for the FM within the agency? Is somebody explicitly assigned at the capital level? And at the field level? How many people are responsible/working on the FM? Is there at least one person dedicated to it within your agency? Are these persons well-informed about what is expected? Is the feedback mechanism included in that person's TOR / job description?
12. Did the responsible staff receive training on how to establish and run the FM? What kind of training (duration/quality)?
13. Please describe the feedback loop step by step.
14. Are there specific guidance / standards in place to guide the staff that is responsible for the FM? How useful is this guidance?
15. Is there a specific budget for the FM? What share of total program budget?
16. Does your agency have mechanisms in place to reassess / adjust the FM? Which systems? Are they functioning?
17. What are your expectations of the FM? What is its purpose?
18. Who is the main audience of the feedback that is collected within your agency?
19. Do you feel like feedback mechanisms are a priority for the agency's management?
20. How supportive is the management with regards to program changes based on community feedback? How often is the management aware of the program changes that are being made? Does the management receive the feedback collected? In what form?
21. Is there a formal requirement for you to take feedback from communities into account?

III. QUALITY/EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FEEDBACK MECHANISM

22. What is the amount of feedback that you collect? How many SMS/phone calls/messages per month? Total per year? How many persons reached with FGDs/consultations (non-technical)? How many complaints in the box? How many visits to do consultations? What share of your total beneficiary number do you receive feedback from?
23. How many people do you aim to receive feedback from? Is there a fixed quota you need / want to achieve?

24. What type of feedback are you mostly collecting? Does the feedback directly concern the program or also other issues? Does the feedback concern issues that the agency is able to influence/change? What share of the collected feedback concerns relevant larger issues / strategic issues / macro-level changes? What share concerns sensitive issues such as theft, harassment, etc. ? Do you receive security warnings or threats through the FM?
25. Is the collected feedback representative according to gender and age? In particular, do you get feedback from women? How?
26. Does the feedback represent minority groups?
27. How is the collected feedback shared with the relevant person in the agency? Is the collected feedback analyzed? Who is/are responsible for the analysis within the agency? How much of the feedback requires a response?
28. How many instances can you think of where community feedback led to changes in programming? How many instances can you think of where relevant community feedback was collected, but not acted upon? Why was it not reacted upon?
29. Are the response and follow-up actions (both if taken or if not taken) communicated back to the community / affected population? Which channels do you use to give the response to the community?
30. Overall, would you consider your FM as effective? In your experience, what is the biggest success factor for a functioning FM?

IV. EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

31. To what extent is the usage of technology socially accepted by the communities in the implementation area? Does gender make a difference here? Age? Province?
32. Is insecurity problematic in the area of concern? If yes, how does it affect the effectiveness of the FM?
33. How often is the agency staff that is responsible for complaints / feedback able to visit implementation sites at the project level?

V. QUESTIONS FOR AGENCIES WITH INFORMAL FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

34. How regularly is the feedback collected? How and by whom?
35. Can you estimate the approximate amount of feedback that your organization is receiving?
36. What kind of feedback is collected?
37. Who is the main audience of this type of feedback?
38. What does the agency do with the feedback it receives? Who gets the information? Is it recorded anywhere? Is it sent to the M&E team too?
39. Do you have examples of adjustments to the project based on informal feedback?
40. Does the organization have means to check that the informal feedback is taken into account?
41. Are your informal feedback mechanisms inclusive? (minorities, women, etc.)
42. Do you consider this feedback valuable?
43. Do you think these informal ways of collecting feedback are effective? What could be improved?
44. Do you feel like feedback mechanisms are a priority for your agency's management?
45. How supportive is the management with regards to programme changes based on community feedback? How often is the management aware of the program changes that are being made? In what form does the management receive the feedback?
46. Does the organization have means to check that the informal feedback is taken into account?
47. Is there a formal requirement for you to take feedback from communities into account (from donors or by management)? And is it encouraged by your peers / management?

Annex 4: Guide to consultations with affected populations

Note: A generic guide was developed and then slightly adopted for each country context. Questions were also slightly adopted for different subsets of the local population (e.g. small business owners, local relief committees, female committees etc.). The version below is the guide used to consult affected people in Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND / CONTEXT

The third component of SAVE's research on aid in insecure environments focuses on monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Together with our learning partners (3 organisations providing humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan: UNICEF, Save the Children, People in Need), we have decided what the research will focus on. One of the focus areas will be options for conducting and implementing M&E in such a way that it centers on, or is even owned by, beneficiaries and communities.

We found that a lot of guidance exists already on how to design participatory approaches in general, including beneficiary feedback mechanisms and other participatory M&E methods. One of the generic recommendations in these guidance materials is that M&E systems should be adapted to the local cultural and political context. We therefore want to find out more about what this means in different parts of Afghanistan. In addition, we feel that the communities themselves are probably best placed to suggest what feedback and monitoring systems would best suit their needs and preferences.

We are therefore planning to conduct community consultations on M&E in Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Khost.

SCOPE / AUDIENCE

We suggest conducting focus group discussions and consultations with individuals who have been involved in consultations relating to humanitarian aid. This could include for example community committees (CDCs), but also smaller committees or health networks, as well as informed individuals such as teachers, village leadership or local authorities.

In addition, a smaller number of people / groups without any such experience should be consulted to cross-check and validate information.

At least 15 focus group discussions should be held in the three provinces. Each focus group should involve approximately 5-20 participants, including extra groups for women and minority groups where appropriate. If you expect differences between different groups, arrange separate discussions. A focus group discussion is estimated to last around 1 hour. Where feasible, a small number (about 5) of individual consultations with people that have provided feedback to aid agencies in the past or have experience with feedback mechanisms should be held.

QUESTIONS

Introduction: Explain that this discussion is about HOW agencies collect feedback. We are not from the agency, we are not here to collect feedback. We want to learn IF and HOW agencies collect feedback, IF and HOW people can communicate with agencies.

> ***1. Are the aid organisations working here asking for feedback?***

[If the answer is no, ask why not and continue with question 5]

If yes, how can you provide feedback to them? [First ask openly, then go through possible examples: Is there a complaints box where you can leave messages? Is there a phone number you can call? Are aid organisations calling people by phone? Are they sending SMS surveys? Are officials of the aid agencies visiting and talking to people? Do you have a committee that checks whether organisations deliver what they promise and check the quality of services? Are there other ways that you can provide feedback?]

Suggestion: Write different feedback mechanisms participants mention on cards and place them on the wall or floor for everybody to see. No need to ask participants to write anything down, you can document for them, potentially also using symbols or illustrations.

> ***2. What do you like about the feedback mechanisms used here and what do you not like?***

Suggestion: Go through the different feedback mechanisms one by one to discuss them. Start with the mechanisms that were mentioned most often.

Where feasible, you can also note comments on cards (for example using one colour for positive aspects, another for negative aspects) and place them next to the card with the relevant feedback mechanism. Take a photo of all the cards before you leave.

Make sure to document why people like or dislike mechanisms, why some mechanisms work better than others.

> ***3. Have you heard back from the organisation about your feedback or complaint? Do you know what they did with your feedback?***

In principle, would you like to give (more) feedback to the aid agencies?

> ***4. What kind of information would you like to give to the aid agencies? What feedback is most important to you, e.g. to give feedback about goods or services received? Or about "more serious" issues such as potential wrongdoing by staff, corruption or abuse? Why?***

> ***5. Can you think of a different way to monitor aid that would fit your preferences better or that would give you a greater say? If yes, what is it and how would it work?***

REPORTING

For each focus group discussion, please prepare the following documentation as an email or word document:

Location and date: When and where did the focus group discussion take place?

Number and type of participants: How many people participated in total; how many men, how many women; what position do they hold

Photographs of cards as placed on the wall or floor

Write-up of answers and suggestions for each of the questions (especially 2, 3 and 4) www.SAVEresearch.net